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*Nostalgia Re-Written.*

**Boris Akunin's Fandorin Project and the  
Detective (Re-)Discovery of Empire**

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## **Note on Transliteration**

Russian names, with the exception of place and personal names that have a commonly used English form, have been transliterated in accordance with the Library of Congress system. The titles of books and films are given in the original Cyrillic, with translations.

All translations from German are by the author.

## Abstract of Thesis

<b>Name of student:</b>	Anne Liebig		
<b>Degree sought:</b>	PhD	<b>No. of words in the main text of thesis:</b>	98143
<b>Title of thesis:</b>	Nostalgia Re-Written. Boris Akunin's Fandorin Project and the Detective (Re-)Discovery of Empire		

Since his rise to fame in 1998, Boris Akunin has become a household name on the post-Soviet book market. Temporarily, he also became one of the leading voices in Russia's liberal opposition movement to the Putin regime. Occupying a place on the border between fiction and non-fiction, Akunin's oeuvre challenges genre classifications along with established perceptions of cultural authority in Russia.

Akunin's first and most successful project is the best-selling Fandorin series, a series of historical detective novels that are set in the late Imperial era. The choice of historical detective fiction - a genre that is both popular and interactive at the same time - allowed Akunin to involve a broad, middle-brow readership in a critical problematisation of Empire whilst updating crime fiction for a specific post-Soviet usability. In my thesis, I approach the Fandorin project as a double detective journey that consists of two narrative strands: one righting the historical narrative about Empire, the other using this reassessment to counteract the widespread trends of nostalgia and cynicism in contemporary post-Soviet culture. In my reading, these two strands simultaneously embody the novelty of Akunin's self-proclaimed 'new detective novel': a revivification of the socio-political function of traditional crime fiction, aimed at Russia's post-Soviet nostalgia discourse, and a rediscovery of original intelligentsia values, accompanied by a critical investigation of the intelligentsia's ill-fated nostalgia for their own, insufficiently reassessed past. Consequently, I present the Fandorin project as a multi-tome counternarrative to the regnant nostalgic remembering for Empire within the wider post-Soviet nostalgia debate.

## Lay Summary of Thesis

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This thesis discusses the work of Boris Akunin, one of the most popular writers of detective fiction in contemporary Russia. Akunin, who became a writer in the late 1990s following the post-Soviet liberation of the Russian book market, designed what he called a 'new detective novel' that mixes entertainment with intellectual brainteasers. The result of this experiment was the Fandorin project, a 15-volume series of historical detective novels set in the Russian Empire during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this thesis, I analyse how Akunin used the specific genre of historical detective fiction to engage readers in the playful re-discovery of Imperial history and culture. I argue that Akunin's overall aim was to counter the widespread nostalgic trends in official Russian memory politics and culture, many of which contribute to a one-sided and simplified remembering of Empire in contemporary Russia. This is an important task for two reasons: first, the current Russian nostalgia boom contributes to the return of authoritarian forms of governance under the Putin regime. Akunin provides readers with reasons not to copy the past, but to learn from its mistakes. Second, by highlighting the need for a constructive reflection on the problematic heritage of Empire, Akunin simultaneously tackles a problem that is highly relevant for other cultural backgrounds – showcasing literature's unique potential for defusing the increasingly explosive border between fact and fiction on a global stage.

## Introduction

Без тайны невозможно жить. Извините за трюизм, но вся наша жизнь – сплошной детектив с убийством, точные обстоятельства которого нам до самого финала неизвестны.<sup>1</sup>

No border today is as contested as that between fact and fiction. On 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018, the official UK Russian Embassy Twitter account mocked British accusations over the Salisbury novichok attacks in a tweet that called for the help of Agatha Christie's Hercules Poirot:



*Figure 1 Russian Embassy UK Tweet  
(Russian Embassy UK, Twitter post, March 18, 2018, 2:54 a.m. [accessed 20 February 2020])*

By implying that the Skripal affair was nothing but a fabricated mystery tale, the Embassy spokesteam chose to view politics as a spectacle, best scrutinised through the prism of popular fiction. In the age of fake news and international disinformation campaigns, the line between the narrative construction of truth, reality, and fantasy poses a substantial challenge for people across the entire globe. The figure of a beloved literary detective, used to evoke a sense of security in the midst of all this confusion, promises to provide the reassurance modern media no longer can.

Yet detective fiction is, essentially, a paradox. It is a genre that is both new and old, traditional and innovative, rigid and lithe. Most interesting, perhaps, is detective

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<sup>1</sup> Grigorii Chkhartishvili, "Grigorii Chkhartishvili otvetil na nashi voprosy," *Snob.ru*, July 13, 2010 <<http://snob.ru/selected/entry/21272>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

fiction's periodical resurgence as a massively popular genre in times of social upheaval and instability. Through its ability to answer to current trends, issues, and, most importantly, anxieties without losing its recognisable shape for the reader, it has contributed to the longevity and applicability of popular fiction frameworks across world literature. Both classical and contemporary detective fiction carry an inherent capacity to re-phrase and re-contextualise the ills and troubles of a world caught in unremitting change, helping readers to make sense of the senseless. As the genre has become increasingly transnational since the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has also joined strongly localised issues with affairs of international importance, helping to bridge cultural gaps in the process. Today, readers of crime fiction are united by the "real international popularity of the crime novel, which makes [them] into a community of conspirators"<sup>2</sup> – or, to put it differently, into readers and writers of their very own detective journey alike.

The lasting global appeal of crime stories, be they in written or in televised form, prompted Lee Horsley to speak of a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century 'wound-culture', i.e. a world characterised by a "pervasive fascination with the spectacle of the traumatized body"<sup>3</sup>. However, contemporary crime fiction writers have begun to compose their stories not only on the bodies of individuals, but on entire body politics. Postmodern crime authors in particular have successfully addressed the "perceived loss of collective and social structures, the loss of biographic certainties and the fragmentation of life stories"<sup>4</sup> that inform the fabric of reality across modern societies. As a result, the perception of crime fiction's primary function has also changed: in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the genre no longer serves to restore the illusion of a stable social contract, but to disrupt whatever binary conceptions of reality are in place and uncover ways of overcoming them. Thus, the Russian Embassy's tweet appears in dire need of a methodological update: not only would Poirot's easy, early 20<sup>th</sup>-century answers fail to satisfy the demands of a postmodern readership, but his style of detection would

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<sup>2</sup> Eva Erdmann and Fiona Fincannon, "Nationality International: Detective Fiction in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, eds. Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009): 11-27, 16. On the topic of crime fiction's transnationality, cf. Vivien Miller and Helen Oakley, *Cross-Cultural Connections in Crime Fictions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 117.

<sup>4</sup> Erdmann and Fincannon, "Nationality International," 20.

also tragically pale in comparison to that of detective hero figures from contemporary crime fiction – many of whom now carry Russian credentials. Erast Petrovich Fandorin, protagonist of the eponymous and best-selling Fandorin series, is one such contestant for the role: created in 1998 and hero of altogether 15 historical detective novels, four film adaptations and one play, Fandorin has become one of Russia’s most recognisable literary exports since the end of the Soviet Union. His creator, Boris Akunin – whose real identity remained shrouded in secrecy for close to a year, and who was eventually revealed to be former literary critic and Japanese scholar Grigory Shalvovich Chkhartishvili – struck gold with a detective fiction project set in the late Imperial period, which allowed him to likewise turn into a writer of international renown.

### *Detective Literature, National Identity, and Post-Soviet Nostalgia*

Akunin’s success on the post-Soviet book market was no isolated case. Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, detective fiction made a dizzying ascent to the pinnacle of Russian popular fiction: “By 1995, there were six Russian *detektiv* authors in the top ten category [of bestseller lists]. In 1996, crime fiction displaced all other genres from the top ten”<sup>5</sup>. The correspondent number of book sales should not be underestimated, given that “publishing [was] the second largest industry in Russia [...], surpassed only by vodka”<sup>6</sup>. This success continued to hold well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where crime and detective fiction still enjoy immense popularity among Russian readers. Whence this sudden rise in popularity?

The post-Soviet *detektiv* was born into a period of immense political, economic, and social upheaval – as is characteristic of the genre. Scholars generally refer to the immediate post-Soviet years as a period of far-reaching identity issues for the Russian public; Susan Larsen, for example, talked of the “tattered post-Soviet fabric of Russian national identity”<sup>7</sup>, whereas Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky compiled the modest list of “the trauma of all Soviet history, [...] of Russian history seen in its

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<sup>5</sup> Anna L. Shparberg, “Issues in Collecting Post-Soviet Crime Fiction in Academic Libraries,” *Slavic & East European Information Resources* 10, no. 4 (2009): 291-303, 292.

<sup>6</sup> Helena Goscilo, “Big-Buck Books: Pulp Fiction in Post-Soviet Russia, 1999-2000,” *The Harriman Review* 12 (1999/2000): 6-24, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Larsen, “National Identity, Cultural Authority, and the Post-Soviet Blockbuster: Nikita Mikhaïlkov and Aleksei Balabanov,” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 3 (2003): 491-511, 493.

entirety; [...] the breakdown of the Soviet symbolic and social order in the 1990s, [and] the trauma of everyday existence, which often seems endless and immutable”<sup>8</sup>, along with Russia’s “ancient traumatic consciousness of inadequacy before Europe”<sup>9</sup> as some of the challenges faced by the post-collapse populace. Other scholars, such as Helena Goscilo and Rosalind Marsh, added that “the dissolution of the Soviet Union constituted a mass/national trauma inevitably entailing dispossession of the collective identity”<sup>10</sup>, and that “[a]fter the fall of the Soviet Union many Russians experienced a traumatic crisis of political, moral and spiritual identity”<sup>11</sup>. Also nicknamed the ‘wild nineties’ (‘лихие 90-е’), the years following the break-up of the Soviet Union became synonymous with the idea of an unstable reality.

Whereas literature and the arts generally play a formative role in the everyday construction of national identities, detective fiction is a particularly prominent genre in times of identity crises.<sup>12</sup> Christoph Jürgensen sees a direct link between “a search for identity with detective work”<sup>13</sup>, whereas John Scaggs stresses that crime fiction “emphasises at every turn [...] the clear parallels between reading, detection, and interpretation”<sup>14</sup>. By involving readers in the creation of the text, detective fiction turns itself into an inherently questioning genre that actively invites, rather than repudiates, readerly participation and self-reflexion.<sup>15</sup> As crime fiction supports the application of literary frameworks to its readers’ extratextual reality, it simultaneously highlights the often flimsy barrier between fact and fiction.

Detective fiction’s close relationship with both epistemological and ontological concerns, embodied in and perpetuated by the “drive to make the unintelligible

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<sup>8</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, “The Burden of Freedom: Russian Literature After Communism,” in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, eds. E. A. Dobrenko and M. N. Lipovetsky (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015): 1-20, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, “Utopias of Return: Notes on (post-)Soviet Culture and Its Frustrated (post-)Modernisation,” *Studies in East European Thought* 63, no. 2 (2011): 159-71, 163.

<sup>10</sup> Helena Goscilo, “Narrating Trauma,” in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, 167-88, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006* (Oxford: P. Lang, 2007), 494.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bhikhu C. Parekh, *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Interdependent World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 96.

<sup>13</sup> ‘in denen Identitätssuche und Detektivarbeit kurzgeschlossen werden’. Christoph Jürgensen, “Keine Ordnung. Nirgends,” *Zeitschrift Für Literaturwissenschaft Und Linguistik* 38, no. 1 (2008): 118-37, 122.

<sup>14</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2005), 143.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) for Barthes’s distinction between readerly and writerly texts.

intelligible”<sup>16</sup>, offers one explanation for detective literature’s ongoing popularity – particularly in post-Soviet Russia, where “history, and especially historical fiction, has a significant role to play in articulating a post-Soviet national identity”<sup>17</sup>. As Duncan Bell reminds us, in order “to mould a national identity [...] it is necessary to have an understanding of oneself as located in a temporally extended narrative”<sup>18</sup> – yet the events of 1991 not only upended historical certainties, but also “forced masses of ordinary Russians to experience the discontinuity of historical time as a matter of daily routine”<sup>19</sup>. As the riddle of Russia’s history became one of the biggest stumbling blocks on the way to formulating a coherent sense of national identity, post-Soviet detective fiction likewise discovered identity and history as two key terms in the further development for its plotlines.

For an analysis of the post-Soviet identity search carried out through literature, it is necessary to add a third term to this framework: the notion of nostalgia. This is essential for two main reasons: first of all, national identity – from a methodological point of view – is too vast and too nebulous a term to deal with in any literary analysis. Jean-François Bayart provided a useful summary of this problem in the astute observation that

[...] there is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification. The identities we talk about so pompously, as if they existed independently of those who express them, are made (and unmade) only through the mediation of such identificatory acts.<sup>20</sup>

I therefore propose to view the backwards-oriented thinking encapsulated in nostalgia as one such operational act of identification, which helps to break down the unwieldy topic of national identity into a manageable unit. At the same time, this approach allows a focus on specific points of nostalgic reflection along a timeline of imagined past stability – giving voice to identificatory desires on both an individual and a national level.

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<sup>16</sup> Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 137.

<sup>18</sup> Duncan Bell, “Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity,” *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 63-81, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Dina Khapaeva, “Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society,” *Social Research* 76, no. 1 (2009): 359-394, 364.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-François Bayart, *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 92.

The second reason for the inclusion of nostalgia in this thesis is that literature often plays an active role in the mediation of nostalgia, as “[l]iterary works are memory-productive and memory-reflexive, and often, like a reversible figure, simultaneously”<sup>21</sup>. More importantly, many literary “depictions of imagined homelands [...] represent an effort less to recover a body of ancestral wisdom effaced by imperialism than to translate a community’s various longings and aspirations into a set of common goals and ideals”<sup>22</sup> – a creation of that which we wish we had possessed, rather than an exploration of that which we really did call our own. This is certainly the case in the Russian context, where a veritable nostalgia boom has taken hold of the national identity debate since the early 1990s.

The fact that Russia did witness the beginning of a nostalgic craze in the early 1990s is not in itself a unique phenomenon. Liudmila Mazur has traced the international proliferation of nostalgic trends across the globe in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, linking their widespread appearance to a post-traumatic shock disorder.<sup>23</sup> I agree that the troubled global history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century unleashed events that drew many a national identity into question, and consequently awakened a desire for a reinterpretation of the past that would provide a sense of safety and stability – not just within Russia, but across the globe. Worldwide ideological wars and the break-up of state constellations raised the question of how to define, construct, or even justify a national sense of identity in the aftermath of border-transcending society breakdowns and historical horrors. A desire to rid oneself of one’s national history collided with the realisation of the impossibility of such an undertaking. Globalisation, the internationalisation of political entities, the expansion of the global market, and the transgression of cultural borders further helped to corrode traditional frameworks of identification; nostalgia, in effect, became a symptom of both progress and crisis.<sup>24</sup>

However, the post-Soviet nostalgic boom was not only born into a set of much more complex circumstances, but it was also, like all “[d]ebates on national identity

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<sup>21</sup> Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 151.

<sup>22</sup> John J. Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Liudmila Mazur, “Golden Age Mythology and the Nostalgia of Catastrophes in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 57, no. 3-4 (2015): 1-26.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Katharina Niemeyer, *Media and Nostalgia Yearning for the Past, Present and Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

[...] never politically innocent”<sup>25</sup>. Instead, it “[existed] in the realm of political design in a complicated relationship with various socio-cultural factors”<sup>26</sup>, and has, as a result, produced “unusual, maybe even perverted, forms of memory and protest”<sup>27</sup>. Among other things, “the word ‘empire’ has become so ubiquitous that almost any article, novel, or television program with this term in its title is likely to find an audience”<sup>28</sup> – a proliferation that is by no means unproblematic. In the words of Oleg Kinsky,

для подавляющего большинства населения монархическая власть сейчас – это просто крепкая и справедливая власть, обеспечивающая процветание своего народа [...] Для многих монархическая идея вообще потеряла свою политическую актуальность [...] остались лишь знаки – моральные (‘человеческая’, ‘благородная’) и эстетические (‘красивая’).<sup>29</sup>

Yet the political dimensions of Imperial nostalgia are not entirely absent from this discourse. Under the Putin regime, the introduction of a carefully crafted narrative about Russian Imperial exceptionalism has lent official sanction to the nostalgic tendencies that started out from below. Multiple scholars have commented on the increasingly neo-Imperial character of Putin’s regime; it has likewise been remarked that Putin’s inauguration was cloaked in historic imagery from the start, drawing heavily on symbols of Empire.<sup>30</sup> This infatuation with the Imperial narrative on an official and an unofficial level has resurrected Empire as the mythological resting place of Russia’s long lost identity – and jumpstarted a search for more than just the Romanov’s bones.

Apart from its obvious susceptibility to ideological manipulation, there is one major problem with Russia’s post-1991 search for a viable national identity narrative

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<sup>25</sup> Parekh, *A New Politics of Identity*, 77.

<sup>26</sup> Moonyoung Lee, “Nostalgia as a Feature of ‘Glocalization’: Use of the Past in Post-Soviet Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2011): 158-77, 161.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Etkind, “Magical Historicism,” in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, 104-119, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Rosalind Marsh, “The Concepts of Gender, Citizenship, and Empire,” *Russian Review* 72, no. 2 (2013): 187-211, 199.

<sup>29</sup> Oleg Kinsky, “Romanovy, kotorye my poteriali. Monarkhicheskaia ideia na XXII MMKF,” *Neprikosnovennii zapas* 14, no. 6 (2000), <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2000/6/kinsk.html>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>30</sup> For discussions of the Putin regime’s neo-imperial character, cf. Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Putin’s Imperial Designs Are Reminiscent of Stalin’s,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008): 50-52; Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin’s Wars: The Rise of Russia’s New Imperialism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015); Grigory Yavlinsky, “Putin Represents an Imperial Course for Russia: Interview with Grigory A. Yavlinsky,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 12, no. 1 (2004): 9-12. For a description of Putin’s inauguration, cf. Elizabeth A. Wood, “Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 172-200, 183.

in its memory of Empire. Empire did not have one. Serguei Oushakine correctly observed that Russians – unlike their Soviet ‘brethren’ – never had a narrative of national sovereignty to fall back on after the break-up of the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> Prior to 1917, no viable national identity narrative existed in Russia, which had been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Empire from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Edith Clowes correctly analysed that European empires “had been developing a broad national identity and a nation state before they ever had an empire”<sup>32</sup>, whereas Russia became an Empire long before it started becoming a nation.

The historian Geoffrey Hosking dedicated an entire book to this topic, in which he conclusively demonstrated the ways in which the building of the Russian Empire obstructed the development of a nation – in other words, how “*Rossia* obstructed the flowering of *Rus*”<sup>33</sup>. Although there are many interesting points to discuss from Hosking’s work, two of his arguments carry particular significance in relation to this thesis and the discussion of present-day nostalgia for Imperial times: first of all, Hosking looks for the origins of the Russian conflict between Empire vs. Nation in the reign of Peter the Great, whom he views not just as the ruler who opened up Russia’s proverbial ‘window to the West’, but who did so in a conflicting and detrimental way that turned his reign into a system of rule where “the eye of the sovereign should be everywhere [...] Freedom backed by compulsion; enlightenment bolstered by the convict camp”<sup>34</sup>. According to Hosking, Peter I’s hierarchical enforcement of Western habits and modes of behaviour created both a physical and cultural periphery that led to the “‘cultural construction’ of [a] Russian citizenship [that] had largely foreign underpinnings”<sup>35</sup>. The separation of the emerging Russian nation into two parallel societies negatively affected the development of Russia’s national identity narrative for centuries to come.

Secondly, Hosking focusses on the role of the intelligentsia as the social class that tried to breach the gap between these two parallel Russian societies. The term

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Serguei Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia. Culture and Society after Socialism* (Ithaca, London: Cornell UP, 2009), 10-11.

<sup>32</sup> Edith W. Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Russia: People And Empire 1552-1917* (London: Fontana Press, 1998), xix.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 83-91.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 290.

intelligentsia, although Russian in origin and by now widely adopted in Western academic parlance, is as obscure in its precise reach and meaning for Russians as it is for Western Slavists. In this dissertation, I am going to follow Hosking's definition of the term, who views the intelligentsia as "critical of the existing regime, concerned about the condition of society"<sup>36</sup> and aiming to "reknit the torn ethnic and civic fabric of Russia [...] to create a new society which was both more humane and more authentically Russian"<sup>37</sup>. Such a definition appropriately focuses on the intelligentsia's traditional position between politics and culture, along with its self-imposed responsibility to challenge the former through purposeful uses of the latter.

### *The Crisis of the Post-Soviet Intelligentsia*

As champions of the ill-fated mission to reconnect Russia's nobility with the people and do "service to 'the nation' rather than to the state"<sup>38</sup>, the intelligentsia took on the task of designing a cultural citizenship narrative of their own, partly because no correspondent narratives were forthcoming from above. After Peter the Great, the only attempt at designing an official Russian national identity was carried out by Count Uvarov, whose famous triad of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nation' may have served Tsars up to Nicholas II, but never even specified what 'narodnost' really meant.<sup>39</sup> Throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the formation of a Soviet – although heavily Russo-centric – identity took precedence, ignoring all nation-building alternatives until the dissolution of the Union invalidated the Soviet identity as well.<sup>40</sup> Faced with such an overwhelming and prolonged sense of historical displacement, the newly minted post-Soviet citizens experienced a near-obsessive wish to rediscover a stable version of their past and self.

However, the group traditionally charged with providing answers to this kind of task had undergone a drastic change in both social composition and function over the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 264.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 265.

<sup>38</sup> Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 79.

<sup>39</sup> According to Svetlana Boym, there are still two versions of 'narodnost' - which she translates as 'people's spirit' – to be found in Russia, neither of which actually originated among the people: Uvarov's legacy, summed up as state policy, and the Slavophile legacy, which also supports the idea of an absolute monarchy. Cf. Svetlana Boym, "From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia," *Representations* 49, no. 1 (1995): 133-66, 140-1.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002).

course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More importantly, it had never managed to complete its historic mission in the first place. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the intelligentsia's composition primarily consisted of upper-class representatives whose nostalgic enthusiasm for the past dictated a "romantic modernity à la Russe [which] drew heavily on the aesthetics of pre-Petrine Muscovy"<sup>41</sup>. Although the late Imperial intelligentsia began to include increasing numbers of non-noble members, so-called *raznochintsy*, it still acted as a small elite whose attempts to build "a civic community that could become a moral and cultural vanguard for society"<sup>42</sup> – although genuine – ultimately only served to contribute to dysfunctional ideas on how to develop a Russian nation. On the one hand, the Imperial intelligentsia gave rise to the belief that "only the toiling Russian people could belong to the nation"<sup>43</sup>; on the other hand, they also created the notion "that the entire multi-ethnic tsarist empire was the Russian nation-state"<sup>44</sup>. As these questions started to be actively discussed in the literary works of 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers, they also became eternalised and internalised in the self-perception of its intelligentsia members, who would carry these problems into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After 1917, the intelligentsia's main function became the defence of those cultural and intellectual traditions that they had inherited from their 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors. The efforts to preserve an independent, free-thinking spirit in society against the unifying forces of mass Soviet education and artistic discipline made the intelligentsia an undesirable element for the Soviet regime, as the persecutions under Stalin and the Great Purge were quick to prove. The literary intelligentsia suffered particularly high losses; as noted by Orlando Figes, "[o]f the 700 writers who attended the First Writers' Congress in 1934, only fifty survived to attend the Second in 1954"<sup>45</sup>. This decimation of the original, pre-revolutionary intelligentsia simultaneously meant the eradication of much of their historical self-understanding and societal image.

Vladislav Zubok eloquently followed the trail of the intelligentsia in the decades following Stalin's death and chronicled the rise of a new generation of intelligentsia

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<sup>41</sup> Katia Dianina, *When Art Makes News: Writing Culture and Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: NIU Press, 2013), 204.

<sup>42</sup> Vladislav M. Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2009), 160.

<sup>43</sup> Vera Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation* (London: Arnold, 2001), 15.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 482.

members, whose primary concern was the reformation of the Communist ideal.<sup>46</sup> According to Zubok, the early 1960s offered a real opportunity to unite the intelligentsia's "subtle irony and stern judgment"<sup>47</sup> with the regime's efforts to create 'Socialism with a human face'. Yet Khrushchev's staunch anti-intellectual stance meant that "the revival of an intelligentsia that could be *both freethinking and morally committed to the Soviet communism* was nipped in the bud [original emphasis]"<sup>48</sup>. The Prague Spring of 1968 completed the disempowerment of this reawakened intelligentsia, which developed two main coping mechanisms for its renewed disenfranchisement: a persistent pattern of cynicism called *stioob* and a retreat into the private realm, which Alexei Yurchak termed 'living *vnye*', a position "that was simultaneously inside and outside [...] neither simply in support nor simply in opposition [of the system] [...] in some extreme cases [it] translated into having little involvement with the system's constative concerns, and even being ignorant of them"<sup>49</sup>. Both *stioob* and the practice of living *vnye* carved out spheres of sovereign intellectual activity in the late Soviet era, but they were notably removed from any areas of official governance.

This disconnect between intelligentsia and state activity posed a real problem for the former: traditionally, "[f]or most of the *intelligenty* most of the time, solutions to Russia's ills were state solutions: a total, systemic change directed from above"<sup>50</sup>. The intelligentsia wanted to be the agent, but not the executor of change. Although first attempts at overcoming this attitude had been underway at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these had been disrupted by the revolution. Under Gorbachev, the hopeless unattainability of a cooperation between intelligentsia and government changed once again, giving the "Thaw dream of a partnership between a reform-minded political leadership and the progressive intellectual and artistic elites"<sup>51</sup> new impetus. Not surprisingly, the representatives of the 1960s intelligentsia felt as if "the history of

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<sup>46</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 192.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 172.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 224.

<sup>49</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), 288.

<sup>50</sup> Leon Aron, "A Champion for the Bourgeoisie: Reinventing Virtue and Citizenship in Boris Akunin's Novels," *The National Interest*, no. 75 (2004): 149-57, 152.

<sup>51</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, 341.

their generation had resumed at the point where it had been forcibly arrested in 1968”<sup>52</sup> – only to be faced with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In Zubok’s portrayal, the result of this dissolution was a wholesale disappointment on part of the intelligentsia, which made perestroika “the last time that the intelligentsia, as either an idea or a reform-minded community, would play a central role in Russian history”<sup>53</sup>.

In many ways, Zubok’s assessment is correct. The post-Soviet intelligentsia failed to live up to the challenges of the changed socio-political circumstances of the 1990s, as the majority of them either continued to perceive reality through their established prism of late Soviet passivity or joined the political system, which, by 1993, suffered its first major setback – a crisis that was left unchallenged by most of the intelligentsia. Rather than come up with new ways of engaging with a new polity, the intelligentsia betrayed its “inability to create a brand new identity without reflecting on tradition and heritage”<sup>54</sup>, thus failing to fulfil its traditional role as Russia’s “virtually [...] sole nation-builders”<sup>55</sup>. This failure found an exemplary outlet in the protagonist’s struggles in Viktor Pelevin’s *Generation P*, where

[the] Russian intelligent’s anxiety about diminishing cultural capital in a world dominated by currency is demonstrated not only by Tatarskii’s lowly status as a mid-level copywriter in several ad agencies, but – more significantly – by his inability to produce what has traditionally been associated with Russian authors: namely, a cosmic, life-transforming ideal.<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, many intelligentsia members chose to give in to their very own nostalgic predicament, allowing “postmodernism [to morph] into cynicism, effectively legitimizing it culturally and furnishing it with the fashionable discursive and media strategies to achieve its nefarious agenda”<sup>57</sup>. The loss of intelligentsia authority that this attitude engendered subsequently turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In 1996, Tim McDaniel commented that “the intelligentsia was always oriented more toward critique and opposition than to responsible construction, for which task they had no experience in any case”<sup>58</sup>. A year later, Masha Gessen published a book

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 343.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 345.

<sup>54</sup> Birgit Beumers, “Introduction,” in *Russia’s New Fin De Siècle: Contemporary Culture Between Past and Present*, ed. ibid. (Bristol, Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2013): 1-11, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation*, 8.

<sup>56</sup> Keith Livers, “The Tower or the Labyrinth: Conspiracy, Occult, and Empire-Nostalgia in the Work of Viktor Pelevin and Aleksandr Prokhanov,” *Russian Review* 69, no. 3 (2010): 477-503, 481.

<sup>57</sup> Mark Lipovetsky, “Intelligentsia and Cynicism: Political Metamorphoses of Postmodernism,” *Russian Journal of Communication* 10, no. 2-3 (2018): 233-250, 246.

<sup>58</sup> Tim McDaniel, *The Agony of the Russian Idea* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 148.

whose title proclaimed the intelligentsia for dead, sparking a discussion about potential new spheres of influence for its remaining members.<sup>59</sup> In 2009, Dina Khapaeva lamented the continued absence of an “intellectual or political force that would make post-Soviet society face the issue of historical responsibility”<sup>60</sup>, whereas in 2013, Birgit Beumers surmised that while “the intelligentsia was the think-tank of social reform during the Soviet era, in present-day Russia it has lost its meaning, its role and its touch with the political reality entirely”<sup>61</sup>. Two years later, Evgeny Dobrenko astutely stated that “the cynicism that had built up in late-Soviet times became truly pandemic in Putin’s Russia of total corruption, disenfranchisement, and government arbitrariness, and permeated all strata of society”<sup>62</sup>, while Gasan Gusejnov attacked the contemporary intelligentsia’s complacent cynicism as behaviour that “[excuses] [...] idleness as virtue”<sup>63</sup>. Mark Lipovetsky called members of the intelligentsia the “chief consumers and sponsors of neo-traditionalist sentiments”<sup>64</sup>, and according to Andrei Piontkovsky, the intelligentsia as a whole “committed moral and ideological suicide”<sup>65</sup>.

Thus, the list of grievances against the post-Soviet intelligentsia is long. However, I believe a diversification of this narrative is in order, along with an update to Zubok’s claim. Zubok’s argument about the end of the intelligentsia in post-Soviet Russia remains plausible for as long as we consider the reformation of the Socialist dream the sole *raison d’être* for the intelligentsia’s continued existence – but there is no reason why a second revival of the intelligentsia, comparable to the group’s self-revivification in the 1960s, should not also be possible in contemporary, post-Yeltsin Russia. After all, the intelligentsia traditionally strove to act as a moral, not just as a political vanguard for society’s development, and would find plenty to oppose in today’s atmosphere of widespread corruption, repression of freedoms, and constitutional powerplay. A comparison of pre-revolutionary, 1960s and post-Soviet intelligentsia

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Masha Gessen, *Dead Again: The Russian Intelligentsia After Communism* (London, New York: Verso, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> Khapaeva, “Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Gothic Society,” 359.

<sup>61</sup> Beumers, “Introduction,” 5.

<sup>62</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, “Recycling of the Soviet,” in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, 20-45, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, “Intelligentsia Exhumed: Nationalist Trends Among Contemporary Russian Intelligentsia,” *Russian Journal of Communication* 10, no. 2-3 (2018): 225-232, 225.

<sup>64</sup> Lipovetsky, “Intelligentsia and Cynicism,” 238.

<sup>65</sup> Andrei Piontkovsky, “The Post-Intelligentsia and the Russian Catastrophe of the Twenty-First Century,” *Russian Journal of Communication* 10, no. 2-3 (2018): 199-211, 199.

responses to the task of nation-building therefore seems not just permissible, but actually in order – not least because the “politicization of literature and history which characterized nineteenth-century Russian society and the entire Soviet period has continued unabated into the post-communist era”<sup>66</sup>.

Some of these literary voices have already taken it upon themselves to oppose the political changes that occurred under the Putin and Medvedev leadership. Complicitous as the intelligentsia was in returning Russia to its current, post-Soviet form of authoritarianism, it also remains the part of society best equipped to create an offer of counterculture to the public. In this sense, the cultural liberation that occurred during the 1990s can be seen as a second, albeit much more extreme version of the Thaw – creating opportunities not just for cynicism, but also for creative impulses that made a lasting contribution to the critical reassessment of Russia’s past and its future paths forward.

#### *Boris Akunin and the Fandorin Project*

Cue the appearance of the Fandorin project. Named after its protagonist and finished in 2018, the Fandorin series comprises fifteen highly-acclaimed ‘intellectual detective novels’ and chronicles Fandorin’s life and career from the moment he first joined the Moscow police department as a 19-year old clerk in 1876 to his supposed death in 1918. Its historical timeline, which interrogates several key points in Russian history – the Russo-Turkish War, the Khodynka tragedy and the 1905 Revolution among them – has made the Fandorin project a tremendous success in post-Soviet Russia and a uniquely suitable case study for intelligentsia-inspired cultural (counter-)productivity in the country.

Somewhat controversially, Akunin also endowed his pioneer project with the subtitle ‘new detective novel’ (*новый детектив*) – combining the qualifier *new* with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century spelling of the word *detektiv*, which, in Russian, can denote both the literary genre and the figure of the detective. In this way, Akunin made a playful, yet bold claim about the creation of an entirely new subgenre of crime fiction, showcasing both a dissociation from the genre’s classical source texts, a desire to reform the sphere

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<sup>66</sup> Rosalind Marsh, *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 213. I would add the caveat that there was a noticeable period of diversification and even de-politicisation during the 1990s, but this has been reversed since.

of cultural production in Russia, and an awareness “that reality is escaping the state’s efforts to know it and stabilize it”<sup>67</sup>. Although Akunin’s writerly style consciously echoed the elegance of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century novels, his work noticeably explored the past from a contemporary point of view – asking, tongue-in-cheek, why his readership would develop a taste for crime fiction at this precise moment in time, and linking detective fiction’s popularity in post-Soviet Russia not just to a desire for escapist fare, but also to the anxious, yet excited search for a national identity.

Akunin’s reinterpretation of the operating modes and functions of detective fiction answers John Cawelti’s notion of genre transformation as the result of generic exhaustion; in a more general sense, it also addressed the exhaustion of Soviet cultural thought in the post-Soviet space in general and foreshadowed the rise of popular culture in future discussions of questions surrounding state, nationhood, and history.<sup>68</sup> Akunin’s playful disregard for genre boundaries purposefully brushed away the cobwebs of Soviet indoctrinating thought and reactivated the pre-revolutionary belief “that truth can only be discovered through a combination of multiple genres (fictional and nonfictional)”<sup>69</sup>. All of Akunin’s fictional projects deal with this issue in some form or other, but the Fandorin project was both his first and, potentially, most experimental way of doing so.

Critical reviews from within Russia suggest that Akunin hit a nerve with his eagerness to experiment – but not always a positive one. Roman Arbitman outright attacked Akunin’s work in 1999 as the outgrowth of Soviet ideology:

Причем наиболее часто возвращаемая потеря [...] — это, естественно, Россия. Да-да, та самая. Которую мы ненароком утратили и которую, слава Богу, кое-кто нашел, чтобы теперь вернуть нам за солидн. вознаграг. Или хотя бы просто за вознаграг. Или даже за бесплатно. Лишь бы мы взяли.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries & Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 18.

<sup>68</sup> According to Cawelti, every art genre has a certain life-span and needs to undergo a generic transformation at a point when this lifespan reaches its exhaustion. The four common modes of generic transformation, according to him, are the humorous burlesque, the evocation of nostalgia, the demythologising of generic myth, and the affirmation of myth as myth, although a mixture of these modes generally occurs at the same time (cf. John G. Cawelti, “Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films,” in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995): 227-45).

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *An Obsession with History: Russian Writers Confront the Past* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994), 222.

<sup>70</sup> Roman Arbitman, “B. Akunin. Azazel’. Turetskii gambit; Leviafan. Smert’ Akhillesa,” *Znamya 7* (1999), <<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/1999/7/arbitm.html>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

He further surmised that “под видом ‘добротного, стильного детектива’ нам обязательно подсуropят какую-нибудь литературную недотыкомку — скорее всего, очередной ‘идеологический роман’, хитро обернутый в детективную шкурку”<sup>71</sup>. This unexpected resurrection of Sologub’s elusive, malevolent dust bunny as the hidden soul behind Akunin’s project may sound humorous at first, but Arbitman’s quotes are excellent proof for the profound scepticism that related to authorial premeditation, stylistic experimentation and commercial reasoning in the 1990s. It also tells us a lot about the author’s failure to perceive the world through anything but a Soviet prism, and the struggles that post-Soviet Russians experienced in moving from the consumption of ideology to the consumption of commercial goods instead.<sup>72</sup> After all, the massive commercial success of Akunin’s mix of history and entertainment was one of its first distinguishing marks, and as of 2016, the Fandorin series reportedly sold over 30 million copies in more than 30 languages worldwide.<sup>73</sup>

Arbitman was not the only critic to exhibit the very Soviet mind-set that Akunin wrote to overcome. Alla Latynina described Akunin’s detective hero as “скромный советский Джеймс Бонд”<sup>74</sup> and linked the Fandorin project to Soviet trash culture, without specifying what exactly it is she meant by that term. Like Arbitman, Latynina mistakenly reads Soviet nostalgia into Akunin’s novels by applying the binary rules of Soviet literary and political thinking to his work, singling out the fact that “Акунин посвящает свою фандоринскую серию памяти литературы XIX века. Но создает героя, которого просто не могло в ней быть”<sup>75</sup> – failing to realise that this is exactly Akunin’s aim. Yet another critic who committed this mistake was Evgenia Shcheglova, who described Fandorin as “смесь Шерлока Холмса с доктором Ватсоном [...], а заодно и со Штирлицем, и с Иоганном Вайсом, и другими советскими душками-разведчиками, любимчиками хомо советикус”<sup>76</sup>. Detective

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Adele Marie Barker, “Rereading Russia,” in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev*, ed. ibid. (Durham: Duke UP, 1999): 2-11, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Mikhail Viesel, “8 Facts About Boris Akunin, Russian Literature’s Mystifier-in-Chief,” *Russia Beyond*, May 20, 2016, <[http://www.rbth.com/arts/literature/2016/05/20/8-facts-about-boris-akunin-russian-literatures-mystifier-in-chief\\_594773](http://www.rbth.com/arts/literature/2016/05/20/8-facts-about-boris-akunin-russian-literatures-mystifier-in-chief_594773)> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>74</sup> Alla Latynina, “Entomologia roda Fandorinykh,” *Novyi mir* 8 (2005), <[http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi\\_mi/2005/8/lat11.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2005/8/lat11.html)> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Evgeniia Shcheglova, “Zerkalo literaturnoi kontrevoliutsii: Boris Akunin,” *Voprosy Literatury* 4 (2009): 62-80, 67.

literature is here retrospectively elevated to a favourite genre of the Soviet reader, but its popularity among readers is grossly exaggerated, not to mention the fact that Akunin himself has talked disparagingly about the Soviet *detektiv*.<sup>77</sup>

In contrast, Western critics primarily focussed on Akunin's political engagement in their attempts to measure his clout as a writer. After Akunin's emergence on the English-speaking book market, which occurred with a five-year delay (*The Winter Queen* was published in 2003), Western journalists and columnists quickly took a liking to the Russian crime-writing wildcard on their shelves. Akunin was called "Russia's anti-Putin 'J.K. Rowling'"<sup>78</sup>, "Russia's best-known author of historical fiction—and, quite probably, its best-known popular writer *tout court*"<sup>79</sup>, "the man credited with having created a new genre of Russian literature"<sup>80</sup>, the "virtual savior of Russian popular fiction"<sup>81</sup> and "without doubt the most interesting phenomenon in Russia's contemporary literary marketplace"<sup>82</sup>. However, it is not always clear whether these comments stem from Akunin's actual merit as an author or whether they are the result of a Western desire to frame Russian writers as an alluring, semi-exotic breed of dissidents. By inferring, for example, that Akunin is "a somewhat singular Russian by arriving perfectly on time at the Mari Vanna restaurant in London's Knightsbridge [...] hardly someone likely to shake the Kremlin's walls and provoke the wrath of President Vladimir Putin"<sup>83</sup>, Akunin is taken more as a *nolens volens* political activist than a serious belletrist. Akunin's phenomenal success in his home country has also been framed in this context, having been described as "startling, since none of his books contains the ingredients said to be the *sine qua non* of popularity in a post-authoritarian, post-censorship literary market"<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>77</sup> This was a statement made by Akunin during a Skype Q&A held at Glasgow University in October 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Will Cathcart, "How Author Boris Akunin Became Putin's Nemesis," *The Daily Beast*, April 25, 2017, <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-author-boris-akunin-became-putins-nemesis>> [accessed 11 February 2020]

<sup>79</sup> Victoria Frede, Stephen Lovell, and Paul Werth, "Making Russian History Up," *Kritika* 15, no. 2 (2014): 231-34, 234.

<sup>80</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "A Russian Intellectual Turns to Crime (Fiction)," *New York Times*, May 17, 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008), 234.

<sup>82</sup> Aron, "A Champion for the Bourgeoisie," 149.

<sup>83</sup> John Thornhill, "Lunch with the FT: Boris Akunin," *Financial Times*, March 1, 2013, <<http://www.ft.com/content/77f7ca96-80d4-11e2-9c5b-00144feabdc0>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>84</sup> Aron, "A Champion for the Bourgeoisie," 149.

Verdicts like these are as outdated as they are nonsensical, but they are a testament to Akunin's success in updating the Russian *detektiv* tradition in a previously unseen manner. They also document a widespread cultural anxiety in post-Soviet Russia, which reacted not just to the fact that Akunin took a formerly pulp fiction genre and made it sound erudite, but which also felt threatened by the way he unapologetically embraced a popular culture genre despite possessing a pronounced intellectual background.<sup>85</sup> In the Russia of the 1990s, this was not only reason for serious consternation, but it also acted as a painful reminder of the changes that were afoot in society. After all, no commonly accepted word for 'popular culture' had existed in Russian up until the 1980s, and official Soviet literature had certainly been mass, but hardly ever popular fiction.<sup>86</sup> Even the term 'mass' was fraught with conflict: "In Russia the term *massovaia kul'tura* was not applied to the Soviet Union – it was regarded as a phenomenon specific to Western capitalist societies, which Soviet society [...] had managed to avoid"<sup>87</sup>. As a result, the truly popular was often subversive in nature and marked by limited availability, but by no means lowly origins.

The fact that Akunin chose to highlight the merits of a newfound commercial culture, rather than criticise its pitfalls, deserves special mention. Stephen Lovell highlighted the boldness of this approach when he described the 1995 book market, stating that "publishers were confident enough in their analysis of popular taste to commission works of historical fiction from contemporary writers"<sup>88</sup>. Lovell's choice of words is telling: publishers needed confidence to ask for popular versions of a genre that had previously belonged to the echelons of higher culture, and which most associated with elephantine works such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (*Война и мир*, 1865-69) or Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* (*Тихий Дон*, 1928).

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<sup>85</sup> The fact that crime fiction enjoys popularity among intellectuals and academics has often been remarked upon as something astounding, both by writers and critics alike. Fritz Wölcken, for instance, commented with some astonishment in the mid-1950s that "a number of significant and mentally by no means deficient people seem to enjoy reading works of this new genre, sometimes even with passion" ('eine Reihe sehr bedeutender und geistig durchaus interessierter Menschen gerne oder gar mit Leidenschaft Werke dieser neuen Literaturgattung lesen,' cf. Fritz Wölcken, *Der literarische Mord: Eine Untersuchung über die englische und amerikanische Detektivliteratur* (Nürnberg: Nest Verlag, 1953), 11).

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Stephen Lovell, "Reading the Russian Popular," in *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, eds. Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (Munich: Otto Sagner, 2005): 29-39, 31.

<sup>87</sup> Lovell, *Russian Reading Revolution*, 19.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 137.

The majority of Soviet-educated literary intellectuals and readers struggled to accept the commercialisation of Russia's cultural sphere during the 1990s. Many felt that the considerably less discriminate commercial publishing industry was challenging the last vestiges of Russian cultural authority on the international stage; people in particular lamented the loss of the 'thick journals', which had served as important places for the debate of cultural and literary trends as well as for political developments in the 19<sup>th</sup> and, partly, the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Russian readers struggled to associate mass print-runs with readability or to view themselves as the consumers they were destined to become. An inborn wariness of the commercial book market alongside a projection of "the Soviet regime's extreme hostility to commercially successful, entertainment-orientated popular literature"<sup>90</sup> was also reflected in the disparaging comments aimed at popular literature by Russian literary scholars and critics of the 1990s, who, as summarised by Birgit Menzel, were united in "the verdict that popular so-called mass literature dominates the entire post-Soviet literary field [...] and] the ostentatious refusal to deal with the reading material of choice for 90% of the population"<sup>91</sup>. The scholars who did discuss this reading material often took a disdainful stance. Norman Shneidman is one such example: his comprehensive study of 1990s Russian literature stated that the "writer who is unable to sell the product of his or her labour often stops writing serious fiction and starts producing detective novels"<sup>92</sup>, before delivering a sweeping dismissal of all Russian literature written during the 1990s. According to Shneidman, not "a single work of prose [...] will become a classic, and not a single new author whose works appeared in print in the same period demonstrates any prodigious talent"<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> What many readers no longer seem to be aware of, however, is the political origin of these journals: according to Hosking, the impressive size of these volumes – averaging no less than 200 pages and published monthly – needs to be partly ascribed to a desire to avoid censorship, as works were exempt from censorship if they were longer than 160 pages (cf. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*, 296).

<sup>90</sup> Stephen Lovell, "Literature and Entertainment in Russia: A Brief History," in *Reading for Entertainment*, 11-28, 26.

<sup>91</sup> 'dem Urteil, daß populäre sogenannte Masseliteratur das postsowjetische literarische Feld beherrscht, einig sind sie sich auch [...] in [...] der demonstrativen Weigerung, sich mit dem zu beschäftigen, was etwa 90% der lesenden Bevölkerung als Lesestoff wählen,' Birgit Menzel, "Formen und Funktionen postsowjetischer Populärliteratur," in *Kunstmarkt und Kanonbildung. Tendenzen in der russischen Literatur heute*, ed. Elisabeth Cheauré (Berlin: Verlag Arno Spitz GmbH, 2000): 219-43, 219.

<sup>92</sup> Norman N. Shneidman, *Russian Literature, 1995-2002: On the Threshold of a New Millennium* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 183.

### *Argument Outline*

From a contemporary perspective, it would be interesting to hear Shneidman's verdict on Boris Akunin's work. Far from having performed a literary fall from grace, Akunin began as a writer of popular fiction and demonstrated a much more progressive and much less rigid attitude towards artistic boundaries than Shneidman did. By raising questions about history, heritage and Empire in a work of popular fiction, Akunin joined in the national identity debate that dominated much of 1990s Russian literature, but supplemented "those overtly political *bol'nye voprosy*, like 'who is to blame?' and 'what is to be done?' [with] a new focus on the equally thorny, and even more irresolvable, 'who are we?' and 'where are we going?'"<sup>94</sup>. His choice of detective fiction to investigate these questions was a logical step in an international context, yet a provocative one within the cultural sphere of Russia.

The Fandorin project was also unusual for its obvious anti-nostalgic stance. Towards the end of the 1990s, even "popular culture in Russia [was] heavily nostalgic"<sup>95</sup> – a trend to which Akunin refused to subscribe, imbuing his novels with astute examinations of existing narratives about the Empire's lost glory instead. At the same time, Akunin embedded a new type of intelligentsia hero into this game of historical hide-and-seek, using his protagonist to delineate ideals for the future of Russia's quickly diminishing intellectual elite.

By choosing the late Imperial era as the setting for the Fandorin project, Akunin not only aimed to investigate the Empire itself, but also to question the original intelligentsia's failure to unite the narratives of Empire and Nation – pointing out the historical dimension and context of this problem while expressing a hope for the intelligentsia's internal revivification. Thus, Akunin addressed the post-Soviet nostalgia for Empire on multiple levels, dissecting both official, state-sponsored views and unofficial, cultural responses to the problem. The fact that Akunin began writing at a watershed moment in post-Soviet history offers an opportunity to contextualise his work as a result of the 1990s search for a national identity, while at the same time

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<sup>94</sup> Christopher D. Ely, "The Unfinished Puzzle of Identity in Imperial Russia," *Kritika* 14, no. 4 (2013): 823-35, 824.

<sup>95</sup> Adele Marie Barker, "The Culture Factory: Theorizing the Popular in the Old and New Russia," in *Consuming Russia*, 12-46, 19.

rendering it into a real-time commentary on the subsequent developments of this struggle under Putinism.

It is therefore all the more surprising that no comprehensive study of the Fandorin project has been published to date. With the exception of Robert Mulcahy's doctoral thesis, only article-length discussions about select Fandorin novels – such as *The State Counsellor*, *The Coronation* and *The Diamond Chariot* – are available.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the majority of these studies focus on the generic aspects of Akunin's work only; Boris Dralyuk, for instance, claims that Akunin aimed to manipulate his "readers' nostalgia for detective stories and thrillers of an earlier vintage"<sup>97</sup>, whereas Mulcahy discusses Akunin's 'refurbishment of genre' and argues that an important factor for Akunin's success was the serialisation of his detective figure. He further claims that Akunin uses the Fandorin novels to "[provide] a sense of stability absent from modern Russian social and political structures"<sup>98</sup> – a view that misses the main point of the Fandorin project, which is to communicate the *instability* of imagined narratives of stability instead.

Kevin Platt touched upon the latter issue when he summarised that the Fandorin novels' mystery plots are

a supremely appropriate form for historical fiction in the post-Soviet era – at a moment when there is no consensual conception of national history to be had, the historical mystery takes up the task of allegorizing not only history's known movements, but also the search for the shape and the mechanisms of history and identity themselves.<sup>99</sup>

Lipovetsky and Lisa Wakamiya likewise stated that "Akunin's novels suggest that the social and political problems that plague Russia today have a long history in its past"<sup>100</sup>, whereas Claire Whitehead argued that Akunin "problematizes [not only] the act of reading, but [...] also [...] the nature of knowledge itself, particularly historical

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Robert Mulcahy, "A Not-so-thrilling Thriller: Adapting Boris Akunin's *The State Counsellor*," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 7, no. 3 (2013): 311-35; Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 232ff.; Olga Sobolev, "Boris Akunin and the Rise of the Russian Detective Genre," *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 18 (2004): 63-85, and Linda Galvane, "In the Middle, Somewhat... Japanese-Russian Mixed Blood Characters in Contemporary Russian Literature," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 44 (2010): 69-87.

<sup>97</sup> Boris Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East: The Russian Pinkerton Craze 1907-1934* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012), 1.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Mulcahy and Helena Goscilo, *A Hero of Two Times: Erast Fandorin and the Refurbishment of Genre* (ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2013), 200.

<sup>99</sup> Kevin Platt, "Historical Novel," in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, 66-85, 79-80.

<sup>100</sup> Mark Lipovetsky and Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya, *Late and Post-Soviet Russian Literature: A Reader* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 274.

knowledge”<sup>101</sup>. Elena Baraban, who offered the first substantive discussion of Akunin’s use of the late Imperial era to oppose the post-Soviet glorification of Russia’s pre-revolutionary past, summarised that he exposes the “myths about a ‘wonderful pre-revolutionary Russia’ and ‘people’s well-being’ before 1917 [as a version of] the past [whose] wholeness [...] never existed”<sup>102</sup>. In an important update to this verdict, Stephen Norris described Akunin’s work in his 2012 monograph on Russian blockbusters as “[playing] with Russia’s past, particularly the Romanov *and* Soviet Empires [my emphasis]”<sup>103</sup>. However, important as these contributions are, they remain limited in scope and are, in some cases, outdated – highlighting the need for further contributions to the field of Akunin studies as a whole.

### *Research Question and Methodology*

This thesis aims to fill this lacuna by approaching the Fandorin project as a double detective journey, consisting of two narrative strands: one aimed at righting the historical narrative about Empire, the other using this reassessment to reverse the trends of nostalgia and cynicism and detect a meaningful way forward for the Russian intelligentsia. In my reading, these two strands simultaneously embody the novelty of Akunin’s ‘new detective novel’: a revivification of the socio-political function of traditional crime fiction, aimed at uncovering the (in)validity of Russia’s post-Soviet nostalgia for Empire, and a rediscovery of original intelligentsia values, accompanied by a critical investigation of the intelligentsia’s ill-fated nostalgia for their own, insufficiently reassessed role as nation-builders. Which overall contribution does this two-pronged reinvention of the detective genre make to post-Soviet Russia’s nostalgic search for a national identity? This is the central question this thesis aims to answer.

In order to reflect the two parallel narrative strands that discuss nostalgia in the Fandorin project, my thesis will borrow Hosking’s theory about Empire and Nation as a structural guideline for my analysis chapters. In doing so, I will not revisit at length the complex history behind the term Empire, either from a general or from a Russian

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<sup>101</sup> Claire Whitehead, “The Temptation of the Reader: The Search for Meaning in Boris Akunin’s Pelagia Trilogy,” *Slavonic & East European Review* 94, no. 1 (2016): 29-56, 37-8.

<sup>102</sup> Elena Baraban, “A Country Resembling Russia: The Use of History in Boris Akunin’s Detective Novels,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 3 (2004): 396-420, 398.

<sup>103</sup> Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2012), 77.

perspective; instead, I will adhere to the basic shared understanding that Empires are polities “marked by inequality, subordination, and difference, with hierarchically distinct units”<sup>104</sup> and “based on conquest, difference between the ruling institution and its subjects, and the subordination of periphery to the imperial centre”<sup>105</sup>. I also subscribe to Dominic Lieven’s view that Empires are “by definition the antipode of democracy [...] Power over many peoples without their consent [...] is what distinguished all great empires of the past and what all sensible definitions of this concept propose”<sup>106</sup>. The revived dominance of power over policy under the Putin regime makes this choice doubly appropriate in its timely approach.

The term Nation is considerably more complex than Empire and notoriously difficult to define; it is also increasingly subjected to ideological distortions in contemporary Russia. In 2011, Oxana Shevel highlighted that “the ruling elites may have found a way to postpone, potentially indefinitely, a resolution of the vexing contradictions associated with [nation-building]”<sup>107</sup> through the institutionalisation of an ambiguous compatriot law. As discussed by Emil’ Pain, contemporary Russia’s neo-Imperial character spells out further problems for the emergence of real nation-building processes, as the misleading promulgation of imperial-civilisational nationalism under the umbrella of an official civic nation project only serves to strengthen the ambiguity pointed out by Shevel. I believe Pain is correct when he predicts that “these attempts will prove even less successful than those made in the nineteenth century”<sup>108</sup>.

The situation surrounding nation-building in post-Soviet Russia is therefore both highly complex and frustratingly fuzzy. In my thesis, I will follow Vera Tolz’s delineation of five basic threads of nation-building in contemporary Russia, which comprise a union identity, a community of eastern Slavs, a community of Russian-

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<sup>104</sup> Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 13.

<sup>105</sup> Ronald G. Suny, “The Contradictions of Identity: Being Soviet and National in the USSR and After,” in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, eds. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012): 17-36, 21.

<sup>106</sup> Dominic Lieven, “Imperiia, istoriia i sovremennyi mirovoi poriadok,” *Ab Imperio*, 1 (2005): 75–116, 79.

<sup>107</sup> Oxana Shevel, “Russian Nation-building from Yel’tsin to Medvedev: Ethnic, Civic or Purposefully Ambiguous?,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (2011): 179-202, 199.

<sup>108</sup> Emil’ Pain, “Russia Between Empire and Nation,” *Russian Politics & Law* 47, no. 2 (2009): 60-86, 65.

speakers, a racial definition via blood ties, and a civic Russian nation.<sup>109</sup> As Tolz views the intelligentsia as Russia's principal nation-builder, I shall approach Akunin as one of the "advocates of civic nationalism, who are a minority [and the only] real innovators in the Russian context"<sup>110</sup>. Civic citizenship, in Tolz's definition, is "formed through [...] conscious efforts"<sup>111</sup>, characterised by horizontal ties within

a multicultural community of citizens [...], who are united by loyalty to the constitution and political institutions [...] Its proponents argue that no nation can be equated with a primordial ethnos claiming descent from a common ancestor. Biologically based beliefs and cultural 'myths', which are artificial constructs of intellectuals, only breed inter-ethnic conflicts. National identity [...] can be a matter of individual choice.<sup>112</sup>

As this concept has no precursor in pre-revolutionary Russia, its use in the Fandorin project poses a bit of an anomaly; however, Akunin's exploration of this citizenship model against an achronological timeline matches the premise of his project, and fittingly illuminates a missed opportunity in the past, reevaluated now in order to arrive at answers for the present.

While neither Empire nor Nation are in any way clear-cut categories and an occasional overlapping of ideas and notions will undoubtedly occur, I believe that my approach nonetheless promises to yield a comprehensive insight into the ways in which Akunin's work helps to address the increasingly sanitised processes of historical remembering in Russia.

#### *Structure of this Thesis*

Chapter One of this thesis will provide a short history of the development of Western and Russian detective fiction as a tried and tested socio-political discussion platform. Inevitably, this discussion will touch upon some of the generic elements of these traditions; however, for reasons previously mentioned, my overview will focus on the function, not on the form, of the genre. Following this contextualisation of Akunin's work on a historical timeline and an international stage, I will outline the particularities of Akunin's 'new' approach to detective fiction in more detail. Part of this discussion

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<sup>109</sup> Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation*, 237ff.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>111</sup> Vera Tolz, "Forging the Nation: National Identity and Nation Building in Post-Communist Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50 (1998): 993-1022, 994.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 1004-5. The keyword of individual choice is important here, as it once again highlights the prerequisite of a democratic mind-set, rather than Imperial subservience, for authentic nation-building to occur. As a result, I cannot follow such definitions of a civic nation that rely solely on the aspect of territorial integrity, as done in part by Shevel and others, cf. Shevel, "Russian Nation-building from Yel'tsin to Medvedev," 180.

will involve a short description of Akunin's writerly persona, along with his use of social media that played into the transformation of the essayist and intellectual G. Chkhartishvili into the writer B. Akunin. An examination of the postmodernist principles that influenced Akunin's work and his treatment of history will round off the chapter.

Chapter Two offers an overview of the nostalgic trends that developed in post-Soviet Russia and which shaped Akunin's design for the Fandorin project. Elaborating on my initial claim that nostalgia features as one of the dominant operational acts of identification in contemporary Russia, I will trace the upsurge and development of nostalgic sentiments in both the official and the unofficial sphere throughout the post-Soviet period. Whereas the unofficial elements of nostalgia will largely be taken from post-Soviet TV culture, films, and literature, their official equivalent will be traced through laws, decrees, and other manifestations of official memory culture. My focus throughout this chapter will be on nostalgia for Empire, but I will inevitably also touch upon elements of Soviet nostalgia, which – while not directly pertinent to the Fandorin novels discussed in this thesis – nevertheless play a central role in the overall post-Soviet nostalgia discourse.

Chapter Three of my thesis comprises the analysis of three Fandorin novels: *The Death of Achilles* (1998), *The State Counsellor* (2001), and *The Black City* (2012). I chose these novels for three specific reasons: first of all, they provide a spaced insight into Akunin's reaction to the increasingly politicised nostalgic discourse in Russia, having been written just before, during, and after Putin's coming into power. Moreover, *The Black City* was written during a time of intense political involvement on the part of Akunin and his participation in a protest movement opposing Putin's return to a third presidential term. Secondly, the plotlines of these novels feature a variety of locales within the Russian Empire, providing an opportunity to unite a temporal with a spatial analysis of Akunin's Imperial world-building and to discuss the geographical and the cultural peripheries explored in his work. Thirdly, all three novels feature a rich background of intertextual references and insights into the intelligentsia heritage, allowing for a careful, in-depth reading of the cultural subtext that Akunin invokes for his readers. At the same time, they function as milestones in

the development of the detective protagonist Fandorin, who features as Akunin's alternative intelligentsia role model throughout the project.

Each of the three analysis chapters that form the main body of this thesis will consist of two subchapters, titled 'Re-Writing Empire' and 'Writing Nation', respectively. These titles were not only chosen in reference to Hosking's theory, but also with regard to the increasingly fixed, reactionary nature of the post-Soviet discourse about Empire, along with the decidedly more fluid and, more importantly, unfinished conversation about Russian nation-building. Whereas 'Re-Writing Empire' addresses the multi-focal tendencies that characterise the existing romanticised, official narrative for identification with Empire, 'Writing Nation' focusses on Akunin's exploration of the intelligentsia's nostalgia for Imperial culture and the established voices of literary and cultural authority that inform their identity narrative.

While it would no doubt have been useful to include other works from the Fandorin series, particularly *The Diamond Chariot* (2002) and *Not Saying Goodbye* (2018), this would have exceeded the scope of a doctoral dissertation and might be more appropriate for a book project. Although the three novels selected for a discussion of these questions offer only a glimpse into the Fandorin project's overall treatment of these issues, each of the novels analysed still provides a different, and differently pertinent, insight into Akunin's treatment of post-Soviet nostalgia for the late Imperial era.

I will outline these insights, along with further avenues for analysis, in the conclusion in Chapter Four.

## 1. Detective Fiction and the Instability of Reality

Detective fiction is [...] distinguished by the way it blurs the line between private and public affairs, between civil society and the state, and, more radically still, between two manifestations of reality.<sup>113</sup>

Let me begin with a riddle: it is frequently claimed that detective fiction, in order to be successful, needs to be written against the backdrop of a stable social contract that highlights its central mystery, puzzle, or enigma as an anomaly.<sup>114</sup> I am not sure this is the case. Detective fiction tends to be at its most popular and sought after in the most unstable of times – thus lending voice to a search for, not a guarantee of, stability. Crime fiction's periodical re-emergence during times of social upheaval testifies to its role as a chronicler of change. Yet at the same time, crime fiction's contrasting image as a provider of stability points to a central challenge that readers and writers of the genre grapple with: the negotiation of changing social norms amid a constantly evolving interplay between life and art.<sup>115</sup>

The question of detective fiction's role in inscribing destabilised or changing social contracts into reality will be my guiding thread throughout this chapter. Leaving aside purely generic conventions of crime and detective fiction (about which separate volumes could and have been written), I shall trace detective fiction's history as a genre that not only directly reflects upon the state of law and (dis)order in given societies, but whose primary function has fundamentally changed over the centuries. I will argue that far from continuing to provide a return to stability, contemporary detective fiction primarily unveils and negotiates the *instability* of reality for its readers.<sup>116</sup>

As this is a common characteristic shared by crime fiction across the globe, I will relay this development not in separate categories of Western and Russian detective

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<sup>113</sup> Boltanski, *Mysteries & Conspiracies*, 16.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 5; Maria Galina, "Outside the Law: Russian Detective Stories," *Russian Social Science Review* 42, no. 2 (2001): 93-99, 99.

<sup>115</sup> While crime and detective fiction are not synonymous terms – strictly speaking, only detective fiction requires the presence of a detective figure – both genres revolve around the topic of a crime. I will therefore treat detective fiction as a subgenre of crime fiction to allow for the use of both terms.

<sup>116</sup> Going forward, the different perception and portrayal of reality as stable vs. unstable shall act as the main discussion thread for my differentiation between the somewhat generalised terms classic and contemporary crime fiction, which both comprise a highly diverse subset of narrative forms and transnational manifestations – some, but not all of which will be discussed in this chapter.

literature, but in a single subchapter, thus effacing the notion of supposedly unique features and functions of crime fiction in today's world. In the second subchapter, I will then use this overview as a starting point for the discussion of Akunin's Fandorin project as a 'new' type of detective fiction. As I contextualise the novelty of Akunin's approach within the greater post-Soviet crime fiction market and a wider debate on the uses and abuses of a postmodernist thought culture in Russia, I will pinpoint the elements that distinguish Akunin from his contemporaries – and which make the Fandorin series a project worthy of further academic attention.

### ***1.1. From Classic to Contemporary***

For centuries, crime fiction has enjoyed worldwide popularity as a genre that entertains intimate relationships with the surrounding socio-political fabric of reality. Both in a Western and a Russian context, the emergence of crime fiction dates back to the establishment of official police forces, which paved the way for the institutionalisation of social contracts in Europe and elsewhere. Edgar Allan Poe, who is commonly considered the father of detective fiction, set his mystery stories not in his native America, but in France – presumably because the French Sûreté, the world's first criminal police force, was founded a full two decades before its New York equivalent.<sup>117</sup> The alleged father of Russian detective fiction, Fyodor Dostoevsky, was not only well acquainted with Poe's work, but also reacted to similar events in his own native country: the publication of *Crime and Punishment* (*Преступление и наказание*, 1866) took place shortly after the implementation of widespread judicial reforms, which were a part of Alexander II's Great Reform project.<sup>118</sup>

Among other things, the Great Reforms established an adversarial system, introduced juries, and formed new courts; they also created a temporary atmosphere of confusion, which positively contributed to the short-lived liberation of the press that

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<sup>117</sup> Cf. Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 19.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. Louise McReynolds, "'Who Cares Who Killed Ivan Ivanovich?': The Literary Detective in Tsarist Russia," *Russian History* 36, no. 3 (2009): 391-406, 395. Following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, these substantial legal reforms addressed the problem of Russia's highly ineffective and outdated judicial system. For more on Dostoevsky's role in the inception of crime fiction in Russia, cf. Claire Whitehead, *The Poetics of Early Russian Crime Fiction 1860-1917: Deciphering Stories of Detection* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018).

had begun after 1856.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, the Great Reforms resulted not just in a remarkable increase of readily available information on criminal deeds and legal prosecutions in newspapers and journals, but also a greater degree of public participation in legal processes in general. Because the Great Reforms presented such a fundamental overhaul of the Russian legal system – with which, at the time, “there was little that was not wrong”<sup>120</sup> – they were avidly discussed throughout society; whereas some researchers link the Great Reforms to a “growth of nationalistic tendencies”<sup>121</sup>, others have commented upon their role in facilitating “the rise of modern Russian culture”<sup>122</sup>. It is for this reason that the Great Reforms present an ideal backdrop against which to observe the interaction of the political with the cultural, along with the reception of legal changes in society and literature. As an immediate side effect to these changes, the public developed a strong taste for so-called true crime stories, which were just as embellished and sensationalised in Russia as they were elsewhere in Europe.

Dostoevsky, editor of the literary and political journal *The Epoch* (*Эпоха*) from 1864 to 1865, took a keen interest in these developments, and fashioned his own police detective figure in *Crime and Punishment* after the newly created post of judicial investigator, or *sudebnyi sledovatel'*. This position, which was introduced in 1866, effectively introduced the role of professional detective and allowed Dostoevsky to merge the best and the worst qualities of existing Western literary investigators into a single character. Porfiry Petrovich, the slightly eccentric, but ultimately humane policeman who appears “incorruptible, but also incompetent to bring closure to the case”<sup>123</sup> serves as evidence that “Russians did not need the Enlightenment to see killers humanely”<sup>124</sup> – a fact often remarked upon in studies on the history of Russian law and order in general, but which is also reflected in the high number of acquittals for Russian murder cases in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>119</sup> For a detailed account on the Great Reforms, cf. Ben Eklof, John Bushnell and L. G. Zakharova, *Russia's Great Reforms, 1855-1881* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994).

<sup>120</sup> Claire Whitehead, “Debating Detectives: The Influence of Publitsistika on Nineteenth-Century Russian Crime Fiction,” *Modern Language Review* 107, no. 1 (2012): 230-58, 230.

<sup>121</sup> Sviatoslav Kaspe, “Imperial Political Culture and Modernization in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*, eds. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2007): 455-494, 466.

<sup>122</sup> Dianina, *When Art Makes News*, 4.

<sup>123</sup> McReynolds, ““Who Cares who Killed Ivan Ivanovich?,”” 396.

<sup>124</sup> Louise McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian: True Crime and Punishment in Late Imperial Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2012), 168.

Another term used to explain the Russian reticence to trust in official institutions was transfixed in the label *neschastnyi*, which designates the criminalised downtrodden and is loosely translated as ‘the unlucky one’. However, the *neschastnyi* figure was seen as unlucky not because of personal failure, but because of society’s inherent unfairness, thus dictating compassion rather than imprisonment as an appropriate response. Porfiry Petrovich’s failure to arrest Raskol’nikov could and has been read as a literary variation of this theme. Louise McReynolds, for instance, called Raskol’nikov the “quintessential *neschastnyi*”<sup>125</sup>.

By locating the source of criminality in society and not within the criminal, the *neschastnyi* figure indicated “a low-level political subversion [and] a cultural obstinacy that worked against respect for the prosecution”<sup>126</sup>. A similar process was observable in Western Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the onset of the Enlightenment.<sup>127</sup> However, in contrast to the European point of view that took shortfalls of law and order as a negative reflection upon both king and country, no such doubts about the Tsar’s fallibility arose in Russia. Instead, extreme state despotism tended to be blamed on the Tsar’s advisors. Several Russian rulers were happy to use this distrust to their advantage, Nicholas II among them: Russia’s last Tsar created the “Imperial Chancellery for Receipt of Petitions, designed to give the people the sense that they had direct access to the Tsar, where he could resolve for them what the courts could not”<sup>128</sup>. The only more direct way of undermining public trust in the legal system would have been to close the courts completely.

Western European countries and Russia did, however, share a common level of distrust towards the police – and often for good reason. In the West, reactions to the new profession of the trained policeman ranged from amused belittlement to outright disdain. Despite moderately successful literary works that talked about the daily life of policemen in England in the 1840s and 1850s, such as William Russell’s

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 117. This definition is debatable, to say the least. Openly portrayed as a former student suffering from dire financial straits, the origins of Raskol’nikov’s idea to murder the old moneylender are more securely rooted in his *Übermensch* theory, and his wish to prove its validity and his own status as one of the world’s Napoleons. Although both his own and his sister’s poverty act as catalysts in his decision to commit the actual murder, they are, ultimately, no more than that – catalysts.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 267.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Martin A. Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection, and Narrative* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 41f.

<sup>128</sup> McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 7.

*Recollections of a Police Officer* (1859), policemen continued to be viewed as incapable and incompetent across much of Western Europe. Notwithstanding official attempts to portray the policeman as a “substitute for organic, paternalistic community control and the Providential eye [...] a master who embodied an acceptable *image of surveillance*, ideologically as rigorous but also as *benign* as the eye of God [original emphasis]”<sup>129</sup>, literary renditions of the Victorian policeman continued to prefer the image of the bumbling fool instead.

In Russia, police detectives were primarily portrayed as government thugs well past the turn of the century.<sup>130</sup> This is not altogether surprising, taking into consideration the high levels of control that many Russian state officials exerted. Cases of corruption, covered up or made exempt from prosecution by the Tsar, were widespread and often coupled with a lack of basic education as well as low pay, resulting in an “arbitrary and coercive operational style”<sup>131</sup>. Nonetheless, a number of judicial investigators strove to improve the public image of their professional peers by publishing novels or private memoirs in the style of Eugène Vidocq’s *Memoires* (1828). One of the first investigators to produce such a literary re-telling of his criminal cases was A. A. Shkliarevskii, a contemporary of Dostoevsky who paid similar attention to the press coverage of judicial proceedings and who later became known as the ‘Russian Gaboriau’.<sup>132</sup> In contrast to his Western colleagues, Shkliarevskii never created a serialised detective persona, but chose to “freely [mix] fact and fiction”<sup>133</sup>, populating his novels with “nameless judicial investigators [...], each with a different sense of professional obligation”<sup>134</sup>. Consequently, it was the power of an institution, not that of an individual, which Shkliarevskii strove to capture.

Both in the West and Russia, crime fiction thus populated the fracture line between society and state from the very start. An important step in the development of Western detective fiction was the advent of the sensation novel, which dominated British literature from the 1850s until the 1870s. This genre, with its “nervous, psychological,

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<sup>129</sup> Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street*, 83.

<sup>130</sup> McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 29.

<sup>131</sup> Neil Weissman, “Regular Police in Tsarist Russia, 1900-1914,” *The Russian Review* 44, no. 1 (1985): 45-68, 58. Cf. also Kayman, *From Bow Street to Baker Street*, 150.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. McReynolds, “‘Who Cares who Killed Ivan Ivanovich?’” 398.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

sexual and social shocks [and] complicated plots involving bigamy, adultery, seduction, fraud, forgery, blackmail, kidnapping and, sometimes, murder”<sup>135</sup>, catered to a large audience and produced such genre-shaping works as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) and Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868). By focusing on the central importance of the family as a social construct and setting, the sensation novel introduced an important aspect of the Victorian mind-set into the developing detective genre: “the scene of the crime was more likely to be the home than the road, the drawing room rather than the drinking den [...] Crime is dealt with in and by the family”<sup>136</sup>. This family setting not only matched the Victorian predilection for privacy and Imperial anxieties about the reach of Empire, but it actually remained the locus of most Western crime fiction well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>137</sup>

### *The Case of Sherlock Holmes*

The next step in the development of crime fiction was the arrival of Sherlock Holmes. While Arthur Conan Doyle was not the first writer to introduce a detective figure into English literature – Charles Dickens is credited with having been the first writer to use the word detective, whereas Anna K. Green created the female detective Violet Strange in 1878 – he was the first to professionalise the role and create an international hit figure in the process.<sup>138</sup> Despite the fact that “Sherlock Holmes [...] is mostly an attitude and a few dozen lines of unforgettable dialogue”<sup>139</sup>, Conan Doyle helped create

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<sup>135</sup> Lyn Pykett, “The Newgate Novel and Sensation Fiction, 1830-1868,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003): 19-39, 33.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>137</sup> This focus on the home should, indeed, be seen as a distinctly British addition to the genre of crime fiction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because it constitutes a marked deviation from those works that had been previously published in French crime literature. The French detective tradition, which has by now somewhat retreated into the shadows of European literary criticism, was remarkably influential on the development of the genre at the time, and did, in fact, provide “the prototypes for three different kinds of fictional detectives: the eccentric amateur, [...] the zealous and brilliant professional, [...] and the genius outsider” (Sita A. Schütt, “French Crime Fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, 59-76, 63).

<sup>138</sup> A closer look into the history of female detective fiction – both in terms of female detective figures and female writers – would be deserving of a publication of its own, both in Britain and beyond. Existing studies tend to focus on women in the role of victims or criminals, cf. Glen S. Close, *Female Corpses in Crime Fiction* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018); Cristelle Maury and David Roche, *Women Who Kill* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020); Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siecle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). A notable exception is Nina L. Molinaro and Nancy Vosburg, *Spanish and Latin American Women’s Crime Fiction in the New Millenium: From Noir to Gris* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

<sup>139</sup> Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (London: H. Hamilton, 1950), 5.

the unmistakable atmosphere of British homeliness and eccentricity that served as identifying traits for decades of detective fiction to come.<sup>140</sup> Yet he also consolidated the view of detective fiction as a reality-affirming genre that aims to safeguard, “[consolidate] and [disseminate] patriarchal power”<sup>141</sup>, rather than disrupt official narratives about existing power hierarchies. Sherlock Holmes’s world is essentially a bourgeois microcosm with links to the upper class and frequent allusions to the British Empire – which Conan Doyle helped to keep that way. As pointed out by Stephen Knight, Holmes dispels the impression of an unrulable, unreliable modernity by uncovering reality’s supposed underlying simplicity:

Inside the scientific mumbo-jumbo, the learned baggage, the mystique of all-night pipe-smoking and austere distant behaviour is someone who can apply the common knowledge of the human tribe. It is both exciting and consoling to have a hero so grand who is also so familiar [...]<sup>142</sup>

In essence, Holmes is the embodiment of Imperial prowess made to (pre)serve Empire.<sup>143</sup>

Nonetheless, Sherlock Holmes left an indelible mark on the history of Russian literature. Once Conan Doyle’s works reached the Russian Empire, the fictional accounts of real-life Russian investigator and head of Saint Petersburg’s detective division I. D. Putilin quickly gained in countrywide popularity. Written by M. V. Shevliakov and R. L. Antropov, the stories varied considerably in style from their English prototype, replacing Holmes’s carefully orchestrated trademark search for clues with a much more action-oriented, fast-paced approach.<sup>144</sup> Unlike the original Holmes stories, Putilin’s literary investigations also usually failed to lead to any convictions – thus reinstating the *neschastnyi* theme, creating a “counternarrative that rejected the closure found in Sherlockology”<sup>145</sup>, and highlighting Russian crime fiction’s much earlier preoccupation with a problematisation of the existing social contract.

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<sup>140</sup> Considering the rather modest literary merit of the bulk of the Sherlock Holmes stories, this may seem puzzling to some. Critical acclaim of Conan Doyle’s work has taken on a much more diversified light in recent years, however, cf. Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*, 5.

<sup>141</sup> Scags, *Crime Fiction*, 20.

<sup>142</sup> Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 57.

<sup>143</sup> This is also one of the main reasons why Fandorin should not be compared, but contrasted to him.

<sup>144</sup> Cf. McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 201f.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

None of that hindered Sherlock Holmes from becoming a major cultural influence on Russian culture to come. I would not go so far as to say that Holmes “managed to become [Russia’s] national hero”<sup>146</sup>, but there certainly was a remarkable public awareness and appropriation of the Sherlock Holmes figure in Russia. After the 1905 revolution in particular, a wealth of imitations, satires, and parodies was produced – such as a 1906 theatre play that “finds [Sherlock Holmes] reduced to an action figure”<sup>147</sup>. Around the same time, P. Nikitin and P. Orlovets penned a series of stories that transported Holmes and Watson onto Russian soil, claiming that they had learnt Russian from a landlady in South America. Nikitin and Orlovets’s stories create a curious impression of the transnational quality of much of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century crime fiction, which was neither afraid to plagiarise nor to enhance existing prototypes. Holmes comes across as uncharacteristically deferential and polite towards both Watson and his clients in these stories, but suffers from a severe case of Western capitalism in exchange for his sang-froid: “Мы, англичане, пересчитываем каждый шаг и момент на деньги”<sup>148</sup>. True to the action-loving taste of the time, the Russianised Sherlock also engages in fights that involve brandishing revolvers, death by bayonet, and a highly proactive Sherlock with lightning-quick reflexes.<sup>149</sup> In the words of Stephen Lovell, “Holmes had mutated into a gorilla with a pistol”<sup>150</sup>. Gone were the meditative musings over violin sounds and tobacco ash: the analytical, overly rational bent of the British super-sleuth was clearly not an ideal fit for the Russian reader’s taste.

The 1905 revolution marked the beginning of a veritable craze for similar fast-paced, action-oriented, and, at times, outrageous crime stories. Highlighting the genre’s popularity in times of social, cultural, and political upheaval, Russia’s early 20<sup>th</sup>-century voracious appetite for cheap and readily available popular crime fiction encompassed a highly diverse readership that included workers, young people, and poets such as Sergei Esenin and Aleksandr Blok.<sup>151</sup> The hype also occurred at a time

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<sup>146</sup> Galina, “Outside the Law,” 99.

<sup>147</sup> McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 218.

<sup>148</sup> P. Nikitin, *Tainstvennyi dom* (Moscow: Direkt-Media, 2016), 110.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 135.

<sup>150</sup> Lovell, “Literature and Entertainment in Russia,” 18.

<sup>151</sup> Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East*, 35. The latter had qualms about the merits of popular literature and was allegedly “surprised he could stomach the stories, which were almost universally regarded as artistic and stylistic failures” (*ibid.*, 51).

when the power of state censorship as good as crumbled under a general strike.<sup>152</sup> Following the initial surge of social-revolutionary sentiments in the 1870s, politically motivated terrorist activity peaked once again during the years 1906 and 1907 – catapulting Russian society into a state of permanent anxiety as “several thousand persons, mainly government officials, [were assassinated] until the government under Stolypin took especially harsh measures to end the wave of killings”<sup>153</sup>. Desensitised by this violence and bloodshed, urban Russian readers reacted positively to the satirical magazines and cheap, five-kopeck crime fiction serialisations that were available on every corner.

As a result, fast-paced tales that gave voice to shared experiences of terror and crime acquired an identity-forming power in Russia, and “tapped into frustration about the limits that remained over the expression of personal autonomy”<sup>154</sup> in the country. Subsequently, the choice of an exotic setting became a popular way of displacing local worries to a safe distance away, whilst simultaneously creating the illusion of a world-wide fraternity of companions in misfortune.<sup>155</sup> America offered the perfect sociocultural and literary backdrop for trigger-happy adventurers and story-tellers: following the creation of the Pinkerton Agency in 1850 and its involvement in several high-profile cases, the ubiquity of detective work as a respectable means of police activity helped create an international atmosphere that raised the profile of both professional investigators and their sensational case files.

The motto of the Pinkerton Agency was ‘We never sleep’, represented by the agency’s symbol of an open eye. Allan Pinkerton, the agency’s founder, had begun publishing novels about his work during his lifetime, but it was only around the turn of the century that a fictional detective by the name of Nat Pinkerton started to conquer the literary markets all over Europe. Serialised instalments with easily recognisable cover art that told of the American detective’s exploits appeared in almost every country between the British and the Russian Empire, with particularly high sales figures in Germany and France.

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<sup>152</sup> Cf. McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 138.

<sup>153</sup> Charles A. Ruud and S. A. Stepanov, *Fontanka 16: The Tsar’s Secret Police* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 102.

<sup>154</sup> McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 233.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East*, 18.

### *Pinkertonovshchina and Golden Age*

Only in Russia, however, did Nat Pinkerton – along with his fictional colleague Nick Carter – achieve such a level of popularity as to be given his own cultural moniker: *Pinkertonovshchina*. Figures vary, but according to one source, the American crime stories “reportedly [sold] by the millions in Russia in 1908”<sup>156</sup>. Korney Chukovsky, who made a special study of Nat Pinkerton in Russia, claimed that “in May 1908 in St Petersburg alone no fewer than 622,300 copies of the Pinkerton books were sold”<sup>157</sup>. The authorship of the majority of these stories remains unclear, but analyses of the plots and characters suggest that many of them were Russian fabrications. In effect, however, “both the Russian and American Carters answered much the same psychological demands, affirming their readers’ desire for a greater justice beyond bureaucratic, imperfect, and, in Russia’s case, flagrantly unjust legality”<sup>158</sup>. It is hardly surprising that the trademarks of the Russian *Pinkertons* were a high degree of violence, an abundance of life-threatening situations, high-speed travel, and garish cover illustrations.<sup>159</sup>

Equally unsurprising is the fact that the action-oriented crime fiction from America enjoyed greater popularity in inter-revolutionary Russia than the comparatively benign and unspectacular British clue-puzzle that was on the rise at the same time. The terms ‘country-house crime’, ‘clue-puzzle’ and ‘armchair deduction’ all delineate the basic, homely qualities of the Golden Age detective story – which, while often lauded as the epitome of an idyllic, comforting Englishness, was still far less reassuring than commonly assumed.<sup>160</sup> Recent studies of Golden Age fiction suggest that the genre acted not so much as a sterling defence of conservative social ideals than as a disquieting spyhole into the sick British body politic. Most Golden

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<sup>156</sup> McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 209.

<sup>157</sup> Robert Russell, “Red Pinkertonism: An Aspect of Soviet Literature of the 1920s,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 60, no. 3 (1982): 390-412, 391.

<sup>158</sup> Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East*, 38.

<sup>159</sup> Cf. McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 212. The closeness of this phenomenon to the American dime novel is reflected in Raymond Chandler’s following comment on similar sales strategies in his home country: “There are even a few optimists who buy it at the full retail price of two dollars, because it looks so fresh and new and there is a picture of a corpse on the cover” (Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder*, 4). In the end, even the 1907 weekly magazine *Vestnik politzii*, published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs as a means to combat public distrust in the police and bolster morale among both citizens and detectives, could not withstand the lure of sensational photographs and graphic depictions of crime scenes, criminals, and victims (cf. McReynolds, *Murder Most Russian*, 146-9).

<sup>160</sup> Nor was it an exclusively British phenomenon, cf. Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 27.

Age detective stories puncture “the elaborate deceptions of a sophisticated society”<sup>161</sup> and portray “a society that maintains the social order through self-surveillance”<sup>162</sup> instead. Golden Age paragons such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers imbued their stories with a heightened sense of paranoia and suspicion that appears appropriate for life in 1930s Europe.

The fact that society was increasingly perceived as unstable and, in many ways, rotten to the core is particularly prevalent in stories such as Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), where complicity in the crime is visited upon a whole range of characters. No other period in crime fiction expressed the genre’s capacity for conjuring up panoptic horror through its quasi-democratic structure as did the Golden Age, where “crime [could] be attributed to any character at all, whatever his or her worth or hierarchical position”<sup>163</sup>. This is not to say that Golden Age crime fiction was not, in a remarkable number of cases, intentionally blind to its surrounding political issues and societal worries. In fact, much of Golden Age crime fiction does display a remarkable capacity for denial as well as an insularity of thought that becomes doubly problematic when considered from a geographical point of view; however, uncoupled from both the sentimental extravagance and the linguistic unctuousness of 19<sup>th</sup>-century sensationalist fiction, Golden Age detective figures did eschew the grand exclamations and swooning sensations produced and experienced by previous forms of crime fiction.

In Russia, *Pinkertonovshchina* experienced a lull between 1909 and 1913, but revived under the influence of the cinematographic experiments and increasingly lenient attitude towards popular forms of mass entertainment that followed the First World War.<sup>164</sup> It should be noted that the Pinkerton novels were well embedded in a generally flourishing market of cheap print materials, represented also by the *kopeiki*, or kopeck newspapers, which contained similarly outrageous adventure stories featuring bandits, outlaws and other roguish rascals.<sup>165</sup> However, *Pinkertonovshchina* found itself in a precarious position after the 1917 revolution, owing to the growing importance of the collective in official political rhetoric: on the one hand, the detective

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<sup>161</sup> Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 19.

<sup>162</sup> Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 46.

<sup>163</sup> Boltanski, *Mysteries & Conspiracies*, 21.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East*, 59ff.

<sup>165</sup> Cf. Jeffrey Brooks, “The Kopeck Novels of Early Twentieth Century Russia,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 13 (1979): 85-97.

booklets with their “Westernism, exoticism, fantasy, orientation toward plot, stylistic artlessness, violence, [and] reactionary ideology served as synecdochic [sic] shorthand for the worst, most corrupting elements of popular literature”<sup>166</sup> and were deemed unfit for consumption by the reading public. Most Soviet officials discredited Pinkerton-style literature as children’s literature, doubting it was even suitable as that.<sup>167</sup> On the other hand, the influential power of *Pinkertonovshchina* was obvious to Soviet officials, who would later go on to claim that they had created the ‘foremost nation of readers’.

Arguably, it was with this goal in mind that N. I. Bukharin approached the phenomenon of *Pinkertonovshchina* in the early 1920s. Trying to utilise the lingering Russian interest in detective stories to create a branch of state literature that was both instructive and ideologically sound, Bukharin harnessed *Pinkertonovshchina* to the freshly minted Soviet ideals for art and society. Theoretically, this could have been a success. The very *shablonnost’* of the detective formula lent itself well to the new requirements of Soviet literature, and the scholar Boris Dralyuk called the Red Pinkerton “a vital ‘missing link’ between pre- and post-Revolutionary popular literature”<sup>168</sup>. On a practical level, however, the Red Pinkerton simply did not work, despite its closeness to the equally new, and possibly even more popular, genre of science fiction.<sup>169</sup>

Turning villains into capitalists and detectives into working-class heroes went against the grain of the genre, no matter how many “mysterious disappearances, unexpected reappearances and heinous murders”<sup>170</sup> authors managed to include. Part of the problem certainly lay in the relative sameness of the new-old plots, transplanted from a world of endless, exotic opportunities into the copy-paste scheme of metallurgical plants and steel factories. Another problem was that even the authors struggled to take their own work seriously. A case in point is Marietta Shaginian’s *Mess-Mend, or Yankees in Petrograd* (1924), a cinematic novel which celebrates the

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<sup>166</sup> Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East*, 151.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. *ibid*, 65.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 160.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. *ibid*, 160. The marriage between detective and science fiction remained intact throughout the Soviet times and up to its very end, as can be seen in the involvement of the Strugatsky brothers, cf. Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 181.

<sup>170</sup> Russell, “Red Pinkertonism,” 397.

technical reproducibility of identities via mirrors, film, and audio files, and which presents a disturbing commentary on the emptiness of the emerging collective self. Some of the novel's depictions of contemporary cultural phenomena, such as the mass exodus of members of the intelligentsia from the Soviet Union, could even be read as subversive.<sup>171</sup>

Only a few years after the initiation of the Red Pinkerton, “[i]t was increasingly difficult to tell whether each new work [...] was truly bad writing churned out by a profit-hungry hack, a ‘serious’ parody, or an occluded but devastating satire of Soviet policy”<sup>172</sup>. The risk of it being the latter was too high for the majority of Soviet publishers, and after a noticeable drop in demand from 1928 onwards, *Pinkertonovshchina* works were indirectly banned. In the eighth volume of the Soviet Union's official Literary Encyclopaedia from 1934, *Pinkertonovshchina* novels are called vulgar, bourgeois and fascist.<sup>173</sup> The years of Stalin's reign saw the detective genre further relegated to the realm of children's literature, with the exception of a few early works such as Yuri German's *Ivan Lapshin* (1937). It was only after Stalin's death that the genre resurfaced properly, both in literature and in cinematography.<sup>174</sup>

#### *Inter-War Crime Fiction*

Meanwhile, the interwar period saw the birth of the hard-boiled detective hero in America. Growing out of “the stock market crash of 1929; the Great Depression; Prohibition and its attendant gangsterism; the growing evidence of illicit connections between crime, business and politics in rapidly expanding American cities”<sup>175</sup>, this subgenre faced a social and political situation no less dire than that of early 1930s Britain. Contrary to Golden Age fiction, however, hard-boiled detective novels did not pretend to comfort readers in a world where little comfort was to be found. Known to “avoid neatly optimistic closure[s]”<sup>176</sup>, its writers answered to the predominantly bleak

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<sup>171</sup> Cf. Marietta Sergeevna Shaginian, *Mess-Mend, ili, Ianki v Petrograde: roman-skazka* (Moscow: Moskovskii Rabochii, 1979), 34-5.

<sup>172</sup> Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East*, 140.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. *FEB Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, s.v. “Pinkertonovshchina,” <<http://feb-web.ru/feb/litenc/encyclop/le8/le8-6451.htm?cmd=2&istext=1>> [accessed 17 March 2017]

<sup>174</sup> Cf. Julia A. Cassiday, “Why Stalinist Cinema Had No Detective Films, or How Three Becomes Two in Engineer Kochin's Mistake,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no. 1 (2014): 56-73.

<sup>175</sup> Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 70.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

political atmosphere in the United States with a hard and unforgiving stare. By addressing the various societal ills of both mid- and post-war America in an explicit, rather than implicit fashion, authors such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett helped the genre overcome the “post-war malaise [of] caution, repression, and intellectual retreat”<sup>177</sup>. Criminals and detectives alike appeared as rough-and-ready flâneurs that roamed urban spaces and followed the disenchanting promise of the anonymous big city, calling to mind Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd* (1840).<sup>178</sup>

The doubling of private eye and criminal and the vulnerability of moral individuals in inherently corrupt societies served – regardless of the virile masculinity brandished about by most hard-boiled detectives – to express profound hopelessness and fatigue on part of society. Their “discovery that what seems on the face of things to be personal is actually only a small corner of a scene of official wrongdoing so sprawling and intractable that the investigator is ultimately powerless to resolve things except within the most narrow limits”<sup>179</sup> mirrored, in many ways, the main quandary faced by Soviet writers at the same time: most of the birth-pangs of the Red Pinkerton continued to trouble the Soviet *detektiv* as it tried to gain a foothold within the limited confines of Socialist Realism.

It seems fair to say that the trademark of classic detective fiction, i.e. a highly individualised detective persona with easily distinguishable character traits and a flair for the extravagant, had not found its footing in Russian literature – nor could it under Soviet guidelines. The few detective novels that met with official approval in the Soviet Union generally featured a team of investigators, rather than a single hero. A case in point is the long-running TV show *Sledstvie vedut znatoki* (1971-1989, revived in 2002).<sup>180</sup> One of the first Russian writers to reintroduce a single investigator into literature was Yulian Semyonov, the godfather of the Soviet spy novel: replacing the investigative team in his novel *In the Performance of Duty* (*При исполнении*

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>178</sup> Late 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies of the flâneur increasingly tend to connect the act of aimless wandering with a proclivity for criminal behaviour, cf. Tom McDonough, “The Crimes of the Flâneur,” *October* 102 (2002): 101-22. McDonough claims that the wandering individual appears as a disruptive, rather than a creative force in the tightly controlled urban spaces and lifestyle of contemporary cities.

<sup>179</sup> Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 269.

<sup>180</sup> The untimely popularity of Agatha Christie’s novels in the second half of the 1960s can also be linked to this, as their frequent focus on a collective set of criminals or victims made it relatively easy to move them past Soviet censors.

служебных обязанностей, 1962) with a single, and singularly successful, literary hero by the name of Isaev-Stirlitz, Semyonov also created one of the most recognisable heroes of all Soviet TV.<sup>181</sup>

The basic idea behind the spy story, i.e. the exploration of “the gap between the private and public self, the instable border between ‘Soviet’ and ‘Russian’ and between ‘us’ and ‘them’”<sup>182</sup> was well suited to the day-to-day experiences of the average Soviet citizen. The Vayner brothers, who were part of a wider resurgence of Soviet crime fiction in the 1970s, went a step further by creating a series of novels with alluring titles such as *I, the Investigator* (*Я, следователь*, 1972) and *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (*Место встречи изменить нельзя*, 1975).<sup>183</sup> The latter featured a “streetwise, self-made, and devoid of doubt [...] modern Robin Hood”<sup>184</sup> as its central hero, but made sure not to suggest a lone wolf mentality. It used the catchphrase ‘The thief belongs in jail’ to proclaim “a communal, moral, and emotional, rather than a legal, foundation for Russian justice”<sup>185</sup>, effectively resurrecting the idea of the *neschastnyi* figure to highlight a continued fundamental rift between society and state. However, the guidelines set by Socialist Realism severely limited the scope for the detective work to be carried out, and murder as a plot device was seen as impermissibly Western.<sup>186</sup> That meant that the Soviet *detektiv* had to revert to the kind of crimes characteristic of both the Sherlock Holmes and the Golden Age eras: theft, forgery, and matters of mistaken identity.

Both the social and the economic set up of the Soviet state presented crime fiction writers with additional difficulties. On the one hand, Soviet society was no longer officially a class society, which, in essence, eliminated the plot device of interfamilial and interclass strife, meaning that “the butler *couldn't* have ‘done it’ [original

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<sup>181</sup> Stirlitz went on to become the protagonist in *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, a highly popular and still often-quoted TV series released in twelve parts in 1973. The show was “so popular that it was rumoured Leonid Brezhnev changed the meeting times for the Politburo, so as not to miss an episode” (Anthony Olcott, *Russian Pulp. The Detektiv and the Russian Way of Crime* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 5).

<sup>182</sup> Elena Prokhorova, “Can the Meeting Place Be Changed? Crime and Identity Discourse in Russian Television Series of the 1990s,” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 3 (2003): 512-24, 514.

<sup>183</sup> Many of their works were turned into TV films starring singer-songwriter and enfant terrible of Soviet theatre, Vladimir Vysotsky, and the title of their novel *Era Miloserdia* was apparently used as a template for the translation of the 2008 Bond film *A Quantum of Solace* into *Kvantum Milosderiya*.

<sup>184</sup> Prokhorova, “Can the Meeting Place Be Changed?,” 515.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 515.

<sup>186</sup> Cf. Arkadii Adamov, “O sovetskom detektivnom romane,” *Voprosy literatury* no. 9 (1976): 151-67.

emphasis]”<sup>187</sup>. Similarly, avarice, greed, or base capitalist desire were categories of thought(-crimes) which Soviet citizens would not entertain, further limiting the list of potential crimes against the state. This meant that “more often than not, [the Soviet crime novel] was reduced to a police novel about the brilliant actions of agents of the OBKhSS [Section for the Struggle Against Theft of Socialist Property and Speculation] investigating the theft of scraps of cloth from a textile mill”<sup>188</sup>. There was simply no room for more intricate plots, as neither the KGB nor the state police could be portrayed as incapable of dealing with crime or allowing society to spiral so far out of control as to permit murder.

The world view present in the Soviet *detektiv* mirrored the binary world view prevalent in much of Soviet life. Socio-political critique, one of the traditional mainstays of detective fiction, was relegated to the fringes of society and ascribed to dissidents and defectors. Paradoxically, this created an entire society of criminals, as the simple act of noticing the gap between the real and the ideal form of Communism sufficed to count as a crime. Coupled with an economic system that was based on personal favours, denunciations, and a pervasive ‘не болтай’ mentality, this state of things spelt out the complicity of nigh on every citizen in the Soviet Union in the creation of a criminal society. Even literary critics of a pro-Soviet persuasion occasionally slipped up in their discussions of crime and society; Arkadii Adamov, for instance, decried detective fiction as a genre that had absorbed “самые острые, болезненные, обычно скрытые от глаз общества проблемы [my emphasis]”<sup>189</sup> – thus no longer portraying criminality as an unbidden import from the West, but as something that lurked in the very depths of Soviet society itself.

### *Contemporary Crime Fiction*

In Western detective fiction, the post-war decades saw an internationalisation and transnationalisation of crime and detective plots that was already briefly discussed in the introduction. In America, this shift was largely galvanized by the Vietnam war and the African-American civil rights movement, which gave rise to an awakening of the civic body politic in a way that effectively undermined America’s claim to moral

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<sup>187</sup> Olcott, *Russian Pulp*, 17.

<sup>188</sup> Galina, “Outside the Law,” 96.

<sup>189</sup> Adamov, “O sovetskom detektivnom romane,” 156.

superiority and rattled the very foundations of US national identity. In East Germany as well as in Eastern Europe, surveillance states proper came into being, inspiring writers on both sides of the Iron Curtain to engage in the writing of spy novels.<sup>190</sup> At the same time, Western Europe had its own challenges to deal with, facing an “erosion of the sense of self [as] part of the disorder of contemporary society”<sup>191</sup> that led literary investigators to act “like a person with paranoia, the difference being that he is healthy”<sup>192</sup>. This process was exacerbated by the rise of mass media and up-to-date coverage on global events such as terrorism and warfare.

As geopolitical, ethnic and cultural borders were beginning to appear increasingly fluid, previously limited needs for surveillance were likewise broadened into a panoptic spectacle that culminated in today’s atmosphere of international paranoia and global suspicion. On these grounds, the genre of crime and detective fiction continues to find a plethora of uncomfortable questions to ask. Western crime fiction writers started to actively engage with socio-political concerns that relate to gender studies, race, and ethnicity; novel series such as Walter Mosley’s *Easy Rawlins* (1990-2016) or Val McDermid’s *Lindsay Gordon* (1987-2003) are only two cases in point.<sup>193</sup> The post-millennial boom of Nordic Noir, the rise of awards such as the CWA International Dagger, and the unwavering popularity of crime TV shows across the globe further prove detective fiction’s continued intercultural appeal, which has long transcended Anglo-Saxon representations of the genre and left “hardly any areas [on the map of the world] uncharted”<sup>194</sup>.

In Russia, detective fiction experienced a resurgence after the break-up of the Soviet Union, which brought its own momentous challenges with it. First undercurrents of change made themselves felt from the mid-1980s onwards, when Valentin Rasputin, Chingiz Aitmatov, and Viktor Astafyev acted as the harbingers of a late apotheosis of detective fiction and effected a socio-critical turn of the Soviet

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<sup>190</sup> The annexation of Crimea in 2014 has helped the Cold War-inspired spy novel to flourish once again and has put Russia back on the map of international crime fiction lovers. Jason Matthews’ modern-day spy novel *Red Sparrow* (2013), which has since been turned into a Hollywood film, and Tom Callaghan’s detective Borubaev series, set in present-day Kyrgyzstan, are just two cases in point.

<sup>191</sup> Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, 28.

<sup>192</sup> Boltanski, *Mysteries & Conspiracies*, 15.

<sup>193</sup> Cf. Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* and Priestman, *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*.

<sup>194</sup> Erdmann and Fincannon, “Nationality International,” 13. Cf. Kerstin Bergman, “The Captivating Chill. Why Readers Desire Nordic Noir,” *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 22 (2015): 80-89.

*detektiv*.<sup>195</sup> Richard Stites, Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky all consider Gorbachev and the perestroika as the starting point for the emergence of an actual popular culture in Russia.<sup>196</sup> 1989 saw the publication of the first volume of the quarterly magazine *The Detective and Politics* (*Детектив и политика*), which was edited by Yulian Semyonov and contained “crime stories, spy thrillers, documents from the Stalin terror, and pro-Gorbachev commentary, thus closing the ranks of practitioners of urban popular fiction along liberal lines”<sup>197</sup>. The magazine’s editors and writers not only pointed a metaphorical finger at the undeniable connection between detective fiction, politics, and society, but also helped the genre on its transition from perestroika to post-Soviet literature, lending it a new, provocative voice that was well suited to the newly liberated media after 1991. The first volume of *The Detective and Politics* featured, among other works, Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), several short stories by Semyonov, and two contributions by (not yet turned political hardliner) Eduard Limonov. Subsequent volumes grew narrower in scope, but contained, amongst others, works by G. K. Chesterton, Ian Fleming, and Kurt Vonnegut. The last volume was published in 1991, by which time *The Detective and Politics* had grown increasingly more focused on Russian contributions.

Post-1991, Russian crime fiction also quickly grew into a field that was dominated by women writers. Polina Dashkova, Darya Dontsova and Tatyana Polyakova have all staked their claim to fame, but none of them achieved comparable popularity to Aleksandra Marinina, whose success even outweighs Akunin’s – in monetary terms, at least. Marinina’s heroine, Anastasia Kamenskaya, is designed as a tough and independent detective who contradicts the widespread notion of the elegant Russian femme fatale and promulgates a Westernised image of the modern Russian woman instead. Kamenskaya is “a rational and unromantic alpha-female [...] with an addiction to work, cigarettes and coffee and an inability to complete daily chores or to get up

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<sup>195</sup> Olcott, *Russian Pulp*, 5.

<sup>196</sup> Willem G. Weststeijn even went so far as to claim that popular literature was an entirely new phenomenon in Russian culture, which is, to say the least, a contested opinion, cf. Willem G. Weststeijn, “Murder and Love: Russian Women Detective Writers,” in *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, ed. Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009): 159-171, 161. Stephen Lovell, for example, argues for the emergence of a Russian middlebrow culture by the turn from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, cf. Lovell, “Literature and Entertainment in Russia,” 11-29.

<sup>197</sup> Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 181.

early in the morning”<sup>198</sup> and is “nearly always [dressed] in jeans, baggy sweaters, and ratty tennis shoes”<sup>199</sup>. She is both a long shot from and a travesty of the dashing alpha-male that so many readers have come to associate with the classic detective hero. However, the extent to which Marinina’s work uses overt feminism and political correctness as a strategy to advocate a conservative political image is still under debate.<sup>200</sup> In the televised version of the Kamenskaya cycle, the heroine appears as “an example of skilful post-Soviet pro-government small-screen propaganda”<sup>201</sup>, advocating an anti-intelligentsia mind-set alongside conservative political views that seem to mirror her creator’s personal stance.

Indeed, Marinina herself often appears to share a dislike for the creative intelligentsia’s heritage in Russia. Many of her novels evoke a nostalgia for Soviet times that kowtows, in several ways, to official Putin rhetoric about the deplorable ‘wild nineties’. Thus, Marinina perpetuates a trauma discourse by demonising the 1990s:

Ты подумай, как времена меняются! Раньше живые в очереди за финскими сапогами и сырокопченой колбасой стояли, а теперь мертвые ждут очереди на вскрытие... Мне порой кажется, что наша действительность плавно переходит в непрерывный кошмар.<sup>202</sup>

The tangible yearning for the alleged stability and innocence of Soviet life, juxtaposed with a nightmarish present, is evocative of the desire to rebrand memories of the Soviet *byt* in a positive light and restore a past that never existed. Marinina’s heroine gives voice to similar sentiments, cutting down complex concepts such as truth and untruth into black-and-white categories that are both reminiscent of official Soviet terminology and eerily prophetic of today’s post-truth climate: “Она думала о том, что в русском языке слово ‘правда’ – только одно, а слов, противоположных по значению, куда больше: ‘обман’, ‘ложь’, ‘неправда’, ‘вранье’. Может, потому,

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<sup>198</sup> Doris Boden, “The Perception of Russian Popular Literature in Literary and Cultural Studies,” *Fabula* 52, no. 3-4 (2011): 267-79, 271.

<sup>199</sup> Olcott, *Russian Pulp*, 59.

<sup>200</sup> Cf. Natalia Ivanova, “Why Russia Chose Putin: Alexandra Marinina in Contexts Literary and Otherwise,” *Russian Social Science Review* 46, no. 1 (2005): 65-80. For a more detailed analysis of Marinina’s role in the post-Soviet, commercial bookmarket, cf. Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, “Markets, Mirrors, and Mayhem: Aleksandra Marinina and the Rise of the New Russian Detektiv,” in *Consuming Russia*, 161-191.

<sup>201</sup> Andrei Rogatchevski, “May the (Police) Force Be with You: The Television Adaptations of Alexandra Marinina’s Detective Novels: With Special Reference to The Coincidence of Circumstances,” *Russian Studies in Literature: A Journal of Translations* 40, no. 3 (2004): 79-94, 80.

<sup>202</sup> Alexandra Marinina, *Ne meshaite palachu* (Moscow: Eksmo, 1999), 246.

что правда – проста, а ложь многолика?”<sup>203</sup> This crude linguistic manipulation not only creates an impression of indomitable evil, but also wilfully ignores the existence of a number of synonyms to go along the word *pravda* in the Russian language – *istina*, *vernost'*, and *pravota* among them.<sup>204</sup>

Marinina's protagonist also frequently works together with various mafia representatives, refusing to distinguish between good and bad citizens and preferring to differentiate between good and bad criminals instead. This approach effectively collapses the border between citizen and criminal, lending voice to a pervasive bandit mentality in society instead.<sup>205</sup> Unlike classical detective fiction writers, however, Marinina does not condemn, but condone the fact that every character is a potential suspect in her stories. By omitting to flag up the crisis of the social contract that underlies this situation, Marinina effectively consolidates the image of the good criminal, whose lawless activities serve to defend his motherland and the Russian soul from the evil influences of Westernisation and democratisation.

Within the context of post-Soviet crime fiction, Marinina is not the only supporter of such a patriotic view on corruption and violence. Another popular subgenre of post-Soviet crime fiction is the *boevik*, represented in the works of Viktor Dotsenko, Aleksandr Bushkov and others. Birgit Menzel describes the typical *boevik* protagonist as an orphaned loner and ex-con, *afganets*, or other social outsider who has explicit inside knowledge of the criminal world and follows his own moral code. This code differs from the long-discredited written code of law, which once again signals the breakdown of a social contract and evokes a strong sense of fraternity between the *boevik* and society's criminal classes.<sup>206</sup> Unlike in Western hard-boiled fiction, the underlying societal problems that contribute to the emergence of such a mafia society are neither questioned nor dismantled. Instead, *boeviks* are generally coated in the type

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<sup>203</sup> Alexandra Marinina, *Stechenie obstoiatelstv* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009), 110.

<sup>204</sup> Marinina's omission of *istina*, the Russian word for an objective truth (as compared to the more subjective and malleable *pravda*) is particularly noteworthy here, as it suggests the absence of any elemental truth at all, leaving only room for the man-made distortions generally subsumed under the term *pravda*. For an analysis of the semantic difference between *pravda* and *istina* in relation to justice and the linguistic rendering of reality, cf. M. V. Chernikov, "Kontsepty 'pravda' i 'istina' v russkoi kul'turnoi traditsii," *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*, no. 2 (1999): 164-175.

<sup>205</sup> The presence of this mentality in post-Soviet Russian culture will be discussed in more detail in the chapter *The Black City* (3.3)

<sup>206</sup> Cf. Menzel, "Formen und Funktionen," 235.

of nationalist rhetoric that resurrects the illusory power of the fabled Russian *sonderweg*.

One contemporary writer who claims to criticise Russia's ever-upward reaching criminal career ladder is Darya Dontsova. Credited with having created the subgenre of ironical detective fiction in Russia, Dontsova allegedly offers her readers a "re-orientation in Russian popular values: from nostalgia to forward-looking optimism, from criticism of wealth to consumer-centrism, and from general pessimism to the carnivalization of the post-Soviet socio-economic environment"<sup>207</sup>. While I agree that Dontsova's work supports the normalisation of the consumer-oriented reader, I also believe that the above statement is far too benevolent in general: Dontsova's supposed optimism about present-day Russia may be refreshingly free of Soviet nostalgia (she occasionally even stylises Soviet terms as elements of the distant past by providing them with footnotes), but it is, on the whole, still largely unreflective about the socio-political nature of Putin's 'fairy-tale Russia'.<sup>208</sup> In one-sidedly affirming consumerism as an antidote to the post-transition crisis, Dontsova inadvertently also ratifies the pseudo-success of the Putin regime in returning stability to the people.

### *Conclusion*

Over the course of the centuries, crime fiction writers in the West and Russia have positioned themselves along fault lines that spell out the instability of reality to their readers – be it by problematising the fallacies of the social contract, the problem of a moral protagonist within an immoral world, or the "public's reluctant awareness of the uncontrollable power of violence in the hands of the government"<sup>209</sup>. In doing so, they created a "contest between an author and a reader about the possession of meaning"<sup>210</sup>, in which the author can be both the novelist or any other entity that engages in the creation of fictional narratives for public consumption – such as the government. However, post-Soviet crime fiction writers increasingly fail to follow this trajectory,

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<sup>207</sup> Olga Mesropova, "Crime, Byt, and Fairy Tales: Daria Dontsova and Post-Soviet Ironical Detective Fiction," *Slavic and East European Journal* 52, no. 1 (2008): 113-28, 114.

<sup>208</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 125.

<sup>209</sup> John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 78.

<sup>210</sup> Peter Hühn, "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 3, no. 3 (1987): 451-66, 456.

foregoing complex plotlines for the provision of comfortable, outdated sound bites – similar to the approach taken by the Russian Embassy Twitter team in 2018. If “writing a crime story essentially functions as an act of freedom”<sup>211</sup>, then the freedom exercised here is the freedom to regress towards the official narrative, not to exact a critical independence of mind.

However, there are exceptions to this trend. In 2016, Whitehead identified Boris Akunin as one author whose novels “counteract the considerable uniformity in the work of other contemporary Russian detective writers”<sup>212</sup> – a uniformity that pertains to both form and content. But what is it that makes Akunin different from other writers, leading him and scholars alike to claim the creation of a ‘new detective novel’? Starting from Akunin’s position on the post-Soviet book market in general, I will now focus on two aspects of his work in particular: Akunin’s openly commercial stance with regard to the Fandorin project and the postmodernist aesthetics that informed both his prose style and his approach to writing historical fiction.

### ***1.2. Boris Akunin as Post-Soviet Literature’s Trickster***

From the moment Boris Akunin appeared on the literary stage, he assumed the role of literary trickster. His pseudonym, which was immediately recognisable as such, sparked heated discussions because of its apparent double meaning: approached from a Russian point of view, ‘B. Akunin’ conjures up the spectre of Russian 19<sup>th</sup>-century anarchist Bakunin. This is a link that Akunin himself confirmed in regard to his origins as a writer, stating: “[t]he style I used at the beginning was anarchistic. Russian literature was either very high or low. I mixed literature with entertainment”<sup>213</sup>. However, Akunin not only positioned himself as a stylistic trickster. By taking the image of a political anarchist and giving it a literary spin, he also offered an underhanded commentary on the often involuntarily political role of writers in the country that he grew up in. In the light of Akunin’s active involvement in the 2011/12

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 460.

<sup>212</sup> Whitehead, “The Temptation of the Reader,” 48.

<sup>213</sup> Thornhill, “Lunch with the FT: Boris Akunin.” In another interview, he added that “he toyed with taking the name of Molotov [so as to be able to describe his books as a cocktail], ‘but Molotov is such a disgusting character that I preferred Bakunin’,” Jasper Rees, “The Masked Man,” *Telegraph*, April 19, 2004, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3615639/The-masked-man.html>> [accessed 27 September 2019]

protest movement in Russia, this initially playful conflation of literary and political anarchism has since acquired the aftertaste of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Apart from its Russian connotations, *akunin* also carries the meaning of ‘evil doer’ or ‘evil person’ in Japanese, where the word is used to describe “lowly and disruptive elements in society who [do] not submissively conform to communal norms and the established social order”<sup>214</sup>. Akunin assumed this role alongside that of the literary rebel, using the subversive quality of his writerly work to expose problems in Russian society and interrogate established norms of cultural authority. In creating a pseudonym with such intricate layers of meaning, Akunin not only united his own background in Japanese studies with his position as a Russian writer, but also imbued his name with a transnational quality that broached the issue of Russia’s identity search between East and West and foreshadowed the multi-ethnic identity construction that would go into the creation of Erast Petrovich Fandorin.

At the start of his career, however, Akunin’s ‘evil’ role in post-Soviet culture was largely interpreted in the context of his work’s openly commercial nature. Akunin was both the first writer to marry the best-selling genre of detective fiction to 19<sup>th</sup>-century soul-searching finesse and the first to embrace popular culture unapologetically: “I call ‘Boris Akunin’ a project, because that’s what it is: a sort of architectural construction. Not a hospital or a school or an administrative building, to be sure — rather something playful like Disneyland, but still something devised and built according to a technical plan”<sup>215</sup>. Andrei Ranchin highlighted the bravery of this move, stating that “никто иной не декларировал и вроде бы не декларирует свой сериал как осознанный проект, не демонстрирует — решительно, смело, откровенно — собственную стратегию успеха”<sup>216</sup>.

Naturally, not all of Akunin’s critics approved of this stance. In 2001, Viktor Myasnikov stated that “[л]ауреат ‘Антибукера’ не имеет права перекочевывать в

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<sup>214</sup> James Dobbins, “‘The Evil Person Is the Primary Recipient of the Buddha’s Compassion’: The Akuninshoki Theme in Shin Buddhism of Japan,” *Numen Book Series* 139 (2012): 93-112, 101.

<sup>215</sup> Daniel Kalder, “Sakkadoo: Russia’s Boris Akunin on ‘The Way of the Writer’,” *Publishing Perspectives*, April 21, 2011. <<http://publishingperspectives.com/2011/04/russian-boris-akunin-interview/>> [accessed 18 December 2019]

<sup>216</sup> Andrei Ranchin, “Romany B. Akunina i klassicheskaia traditsiia: Povestvovanie v chetyrekh glavakh s preuvedomleniem, neliricheskim otstupleniem i epilogom,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 67, no. 3 (2004): 235-66, 235.

масслит — это профанация и попса”<sup>217</sup>. Myasnikov then prematurely proclaimed the end of the Akunin cult. Similarly, Lev Anninsky argued that Akunin’s work corresponds to “глянцевая литература, которая сродни глянцевым журналам [...] у Акунина серьезных задач нет вообще”<sup>218</sup>. However, both these critics were too hasty – or simply too dismissive – in their assessments.

Akunin’s star did not wane, and instead, it began to glow all the brighter with the onset of the internet, which helped Akunin involve an even wider readership in the discussion of several ‘serious tasks’. He became an active social media user, employing platforms such as *LiveJournal* and *Facebook* to discuss the development of his book projects alongside Russian daily life and politics. As a result, Akunin successfully positioned himself as an audience-oriented writer of both intellectually and politically engaged popular fiction.<sup>219</sup> He also expertly seized on new opportunities to create interactive experiences for his ever-growing readership. From the start of the Fandorin series, Akunin chose to provide lavishly illustrated print publications of his novels alongside plain pocket-sized paperbacks. He also brought two literary apps to the market: *Akuninbook* and *Os’minog*.<sup>220</sup> Whereas *Akuninbook* offers access to the entirety of Akunin’s oeuvre, including illustrations, audiobooks and Akunin’s latest social media posts, *Os’minog* is a literary game for portable devices that allows readers to choose an ending for each (paid for) chapter. As eight

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<sup>217</sup> Viktor Myasnikov, “Bul’varnii epos,” *Novyi mir* 11 (2001), <[http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi\\_mi/2001/11/mias-pr.html](http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2001/11/mias-pr.html)> [accessed 15 August 2019]

<sup>218</sup> Lev Anninskiy, “Interv’iu,” *Peoples.ru*, November 5, 2004. <<https://www.peoples.ru/art/literature/criticism/anninskiy/interview.html>> [accessed 21 December 2019]

<sup>219</sup> In 2010, Akunin opened a blog on the platform *LiveJournal*, the contents of which he described as “развлекательные околосторические байки; что-то общественно-политическое; новости про мою литературную работу,” Boris Akunin, “Kak ia provel leto,” *LiveJournal* (blog), September 7, 2015, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2015/09/07/>> [accessed 21 September 2019]. Following *LiveJournal*’s move to Russian servers in 2016 and the subsequent change to restrictive Russian terms of service, Akunin quit the platform in April 2017 in an expression of political protest. Previously, he had used *LiveJournal* to comment on various political incidents, most prominently the cases of Khodorkovsky and Navalny. Talking about the former, Akunin called for an “ампутация” (‘Amputation’), a neologism to be read as a word-play on the words amputation and Putin. Boris Akunin, “Pochtovaia sumka,” *Echo Moskvy* (blog), January 7, 2011, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b\\_akunin/739969-echo](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b_akunin/739969-echo)> [accessed 20 September 2019]) as the most effective solution to the issue.

<sup>220</sup> Cf. Boris Akunin, “Spasenie utopaiushchikh,” *LiveJournal* (blog), November 19, 2012, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2012/11/19/>> [accessed 13 July 2019]; Boris Akunin, “Akuninbuk,” *LiveJournal* (blog), February 27, 2014, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2014/02/27/>> [accessed 13 July 2019]; Boris Akunin, “Literaturnye igry,” *LiveJournal* (blog), May 20, 2016, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2016/05/20/>> [accessed 13 July 2019]

potential storylines can be discovered, readers and viewers alike are encouraged to question the idea of linear narratives and their perception of historical time and reality.

### *Akunin's Postmodernist Aesthetics*

All of these elements already point to what Olga Sobolev and Elena Baraban voiced in 2004: the fact that Akunin created a “polyphonic artistic space, so characteristic of postmodernist writing [...] [but] hardly ever seen in the works of formula genre”<sup>221</sup>. Baraban called Akunin “the first among contemporary Russian detective authors to combine the genre of the historical detective novel with Postmodernist aesthetics”<sup>222</sup>. In 2011, Akunin affirmed this description:

river\_keeper

*Скажите, насколько Вы считаете свои собственные книги — постмодернизмом.*

На сто процентов.<sup>223</sup>

However, entering the topic of postmodernism inevitably also means stepping onto a terminological minefield. Given the manifold transformations that the term postmodernism has undergone over recent decades, a short detour is therefore in order.

In a Western context, two of the leading authorities on literary postmodernism are Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon. Whereas McHale succinctly characterises postmodernist fiction as “above all illusion-breaking art [...] systematically [disturbing] the air of reality by foregrounding the ontological structure of texts and of fictional worlds”<sup>224</sup> and holding up a mirror to a reality that “now more than ever before, is plural”<sup>225</sup>, Hutcheon calls it a phenomenon that is “resolutely contradictory as well as unavoidably political”<sup>226</sup>. In a postmodernist world, nothing can exist as self-explanatory or self-evident; as a result, postmodernism raises questions about past and present alike. In Hutcheon’s view, one of the main functions of postmodernism is

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<sup>221</sup> Sobolev, “Boris Akunin and the Rise of the Russian Detective Genre,” 68-75.

<sup>222</sup> Baraban, “A Country Resembling Russia,” 396. That being said, other Russian authors have combined the genres of historical and detective fiction, such as Leonid Iuzefovich. Akunin’s and Iuzefovich’s work are often compared for their different treatment of historical subject matters, cf. O. S. Ryzhchenko, “Leonid Iuzefovich i Boris Akunin: istoricheskii detektiv ili retro-detektiv,” *Naukovi zapiski Khar'kivs'kogo NPU, Literaturoznavstvo* 3, no. 2 (2010): 133-139.

<sup>223</sup> Boris Akunin, “Pochtovaia sumka №3,” *Echo Moskvy* (blog), March 04, 2011, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b\\_akunin/754756-echo](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b_akunin/754756-echo)> [accessed 13 July 2019]

<sup>224</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), 221.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>226</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

therefore to join readers and writers in a revolt against totalizing givens and misleading notions of the self-understood.

It is easy to draw a link from this to historical detective fiction's truth-searching quests. Hutcheon united postmodernism's epistemological and ontological concerns in the concept of historiographic metafiction, the basic premise of which is that "story-telling has returned – but as a problem, not as a given"<sup>227</sup>. Because postmodernism's awareness of the narrative basis of all representations of reality challenges the border between fact and fiction, it likewise turns all historical narratives into constructs – marred by the imperfection of human language and the impossibility of rendering truly objective views. Given today's proliferation of post-truth thinking across the globe, Hutcheon's work has lost none of its topicality.

However, postmodernism's ambiguity also makes it contentious in the eyes of many critics. Post-Soviet writers of an ultra-conservative, nationalist conviction, such as Aleksandr Dugin, have used postmodernism to claim validity for their Russian *sonderweg* theories since the 1990s, revealing the phenomenon's potential for political manipulation. In 2016, Boris Noordenbos detected postmodernism's presence in contemporary Russian politics, judging that one "may see how the ambiguous attitudes and politicized aesthetics of neo-imperialism—an over-the-top chauvinism which borrows from *and* moves beyond postmodernism—in some cases informs the Putin government's rhetoric and policies"<sup>228</sup>. Two years later, Mark Lipovetsky stated that "Postmodernism in Russian politics has been especially tangible in the nationalist discourse after Russia started its war against Ukraine and annexed Crimea, and it reached an apex after Trump was elected the U.S. president"<sup>229</sup>. Postmodernism is therefore a highly prevalent aspect of contemporary Russian politics – but its presence has been felt since the 1990s.

This timeline is not altogether surprising. When interpreted as an all-encompassing disregard for moral, legal and criminal boundaries in face of their ulterior meaninglessness, postmodernism carries a certain conceptual kinship with the post-perestroika notion of *bespredel'*, or lawlessness, as well as with Soviet *stio*b and

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>228</sup> Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 208.

<sup>229</sup> Lipovetsky, "Intelligentsia and Cynicism," 243-4.

its peculiar forms of in-betweenness. Indeed, a link between today's prominence of postmodernism and the cultural heritage of the Soviet period has been suggested by Mikhail Epstein, who coined the term simulacrum in this context. Epstein argues that the emptiness of post-Soviet, postmodernist signifiers is grounded in the centuries-long proclivity of Russian culture to engage in the creation of simulacra, for which he lists the city of Saint Petersburg and the public image of Soviet leader Brezhnev as examples. According to Epstein, the simulacrum-building part of Russian culture reached its climax in the period of Socialist Realism.<sup>230</sup>

While I would join Rosalind Marsh in her warning that "such denials of historical reality should not be taken too far"<sup>231</sup>, Epstein did raise an important point when he highlighted the existence of precursors to contemporary forms of Russian postmodernism. This chronology has led some scholars to question the existence of a post-Soviet postmodernism altogether: Evgeny Dobrenko, for instance, considers the term "a slip of the pen"<sup>232</sup>, arguing that Russian postmodernism is nothing but a reaction to the undead Soviet elements in contemporary Russian art. Lipovetsky and Borenstein, while not denying the existence of a Russian postmodernism *in toto*, also suggest that Russian postmodernism is "restricted to the art of reflection on the ruins of Socialist Realism"<sup>233</sup>, which is a position shared by Teresa Polowy.<sup>234</sup>

In the light of post-Soviet Russia's nostalgia debate and intelligentsia crisis, these claims certainly have their place. In essence, they imply that the 'art of reflection' has not gone far enough, indicating an insufficient reappraisal of Russia's Soviet past alongside a deep-seated inability to move past established doctrines of reality perception – outgrowths of which were noticeable in the previously cited responses to Akunin's work. However, it is equally important to stress that critical and creative forms of postmodernism have also evolved in the post-Soviet cultural space. Lipovetsky and Borenstein speak of a "new level of fullness and historical universality,

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<sup>230</sup> Cf. Mikhail Epstein, "The Origins and Meanings of Russian Postmodernism," in *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, ed. ibid. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 188-213.

<sup>231</sup> Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 268.

<sup>232</sup> Dobrenko, "Utopias of Return," 171.

<sup>233</sup> Mark Lipovetsky and Eliot Borenstein, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (New York, London: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 234.

<sup>234</sup> Cf. Teresa Polowy, "Twenty Years Later: Russian Literature and Literary Studies Since 1991," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53, no. 2-4 (2011): 527-44, 534.

a new scale of history's dramas and potential; by no means [...] history's annihilation"<sup>235</sup> in relation to Russian postmodernism, whereas Rosalind Marsh noticed that the rise of the term 'usable past' in post-Soviet Russia indicates a growing awareness and appreciation of postmodernism's versatility in society.

Marsh also showed that postmodernist historical fiction frequently challenges the concept of linear time, which is a phenomenon that Edith Clowes described with the words: "[if] modernity was striking for its [...] belief in linear progress, then in postmodernity history [...] resembled movement along a Moebius strip"<sup>236</sup>. The mention of the Moebius strip is an interesting one in relation to Akunin, as readers of the Fandorin series are met with at least one random use of the name Moebius in all of the earlier novels. From among the different interpretations for this occurrence, I am most inclined to agree with Andrei Staniukovich's, who considers the consistently random name-dropping a reference to the Moebius strip. In Staniukovich's interpretation, Akunin plays with the term to relay a view of time as circular and developing along multiple, parallel narratives.<sup>237</sup>

In recent years, the idea of the Moebius strip has also been applied to Russian history. Mikhail Shishkin, with whom Akunin interviewed in 2013, stated that the "twentieth century locked Russian history into a Mobius [sic] strip"<sup>238</sup>, whereas Ilya Kalinin – in a highly readable assessment of culture politics under the Putin regime – adopted a more political stance, observing that "[к]ультурное наследие и политические амбиции становятся элементами общей топологии, как в ленте Мебиуса"<sup>239</sup>. Both of these interpretations of the Moebius strip – either as a form of historical cyclicity or as a visualisation of contemporary Russia's interweaving of culture and politics – indicate, once again, the strong presence of postmodernist elements in contemporary Russian culture, alongside a deliberate indecisiveness about the border between past and present, fact and fiction.

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<sup>235</sup> Lipovetsky and Borenstein, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction*, 238.

<sup>236</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 3. Cf. Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 153.

<sup>237</sup> Cf. Andrei Staniukovich, *Fandorinskaia Moskva* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2008), 8-10.

<sup>238</sup> Mikhail Shishkin, "Poets and Czars. From Pushkin to Putin: The Sad Tale of Democracy in Russia," *New Republic*, July 1, 2013, <<http://newrepublic.com/article/113386/pushkin-putin-sad-tale-democracy-russia>> [accessed 15 August 2019]. For the interview with Akunin, cf. Boris Akunin, "Razgovor belletrista s pisatelem," *LiveJournal* (blog), July 30, 2013, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2013/07/30/>> [accessed 13 July 2019]

<sup>239</sup> Ilya Kalinin, "Prazdnik identichnosti: Russkaia kul'tura kak natsional'naia idea," *Politekonomiia povsednevnosti* 101, no. 3 (2015): 250-61, 255.

The same is true for Akunin's latest project, the multi-tome *History of the Russian State* (*История Российского государства*), which he described as “большую мегаповесть о жизни одного русского рода за тысячу лет”<sup>240</sup>. The project features eight historiographical tomes on major periods of Russian history, designed to emulate Karamzin's early 19<sup>th</sup>-century history of the same title: “[я] (пришло время в этом признаться) всегда мечтал стать новым Карамзиным”<sup>241</sup>. However, each of the historical tomes is also accompanied by a book of corresponding fictional stories, which are given equal prominence as the historical analyses. Both parts of the *History of the Russian State* are published under the pseudonym Boris Akunin. Perhaps not surprisingly, such a deliberate commingling of fact and fiction met with mixed reviews by critics. Ilya Gerasimov's verdict that Akunin “ничего нового не предложил, а только довел практически до абсурда основные идеи карамзинской картины мира”<sup>242</sup> is a rather stark misrepresentation, but it does express some of the anxieties experienced by contemporary critics about Akunin's postmodern play with history and literature.

The same aesthetic is also used in the Fandorin project. In 2001, Anatoly Vishevsky claimed that “the only future Akunin sees for Russia is in its literary past”<sup>243</sup>, highlighting the way that intertextuality is not only used as a postmodernist and intellectual mind-game in the Fandorin series, but as a serious part in Akunin's overall world-building. Both Russian and Western critics have commented on Akunin's prolific use of intertextuality, which is an element of the Fandorin series that Akunin has neither tried to hide nor silence. In a blog post from 2011, he wrote:

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<sup>240</sup> Boris Akunin, “Novyi Karamzin iavilsia,” *LiveJournal* (blog), March 20, 2013, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2013/03/20/>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>241</sup> Ibid. Karamzin himself was both writer and historian and conceived his *History of the Russian State* (*История Государства Российского*, 1818-29) as a work that straddled the border between historiography and literature. He also served as a source of inspiration for other elements of Akunin's oeuvre – Erast Petrovich's name among them. Just like the couple in Karamzin's novella *Poor Lisa* (*Бедная Лиза*, 1792), Akunin's Erast also enters a relationship with a young woman named Lisa in the first Fandorin novel – a love affair that ends on a similarly tragic note. Unlike Akunin, Karamzin is generally known as a proponent of ultraconservative political views.

<sup>242</sup> Ilya Gerasimov, “L'état, C'est Tout: 'Istoriya Rossiiskogo gosudarstva' Borisa Akunina i kanon natsional'noi istorii,” *Ab Imperio* no. 4 (2013): 219-30, 225.

<sup>243</sup> Anatoly Vishevsky, “Answers to Eternal Questions in Soft Covers: Post-Soviet Detective Stories,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 45, no. 4 (2001): 733-39, 737.

Я никогда не скрывал, что многие эпизоды/персонажи/коллизии выхватываю из истории или из 'большой' литературы [...] Эта литературно-историческая угадка является одной из несущих опор всего акунинского проекта.<sup>244</sup>

Over the years, Akunin's work has been linked to "Nikolai Leskov, Ivan Goncharov and Sergei Aksakov, with echoes of Nikolai Gogol and Fyodor Dostoevsky"<sup>245</sup> along with "Chesterton, Peters and Eco [...] as well as [...] Agatha Christie"<sup>246</sup> and many others. As Akunin refuses to acknowledge the existence of "непроходимых литературных границ и легко оперирует деталями разных художественных миров"<sup>247</sup>, he creates a rich tapestry of intertextual references to classical works of Russian and European fiction in addition to carefully researched historical content – effectively making detective fiction into the seat of a shared, transcultural history. Through the additional use of paratextual elements such as elaborate chapter headings, newspaper clippings and epigraphs – all of which have been named parodic elements characteristic of historiographic metafiction by Hutcheon – Akunin creates a unique artistic space that mixes literary memory with the impression of historical authenticity.<sup>248</sup>

However, it is important to point out that instead of mindlessly recreating classical source texts in the pursuit of a nostalgic utopia, Akunin stands for a critical and fluid, rather than an unreflective memory culture. While Lyudmila Parts is correct in pointing out that every "instance of intertextuality, be it a small quotation or a complex network of allusions, signals the fact that the pre-text or texts are vital parts of culture"<sup>249</sup>, Akunin's use of intertextuality goes further than that. He

uses the classics' 'testimonies' to question the myth of Russia's golden age [...] the philosophical principles of Postmodernism are used to create a pertinent critique of the idealization of tsarist Russia and to depict 'the Russia we have never lost' [...] allusions and pastiche become *historical* details that help produce a nuanced and often ambivalent depiction of Russia [original emphasis].<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Boris Akunin, "Otkuda chto beretsia - 1," *Echo Moskvy* (blog), September 16, 2011, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b\\_akunin/812363-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b_akunin/812363-echo/)> [accessed 13 July 2019]

<sup>245</sup> Aron, "A Champion for the Bourgeoisie," 149.

<sup>246</sup> Whitehead, "The Temptation of the Reader," 44.

<sup>247</sup> A. G. Golovacheva, "Dilogiia B. Akunina 'Ves' Mir Teatr' i 'Chernyi Gorod' kak polilog velikoi russkoi i mirovoi literatury," *Voprosy russkoi literatury* 31, no. 1 (2015): 88-135, 110.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. Linda Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," in *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*, eds. Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000): 189-207.

<sup>249</sup> Lyudmila Parts, "Boris Akunin's Postmodern Čajka," *Russian Literature* 82 (2016): 37-47, 45.

<sup>250</sup> Baraban, "A Country Resembling Russia," 403.

Whitehead aptly analysed Akunin's provocative and postmodern use of intertextuality as a method that not only creates a friendly intellectual contest between author and reader(s) over the possession of knowledge, but which also conjures up specific frames of reading expectations in order to engage a diverse readership in the deliberate deconstruction of these canonised perceptions of culture, "thereby [demonstrating] the redundancy of such literary categories"<sup>251</sup>.

Akunin's obvious desire to carve out a new sphere of cultural activity that prompts readers to leave their Soviet-educated comfort zone of cultural superiority behind is crucial in the context of post-Soviet Russia's struggles to critically illuminate its own past – literary or otherwise. However, before I can analyse the precise nature of Akunin's challenge to Russia's nationwide nostalgia for Empire, it is imperative that I first discuss the precise forms and trends that this nostalgia boom has taken since its inception.

## **2. Between the Popular and the Political: The Post-Soviet Nostalgia Debate**

[...] a history lesson is the best cure for nostalgic pathos.<sup>252</sup>

In the year 2000, Linda Hutcheon surmised that "contemporary [Russian] culture is [...] nostalgic; some parts of it – postmodern parts – are aware of the risks [...] and seek to expose those through irony"<sup>253</sup>. In 2014, Ekaterina Kalinina reformulated this bond between nostalgia and irony, stating that "[like] irony, nostalgia should be perceived as an emotional response and a discursive practice which is directed towards the construction of identities"<sup>254</sup>. These quotes are pivotal not just because of their content, but also because of their timing: written at watershed moments in post-Soviet Russian history, they describe nostalgia's persistent significance for a correct understanding of post-Soviet culture at large.

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<sup>251</sup> Whitehead, "The Temptation of the Reader," 46.

<sup>252</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 156.

<sup>253</sup> Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," 206.

<sup>254</sup> Ekaterina Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia* (Huddinge: Södertörn University, 2014), 44.

Nostalgia as a term was originally coined by the Swiss army doctor Johannes Hofer, who used it to describe the medical-pathological symptoms of homesickness among 17<sup>th</sup>-century soldiers. Since then, the term's meaning has undergone several shifts, the most important of which describes the move from a spatial to a temporal category: whereas Hofer's understanding of nostalgia involved a simple cure by returning the afflicted soldiers to their homeland, the modern nostalgic is seen to suffer from a psychological condition that is embodied in a yearning for a lost time, rather than a lost space.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nostalgia has become a mass phenomenon of global dimensions, which acts as a culturally accepted flight response in times of political and social uncertainty. According to Hutcheon, there are three reasons for this mass proliferation of nostalgia: the ontological uncertainty created by postmodernism, growing dissatisfaction with the present, and the rise of technology.<sup>255</sup> Indeed, most contemporary nostalgia seems to be “less about the past than about the present [...] which [...] is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational [...] Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe”<sup>256</sup> – a statement that holds true both in a Western and in a Russian context.

The role of the internet and social media in the creation of a specific postmodern nostalgic boom is equally applicable to a global context. Katharina Niemeyer links the appearance of mass nostalgia to today's modern, ever-growing media landscape, claiming that “nostalgia has always been an affair of mediated processes, within both literature and the arts”<sup>257</sup>. According to Niemeyer, both traditional and modern forms of media can work as triggers for nostalgia. Similarly, Andrew Higson argues that because of nostalgia's ubiquitous presence in the media and its associated status as a commodified good, past and present are merging into one, making nostalgia a positive rather than a negative experience that “retains nothing of melancholia and wistfulness”<sup>258</sup>, and which is “no longer about loss and the irrecoverable, but about the

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<sup>255</sup> Cf. Hutcheon, “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” 196.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>257</sup> Niemeyer, *Media and Nostalgia*, 7.

<sup>258</sup> Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia*, 54.

found, about discovery and enjoyment”<sup>259</sup>. In Higson’s view, postmodern nostalgia achieves an atemporal perception of the past through the process of commercialisation – unlike modern nostalgia, which upheld a temporal dimension and yearned for a return to an authentic, often pre-industrial past:

It is not that the irrecoverable past can now be recovered; it is rather that the object of nostalgic celebration is celebrated precisely because it is attainable, because it was never lost [...] it renders the past as co-existent with the present; it recovers the past as something that can be experienced by present-day spectators.<sup>260</sup>

There are some weaknesses to Higson’s argumentation, particularly his view of commodification as a result of postmodernism – Elizabeth Outka’s study on late-Victorian commodified nostalgic goods is a case study to the point.<sup>261</sup> Nevertheless, both Niemeyer and Higson are right to point out the role of mediated commercialisation processes in boosting a global, commodified access structure that offers wide-scale nostalgia-on-demand. What neither scholar explores in any depth is how this phenomenon applies to the post-Soviet space in particular.

Kalinina’s 2014 study of the mediation of post-Soviet nostalgia presents an important first contribution to this field. Using Hutcheon as a theoretical framework, Kalinina showcases how certain areas of communication – such as restaurants, fashion, television, and theatre – have contributed to Russia’s present nostalgic boom.<sup>262</sup> Nostalgia, in Kalinina’s interpretation, is not an immanent characteristic to any one subject; instead, it is the result of a process of interpretation or mediation, be it via a producer or a viewer. As nostalgia becomes “both a discursive and a bodily experience [that] has the potential to contribute to the constructions and reconstructions of nation-states”<sup>263</sup>, its strong emotive powers also place it within a wider structure of feeling that connects individuals to their surrounding social and political spheres and contributes to the process of identity formation.

While Kalinina’s study provides an up-to-date analysis of the interrelationship between media and nostalgia and suitably shows the infiltration of various aspects of

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<sup>259</sup> Andrew Higson, “Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be: Heritage Films, Nostalgia Websites and Contemporary Consumers,” *Consumption Markets & Culture* 17, no. 2 (2014): 120-42, 126.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-8.

<sup>261</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).

<sup>262</sup> Cf. Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia*.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

modern Russian life with nostalgic sentiments, it does not touch upon the nostalgia mediated – or challenged – in literature. Likewise, it fails to highlight the peculiarities of the post-Soviet nostalgia boom as compared to its Western equivalents. Where does the Fandorin project – an openly commercial work, situated in a transcultural artistic space, but constructed as a counter-narrative to post-Soviet nostalgia – fit in this overall nostalgic structure, and how does it respond to specific Russian outgrowths of nostalgic reflection?

### *Post-Soviet Nostalgia*

As mentioned before, post-Soviet societies did not just struggle with the global traumas of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also with specific “transitional periods, in which old ideologies and value systems [were] being replaced by new ones”<sup>264</sup> – or were supposed to be replaced, at least. It is this reality split, complete with all its imperfections, that has produced the fertile ground for nostalgic phenomena in the post-Soviet space to grow on. Therefore, I agree with Maria Todorova that nostalgia, in the case of post-Communist societies, has not only been brought about by the aforementioned factors of postmodernism, present-day ennui and a proliferation of social media, but by a highly specific combination of “elements of disappointment, social exhaustion, economic recategorization, generational fatigue, and [a] quest for dignity”<sup>265</sup>.

Todorova’s summary adequately describes the strong socio-political layers as well as the identitary confusion inherent to Russian nostalgia that are not necessarily found in its less politicised Western forms. Both Niemeyer and Higson essentially consider nostalgia a positive force; so does John J. Su, a scholar of Anglophone literature who views nostalgia as a positive social practice that “enables a kind of constructive forgetting and stabilization of the past”<sup>266</sup>. While generally correct, these statements

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<sup>264</sup> Lee, “Nostalgia as a Feature of ‘Glocalization’,” 161.

<sup>265</sup> Maria Todorova, “Introduction,” in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, eds. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010): 1-17, 7.

<sup>266</sup> Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia*, 10. A similar phenomenon to Russia’s nostalgic boom can also be noted in East Germany, for instance. For studies on Ostalgie, cf. Cf. Paul Cooke, *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005); Thomas Ahbe, *Ostalgie: Zu Ostdeutschen Erfahrungen Und Reaktionen Nach Dem Umbruch* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale Für Politische Bildung Thüringen, 2016); Gerhard Schilling, *Ostdeutsche Kriminalliteratur nach der Wende: Eine Thematische und Gattungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Marburg: Tectum, 2013).

tend to underrepresent the thin line that can be trod between *constructive* and *destructive* forgetting – which is a problem of considerable magnitude in the post-Soviet space, where nostalgia risks a dive into the deep end of nationalist myth-making when turned into a political tool.

One of the definitions of nostalgia that does take this difference into account is Svetlana Boym's model of restorative versus reflective nostalgia. Boym views nostalgia as different from melancholia, which according to her is a private and individual phenomenon. In Boym's view, nostalgia presupposes an interplay between individual and collective mnemonic practices, which is also the point at which nostalgia and national identity formation intersect. According to Boym, supporters of restorative nostalgia consciously distort history for the sake of the reconstruction of a mythical past, which is why this kind of nostalgia is particularly popular among nationalist movements.<sup>267</sup> Reflective nostalgia, in contrast, expresses what in German is rendered with the uniquely untranslatable term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, i.e. an attempt to investigate, understand and come to terms with one's past through the creation of an "individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself"<sup>268</sup>. This kind of nostalgia invites both private and public retrospection and frequently carries humorous or ironic overtones, which is why Boym initially also called it creative or ironic nostalgia.<sup>269</sup> Unlike the unreflective nostalgic ready-mades provided by restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia fashions a critical future out of the past.

Boym helped point out another peculiarity of the post-Soviet rise of nostalgia by placing it in the context of the Russian 1990s trauma discourse. This approach must now be taken with a grain of salt: as pointed out by Timothy Bewes, Boym's views tend to overstate the significance of "the traumatic experience of Communism and state repression"<sup>270</sup> in relation to the events of 1991. Catriona Kelly and Mark Bassin analysed the misrepresentative character of such descriptions, arguing that perestroika and the subsequent, peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union did not lead to a sudden

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<sup>267</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>269</sup> Cf. Boym, "From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia," 151.

<sup>270</sup> Timothy Bewes, "The Future of Nostalgia," *New Left Review* no. 14 (2002): 167-72, 169.

loss of identity, but instead served as the final manifestation of a process that had been unfolding over a long time.<sup>271</sup>

This is not to say that the collapse of the Soviet Union did not constitute a traumatic incision in many peoples' daily lives. However, their main cause for nostalgia was less the loss of an ideological system and more the loss of certainty and stability that this incision signified. It was the chaos and incompetence of the transition, not the transition itself, which the majority of the people lamented. Therefore, I am inclined to agree with Kalinina's correction to Boym's perspective and to see "as the trauma that causes growing nostalgic sentiments towards the past [...] not communism itself, but the period immediately after the fall of communism"<sup>272</sup>. Consequently, the overarching master-narrative about the break-up of the Soviet Union as the dominant identity crisis of the 1990s looks like an increasingly shaky and potentially unsound commonplace.

The following two subchapters will now detail the development of nostalgic trends in post-Soviet Russia since 1991, leading to a list of suitable interrogation points for my analysis of the Fandorin project. I will trace the various narratives of truth-bending nostalgia that developed during the 1990s and the 2000s, giving credence to the changed interplay between culture and politics that resulted from the 1999 regime change. Which nostalgic ideas were formulated on the unofficial level of society, and which dominant forms of nostalgia were circulated top-down as part of an official rewriting of Russian history? To what extent has nostalgia been politicised in contemporary Russia, and how have cultural figures and the intelligentsia responded to this process? Last but not least, which role have the regime and cultural figures of authority played in circulating narratives of trauma to perpetuate a specific nostalgia for Empire?

### **2.1. *The 1990s: Exploring Nostalgia***

It is often claimed that Russia is a country with an unpredictable past. At the beginning of the 1990s, it was a country with no past at all: in 1988, even "university entrance

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<sup>271</sup> Cf. Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly, "Introduction: National Subjects," in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, eds. ibid. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012): 3-16.

<sup>272</sup> Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia*, 44.

exams in history were cancelled [...] in a reflection of the impossibility of determining right answers from wrong ones”<sup>273</sup>. Hans Bagger characterised the 1990s by a “[...] longing for history’ (*toska po istorii*) [...] so marked that there was actually talk of a ‘worship’ of the past [original emphasis]”<sup>274</sup>. First comments about the rise of nostalgia in the Russian cultural sphere occurred in the mid-1990s, when “many democratically oriented journalists raised the alarm about the new wave of unreflective nostalgia in media and public discourse”<sup>275</sup>. However, it stands to reason that in order to manifest as mediated nostalgia, nostalgic sentiments in Russian society had to consolidate over a certain period before they could first be recorded.

One of the earliest manifestations of mediated nostalgia in post-Soviet Russia was the 1992 film *The Russia That We Lost* (*Россия, которую мы потеряли*). Produced by Stanislav Govorukhin – Putin’s election campaign manager in 2011 and 2012 – the polemically titled documentary portrays Russian 20<sup>th</sup>-century history as the tragic result of a Soviet rise to power and conveys a decidedly anti-Soviet mentality. Shrouded in romantic and borderline kitschy descriptions, *The Russia That We Lost* laments Russia’s lost opportunities after 1913 and constructs an image of pre-revolutionary Russia as a ‘загадочная, незнакомая страна’<sup>276</sup>:



Figure 2 *The Russia That We Lost* Film Still  
 (“*Rossii, kotoruiu my poteriali. Stanislav Govorukhin 1992 god*,” video file)

Supposedly factual pieces of information and personal reflections on the part of the narrator alternate to create a non-objective (as is indeed warned at the beginning of the

<sup>273</sup> Platt, “Historical Novel,” 66.

<sup>274</sup> Hans Bagger, “The Study of History in Russia during the Post-Soviet Identity Crisis,” *Scando-Slavica* 53, no. 1 (2007): 109-25, 110.

<sup>275</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 64.

<sup>276</sup> “*Rossii, kotoruiu my poteriali. Stanislav Govorukhin 1992 god*,” video file, 4:13, YouTube, posted by Zinkovskie.ru, August 27, 2015, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qy6ul82hN4I>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

film) voiceover. Norris describes the film as “an active site of memory [...] deliberately unmaking Soviet-era historical narratives and replacing them with alternatives”<sup>277</sup> – alternatives which focussed, among other things, on the stability provided by the Romanov family and their love for family, fatherland and tradition. Oushakine sees in *The Russia That We Lost* the “trope of the Russian tragedy [cementing] yet another community of loss”<sup>278</sup>, singling out the film’s role as one of the earliest renditions of a post-Soviet trauma discourse aimed at the loss of Empire.

Another television show that first aired in 1992, and which enjoyed great popularity throughout the decade, was the programme *Who are we? (Кто мы?)*. According to Marlene Laruelle, it offered “a reconciled and consoling view of the major moments of Russian history [...] [t]he overarching pathos is that of a suffering nation, decimated by pathologically unstable leaders and frantic masses and by a significant loss of the sense of values and identity”<sup>279</sup>; as such, it seems to have carried less overt forms of nostalgia, favouring, instead, an experimental discovery of the past that did not necessarily romanticise it.<sup>280</sup>

Although anti-Communist sentiments prevailed during the immediate post-perestroika period, Kathleen E. Smith also noted that the “Communists had worked diligently since 1992 to harness positive collective memories”<sup>281</sup>. The 1995 musical film *Old Songs About Main Things (Старые песни о главном)* speaks to the apparent success of this strategy, offering an insight into the parallel development of pro- and anti-Communist nostalgic strands in Russian society. A staple of 1990s Russian nostalgic popular culture, *Old Songs About Main Things* was modelled after Soviet propaganda films, but lacked elements of class struggle or conflict. Set in an unnamed village and an unspecified year between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, the film

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<sup>277</sup> Norris, *Blockbuster History*, 20.

<sup>278</sup> Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*, 114.

<sup>279</sup> Marlene Laruelle, “The ‘Russian Idea’ on the Small Screen: Staging National Identity on Russia’s TV,” *Demokratizatsiya* 22, no. 2 (2014): 313-33, 330-1.

<sup>280</sup> Given the much more pronounced role that television plays in the formation of national identity and the (dis)information of citizens in Russia than in the West, the fact that this show continued to be shown in the 2000s should not be lost from view, cf. Tina Burrett, *Television and Presidential Power in Putin’s Russia* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011); Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin’s Russia: Remote Control* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>281</sup> Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory During the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2002), 156.

portrays its protagonists as singing and pining after their various love interests, living a simple and straightforward life devoid of any kind of chaos or uncertainty.

From a critical perspective, it is not quite clear how life in the Soviet Union, and under Stalin no less, would have provided that kind of harmony – yet historical accuracy was not the aim behind this production. Lipovetsky links *Old Songs About Main Things* to other nostalgic works from the mid-90s, all of which, he says, “are [...] aimed at pleasing the middle-aged generation for whom Socialist Realism is more associated with childhood memories”<sup>282</sup>. This thought is also echoed in Dominic Boyer’s work on 1990s nostalgia, in which he claims that people were primarily experiencing “a sociotemporal yearning for a different stage or quality of life”<sup>283</sup>. A similar thought was also raised by Boym, who called early post-Soviet mass nostalgia in Russia a “nationwide midlife crisis; [a] longing for the time of [...] childhood and youth, [...] partaking collectively in a selective forgetting”<sup>284</sup>, whereas Platt considered the Soviet past “a treasure house of timeless elements of a shared identity”<sup>285</sup> for many post-Soviet Russians.

Thus, the early 1990s forms of Soviet nostalgia appear primarily concerned with a temporal yearning for the safety of one’s childhood – a period in time which just so happened to coincide with Soviet rule for the majority of the Russian population. It did not, by and large, reference actual Soviet realia. This also explains the temporarily strong nostalgic feelings about the 1970s, which were dubbed Soviet Russia’s ‘Golden Age’.<sup>286</sup> Both *Old Songs About Main Things* and *The Russia That We Lost* represent, to an extent, an apolitical form of nostalgia, which mourns not the loss of an ideology, but the loss of stability and blissful uneventfulness.

In the field of literature, postmodern ideas and concepts were on the rise during the 1990s, whereas nostalgia was not – yet. As noted by Rosalind Marsh,

Russian readers began to long for more escapist fare, and detective stories, thrillers and romances became the most popular reading matter in the 1990s. The people of Russia and the former USSR, to the great disappointment of the cultural intelligentsia, seemed to be more interested in

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<sup>282</sup> Mark Lipovetsky, “Post-Sots: Transformations of Socialist Realism in the Popular Culture of the Recent Period,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 3 (2004): 356-77, 358.

<sup>283</sup> Dominic Boyer, “From Algos to Autonomos. Nostalgic Eastern Europe as Postimperial Mania,” in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, 17-29, 18.

<sup>284</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 58.

<sup>285</sup> Kevin M. Platt, “Russian Empire of Pop: Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the ‘New Wave’ Competition,” *Russian Review* 72, no. 3 (2013): 447-69, 450.

<sup>286</sup> Cf. Mazur, “Golden Age Mythology”; Lee, “Nostalgia as a Feature of ‘Glocalization’”.

developing a mass culture than in filling in the many remaining gaps in their knowledge of history and ‘high culture’.<sup>287</sup>

The term *chernukha* forms an important keyword for the era. Originally a slang term coined in the perestroika period to denote “a tendency toward unrelenting negativity and pessimism both in the arts and in the mass media”<sup>288</sup>, *chernukha* gave voice to the prolonged and ubiquitous sense of historical rootlessness that was frequently expressed in images of trauma and the shell-shocked mind. The heavy use of tropes such as “amnesia, returning ghosts, hereditary diseases, [...] psychic flashbacks [...] standing for the problems involved in formulating a shared, continuous identity after the traumas and upheavals of the twentieth century”<sup>289</sup> is characteristic for novels such as Pelevin’s *Buddha’s Little Finger* (*Чанаев и нымтома*, 2000) and Sorokin’s *Blue Lard* (*Голубое сало*, 1999), which also include frequent portrayals of Russian history as a black hole.

The choice of these metaphors, while powerful, is also problematic. They contributed to the artificial inflation and perpetuation of a trauma narrative that would outlast the nineties and return in official guise under the Putin regime. Borenstein described the post-perestroika culture industry as “hell-bent on creating [an] impression of chaos while the 1990s were still a going concern”<sup>290</sup>, whereas Oushakine used the more general term of the “authors of the Russian tragedy”<sup>291</sup> in an analysis of nationalist texts as late as 2009. At the same time, Alexander Etkind stated that “Russian literature played an integrative rather than a divisive role”<sup>292</sup>, whereas Marsh judges that “[i]t is difficult to measure the impact of trauma on the work of Russian writers, since [...] mental illness remains largely taboo in Russian society”<sup>293</sup>.

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<sup>287</sup> Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 13.

<sup>288</sup> *Encyclopedia of Russian History*, s.v. “Chernukha,” <<http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/chernukha>> [accessed 18 January 2019]

<sup>289</sup> Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, 205.

<sup>290</sup> Eliot Borenstein, “Dystopias and Catastrophe Tales after Chernobyl,” in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, 86-103, 87. If we follow McHale, this proclivity for disaster tales needs to be read – to some extent – as a result of postmodernism, which “tends to deny reality and promote unreality, in the interests of maintaining high levels of consumption” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 219). Thus, the 1990s Russian taste for tales of chaos would not be a uniquely post-Soviet phenomenon, but it would have been heightened by this specific cultural context.

<sup>291</sup> Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, 81.

<sup>292</sup> Aleksandr Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia’s Imperial Experience* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 169.

<sup>293</sup> Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 162.

Akunin struck a successful balance between these two extremes: although the issue of trauma is incorporated into the Fandorin project, it is done in a way that helps Fandorin – the central trauma victim – to reclaim individual responsibility for the events and make peace with his past. Thus, both the detective’s prematurely white temples and his pronounced stammer, which disappears in moments of stress, intense concentration, or masquerade, are the result of a bomb blast that killed Fandorin’s new bride in the series’ first instalment *The Winter Queen* (*Азazelь*, 1998). Fandorin’s shell-shocked view of the mutilated arm of his wife raises both the spectre of the fragmented Empire and “the dismemberment of the Soviet Union”<sup>294</sup> – a starting point for the series that not only marked the Fandorin project as a product of the Russian 1990s, but which also created a conceptual link between Fandorin’s private tragedy and the bigger picture of Russia’s national trauma.

The way that Fandorin deals with his trauma is indicative of Akunin’s break-out position on the post-Soviet book market. His protagonist not only accepts his stammer with equanimity, but also refuses to dye his temples – thus refusing to give his trauma any identitarian precedence. In the novel *Leviathan* (*Левиафан*, 1999) Fandorin advises another trauma victim not to escape into an illusory ideal world, but to face the roots of his traumatic memories and come to terms with them: “Мне, как и вам, тоже угрожала потеря рассудка. Я сохранил разум и даже заострил его [...] Не уходите от истины, какой бы страшной она ни была, не прячьтесь за иллюзию”<sup>295</sup>. Approached in this way, trauma does not spell out an inevitable turn towards the past, nor does it justify a rejection of objective truth.

However, similar voices of forward-looking self-reflexion were few and far between in the Russian literature of the 1990s. The dominant, chernukha-inspired insistence on metaphors of loss and fragmentation also created another problem by suggesting “that the parts of a shattered empire may secretly cohere in ways hitherto unsuspected”<sup>296</sup> – triggering not only a belief in the wholeness of Empire, but also a search for alternative identity offers that received little to no guidance from above.

The Russian President at the time, Boris Yeltsin, tried and failed to adequately deal with the legacy of his predecessors’ politically induced historical amnesia.

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<sup>294</sup> Borenstein, “Dystopias and Catastrophe Tales after Chernobyl,” 87.

<sup>295</sup> Boris Akunin, *Leviathan* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2003), 299.

<sup>296</sup> Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, 189-90.

Yeltsin's attempts at managing Russia's search for a viable identity narrative were largely confined to an open, but disorganised embrace of Western liberalism and Western ideals. In 1996, Yeltsin initiated a search for a new 'idea for Russia' as part of his presidential campaign; the results, however, were as scarce as they were disheartening. In the end, all they revealed was a profound lack of convincingly positive reference frames among the public. At the same time, however, responses to Yeltsin's call for a new national identity narrative also indicated the absence of deeply rooted nostalgic sentiments, as neither Soviet ideology nor the intelligentsia's liberal mind-set evoked clear preferences on the part of the public.

While it is not particularly surprising that no sound concept of a non-Western and non-Soviet way forward for Russia could be found in 1996, the results still aptly illustrate the fact that Yeltsin's "politics of memory was episodic and lacked resources"<sup>297</sup>. The only suitable foil for Yeltsin's Western-oriented political agenda was Imperial Russian culture, mainly based on the fact that the Russian Empire had entertained a much less reclusive cultural sphere than its Soviet counterpart. The somewhat paradoxical identification of Imperial nostalgia with Western progress was reflected in the fact that, for most of the 1990s, "Peter the Great (since 1990) and Catherine II (since the end of the decade) were the two most popular historical figures in Russia, both being perceived less as powerful rulers [...] than as enlightened monarchs, modernizers, and Westernizers"<sup>298</sup>.

However, the open embrace of all things Western "as an incarnation of moral and aesthetic perfection, economic efficiency, and political freedom"<sup>299</sup> began to tip towards exasperation in the wake of a growing disenchantment with the liberal experiment during the mid-1990s. As the West stopped being an attractive offer of identification, so did the word 'new'. Instead, Boym registered that "sometime in the mid-1990s [...], the word *old* became popular and commercially viable, promoting more goods than the word *new*"<sup>300</sup> – which is an interesting observation to make in the

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<sup>297</sup> Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2017), 220.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>300</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 65. Recalling Akunin's subtitle for the Fandorin project, this puts him onto a clear trajectory for an anti-nostalgic discourse.

context of the Fandorin project, which continued to use the opposite approach with some success.

During the mid-1990s, official voices that focussed on Russia's pre-revolutionary past in an outspokenly nostalgic manner also began to make themselves heard. Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov engaged in an ambitious architectural project aimed at redesigning Moscow as Russia's traditional capital and the mythological heart of the country. In 1995, work began on the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which had been dynamited by the Soviet authorities in 1931. It was the crowning piece of Luzhkov's architectural renaissance project, which betrayed his open desire to

have Russians embrace a vague folkloric concept of their roots – one that included castles and churches, tsars and soldiers. Gritty social history and balanced interpretations of past policies have no place in his vision of the national capital. [...] The mayor seemed nostalgic for an idealized distant past, when Russians were united around faith in their state and and [sic] in their church.<sup>301</sup>

In 1997, Luzhkov's celebrations of Moscow's 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary drew national and international attention as “a festival of reimagined Tsarism, fake Slavicism, and gold-encrusted religious ceremonial”<sup>302</sup>. Three years later, the new Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was finished.

The symbolic and indeed nostalgic value of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was subsequently referenced in Nikita Mikhalkov's 1998 film *The Barber of Siberia* (*Сибирский цирюльник*), which remains one of the most expensive blockbusters and most discussed films of post-Soviet film history to date. It is said to have been heavily sponsored by the Russian government, making it a precursor for the later wholesale commodification of nostalgia under Putin.<sup>303</sup> Norris paid attention to the film in several of his works, describing it as both a “cultural eruption and the first explosion that made Putin's use of patriotism possible”<sup>304</sup> as well as an “effort to rekindle tsarist-era values in contemporary society”<sup>305</sup>, “a comment on Russian nationalism after 1991”<sup>306</sup> and a

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<sup>301</sup> Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia*, 126-29.

<sup>302</sup> Catherine Merridale, “Redesigning History in Contemporary Russia,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 13-28, 21.

<sup>303</sup> Cf. Rosalind Marsh, “The Nature of Russia's Identity: The Theme of ‘Russia and the West’ in Post-Soviet Culture,” *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 3 (2007): 555-78, 561.

<sup>304</sup> Norris, *Blockbuster History*, 26.

<sup>305</sup> Stephen M. Norris, “Tsarist Russia, Lubok Style: Nikita Mikhalkov's Barber of Siberia (1999) and Post-Soviet National Identity,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25, no. 1 (2005): 101-18, 106.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

homage to Russia's traditional father-like ruler figures and the "timeless patriotism of the Russian soldier"<sup>307</sup>. At the same time, many "reviewers [...] believed that Mikhalkov was attempting to sell an outdated patriotism that glossed over the tsarist past and overly criticized the West"<sup>308</sup>.

As one of the milestones in the development of post-Soviet nostalgia discourse, *The Barber of Siberia* encapsulates several of the nostalgic discussion points that were carried over from the 1990s into the Putin years, and which consolidated a nostalgia for both Empire and the image of a strong, paternal ruler in the broader swathes of Russian society. It also joined an already existing discussion around the significance of Eastern values for Russia's future development. The ways in which *The Barber of Siberia* focuses on the illusory image of the enigmatic, incomprehensible Russian soul are reminiscent of Govorukhin's earlier work, but the choice of Alexander III's reign provides a more selective interpretation of the Imperial past, which refutes Peter the Great's vision for Russia as much as it does Yeltsin's cosyng up to the West. Birgit Beumers credited Mikhalkov's film with performing a "shift from a nostalgia that is openly constructed as a myth to a nostalgia for a past that pretends to be authentic"<sup>309</sup>. In other words, *The Barber of Siberia* signals the move from an overwhelmingly postmodern, ironic form of nostalgia to a nostalgia more correctly labelled restorative after Boym's theoretical model.

The considerable loss of ambiguity in mediated forms of nostalgia during the 1990s also became apparent in Aleksandr Sokurov's film *Russian Ark* (*Русский ковчег*), one of the last major cultural productions to emerge from the decade. Commissioned in the mid-1990s, the film was only finished in 2002 due to its singular production circumstances and complicated technical approach. It follows the Marquis de Custine, a real-life French chronicler of Russian court life in 1839, on his journey through the Hermitage. The tour leads through an achronological assortment of snippets from Russian history and is accompanied by the voiceover of an invisible narrator, with whom the Marquis engages in a discussion of Russian values, achievements, and national identity. The film has alternatively been described as "a

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>308</sup> Norris, *Blockbuster History*, 112.

<sup>309</sup> Birgit Beumers, *Nikita Mikhalkov: Between Nostalgia and Nationalism* (London: Tauris, 2005), 2.

covert propaganda film”<sup>310</sup>, a “solemn contemplation of the ‘Russia that we lost’”<sup>311</sup> and as an expression of “cultural identification that occurs on the brink of identity hesitation”<sup>312</sup> – thus highlighting, once again, the multipolarity of the Russian national identity and nostalgia discourse in the 1990s.

Both *Russian Ark*’s setting within the Hermitage, where the protagonist and narrator are surrounded by artefacts of European culture, and the film’s ongoing comparison between Russia and the West have become the subjects of prolonged academic discussions. Despite the fact that *Russian Ark* features multiple instances of criticism directed at both Russian state history and the European othering of non-European cultural achievements, Sokurov has been accused of “[producing] various forms of erasure and national myths of origin”<sup>313</sup> as well as, somewhat dramatically, “[carrying] the same load of Russian nationalism that helped to unleash the flood of the 20th century”<sup>314</sup>. The use of the term ‘ark’ certainly does suggest a “timeless, cloistered space”<sup>315</sup> and an inviolable sanctity of values that carries eternal meaning. At the same time, the notion of an ark could be interpreted critically, or as a parody aimed at a long out-of-date repository of cultural elements in dire need of an update. Seen from a contemporary perspective of domineering restorative nostalgic moods in cultural productions, I would agree with Yana Hashamova on this matter, who views Sokurov’s attempts at dissolving the timeline between past and present as a postmodernly inspired experiment as well as a critical and reflective engagement with Russian history.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>310</sup> George Sikharulidze, “Rethinking Russian Ark,” *Film International* 10, no. 4-5 [58] (2012): 101-08, 107.

<sup>311</sup> José Alaniz, “Crowd Control: Anxiety of Effluence in Sokurov’s Russian Ark,” in *Cinema of Alexander Sokurov*, eds. Birgit Beumers and Nancy Condee (London: Taurus, 2011): 155-176, 170.

<sup>312</sup> Yana Hashamova, “Two Visions of a Usable Past in (Op)position to the West: Mikhalkov’s *The Barber of Siberia* and Sokurov’s *Russian Ark*,” *Russian Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): 250-66, 260.

<sup>313</sup> Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, “Floating on the Borders of Europe: Sokurov’s Russian Ark,” *Film Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2005): 18-26, 18.

<sup>314</sup> Pamela Kachurin and Ernest A. Zitser, “After the Deluge: Russian Ark and the Abuses of History,” *Historically Speaking* 7, no. 6 (2006): 25-27, 27.

<sup>315</sup> Condee, *The Imperial Trace*, 241.

<sup>316</sup> Particularly the satirical portrayals of Russian heads of state stand out in comparison to contemporary kowtowing to figures of authority. Hashamova also made the interesting observation that Custine and the narrator never argue, despite their obvious differences in beliefs (cf. Hashamova, “Two Visions of a Usable Past,” 262). While perhaps an insignificant detail to some Western viewers, this un-emotional acceptance of differing viewpoints should also be read in the context of a more open Russian memory culture of the 1990s.

Considered through the prism of Boym's methodology, it thus appears that a mix of restorative and reflective nostalgia was at work in Russia during the time between 1991 and 1999. Neither an overarching nostalgic master-narrative nor a united sense of national nostalgia for one particular period in time can be detected; instead, various manifestations of nostalgia played with the borders and specifics of a hitherto illicit discourse about the national past whilst simultaneously rediscovering the hidden corners of Russia's multi-faceted history. A nostalgia for the intelligentsia was curiously absent from most of these productions: whereas Mikhalkov, for instance, tended to "pillory the intelligentsia as weak and ineffectual [...] Sokurov, in many ways the quintessential, absorbed intelligent, has seemed not to notice them"<sup>317</sup>. The intelligentsia itself remained largely silent on these issues. Unlike the realm of TV and cinematography, the literary world of the 1990s seemed hesitant to embrace nostalgia as a theme; instead, romance and historical fiction were on the rise, while the intelligentsia occupied itself with its own demise and engaged in a more one-sided *chernukha*-inspired discourse that laid the groundwork for its own, subsequent cynicism trap.

Crucially, however, the initial wave of nostalgia in the 1990s was the result of a public movement, played out from a variety of perspectives in the available arenas of public discourse. While political figures such as Luzhkov and Yeltsin influenced this debate and came to represent it to a degree, they never dominated it. As summarised by Koposov,

the situation with historical memory in Yeltsin's Russia was uncertain and contradictory. On the one hand, it was characterized by a growing nostalgia for Soviet times, increasing anti-Western sentiments, and the rise of nationalism. On the other hand, the liberal master narrative, which was gradually losing credibility, remained the government's official position and continued to enjoy some popular support.<sup>318</sup>

Lee was therefore correct when she called the 1990s nostalgic discourse a "genuinely popular *impulse* [my emphasis]"<sup>319</sup> – i.e. a spontaneous and largely unorganised process characterised by its intensity, but also its potential brevity. From today's perspective, it is impossible to say whether the 1990s nostalgic discourse would have outrun its lifespan and simply ceased to play a part in the national identity discourse if

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<sup>317</sup> Condee, *The Imperial Trace*, 231.

<sup>318</sup> Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars*, 213.

<sup>319</sup> Lee, "Nostalgia as a Feature of 'Glocalization'," 172.

different political events had taken place after 2000. As it happened, “after the end of the 1990s, [nostalgia] acquired its dynamic force from the ‘outside.’ It is noteworthy that this ‘outside’ is neither a mature civil society nor the intelligentsia, [...] but political power itself.”<sup>320</sup> As of 31 December 1999, the name behind this political power was that of Vladimir Putin.

## 2.2. *After 2000: Streamlining Nostalgia*

Putin’s coming into power changed the trajectory of Yeltsin’s unstructured national identity project. Starting from a “desire to restore Russia’s injured national pride”<sup>321</sup>, Putin initiated an aggressive politics of revival, aimed at recapturing Russian history for a public usability. Neither the failures of the Russian Empire nor the Soviet regime’s horrors played a part in this narrative. Instead, the interim of the 1990s was labelled as a period of unprecedented instability in Russian history, taking on the role of the main culprit in Russia’s continued identity struggle. Constant reminders about the strength of the state – and the Empire – that came before the 1990s, along with the many ways in which Putin’s style of governance connects to these periods, served to cement the national trauma of the ‘wild nineties’ – lest people forget how the absence of a strong, paternal ruler and state lastingly uprooted them.

By rejecting the anti-Communist rhetoric employed by Gorbachev and Yeltsin and placing the Soviet period – with a special focus on the victory in the Great Patriotic War – “within a power-political continuum [that] takes its departure in the year 1612, when [...] a popular uprising expelled the Polish occupation troops from Moscow”<sup>322</sup>, the Putin regime purposefully glossed over the historical breaks created by previous regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also filled those gaps with a blinkered view of Russian history, following an unbroken line of Russian patriotism, military strength and century-old anti-Western fervour in a bid to turn identity indecision into a need for opposition and othering instead.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid, 172.

<sup>321</sup> Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 113.

<sup>322</sup> Bagger, “The Study of History,” 115.

<sup>323</sup> Cameron Ross, “Das Paradox: Putins Populäre Autokratie: Legitimitätsquellen in Einem Hybriden Regime,” *Osteuropa* 64, no. 8 (2014): 99-112, 111. Whether this process was always entirely under control or not would be a subject for debate, but it certainly fits Putin’s 2016 elevation of patriotism to Russia’s only national idea (Gregory Feifer, “Putin’s Patriotism Playbook,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2016, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2016-02-18/putin-s-patriotism->

This confrontative stance stabilised the Russian search for a national identity in two ways: on the one hand, a negative definition of selfhood conveniently made it redundant to define who or what Russians really were. On the other hand, the failure of Putin's predecessors to create a convincing national identity narrative based on a reassessment of history made Putin's open embrace of Russia's past into a trailblazing moment, enabling him to conquer the interpretative primacy over both Soviet and Imperial history in one fell swoop. By openly reclaiming – rather than denigrating – past periods in Russian history, Putin answered the widespread psychological need for clear guidance in the post-Soviet space and appeared as the first post-perestroika politician to openly refute “the liberal habit of soul-searching”<sup>324</sup> – which had seemingly only led to uncomfortable truths about self and nation anyway.

### *Restorative Soviet Nostalgia*

Putin's strategy in formulating a national idea for Russia was thus to dictate a narrative from above, rather than leave the search process to society, scholarship, and culture. Instead of embracing the radical heterogeneity of postmodernist thinking and continuing to foster a critical spirit capable of authentic *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Putin chose an approach that worked for, and not against, the onset of a nationwide revival of restorative nostalgia. The transfer of these reactionary attitudes into the public discourse promptly followed suit: as described by Kalinina, the years immediately following Putin's rise to power were marked by a “rejection of ironic attitudes [...] the general rejection of the postmodern paradigm and the revival of conservative modes of thinking”<sup>325</sup>.

The education sector was one of the spheres of public life that was quickly affected by this shift in narrative. In 2003, Catherine Merridale analysed Russia's education system and identified

a tendency to seek an undivided truth, the one correct answer beside which all others are sheer lies; a fascination with charismatic authority, and especially with the personalities of leaders; an equal fascination with the irrational, and especially with the idea of miraculous deliverance, the hoped-for but elusive

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playbook> [accessed 17 December 2019]) – a move that could be interpreted as the official closing statement to the project initiated by Yeltsin twenty years before.

<sup>324</sup> Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia*, 182.

<sup>325</sup> Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia*, 233.

‘special path’; and a taste for making extreme judgments about events, dividing them into light and dark, good and evil, the echoes of omniscient morality.<sup>326</sup>

Three years later, a history textbook was withdrawn from Russian schools because it “invited students to discuss the positive and negative aspects of the current president’s policies”<sup>327</sup>. In 2013, Putin’s call for a unified history textbook to end the discussion of multiple parallel versions of historical events in schools even made international headlines, as it drove home the fact that in his Russia, historical “Truth is unitary and compulsory”<sup>328</sup>.

Journalism and media were also directly affected by this changed attitude towards fact and fiction. In 2001, the independent TV channel NTV – which had been known for its satirical political programmes – was raided and incorporated into the state-controlled media holding company Gazprom, which effectively silenced it as a voice of critical news coverage. While not directly related to nostalgia or the manipulation of historical memory, the NTV incident did mark the moment from which non-conformist news coverage was under attack in Russia. A subsequent case was that of the liberal TV channel TVRain, which – following the publication of a public opinion poll about the siege of Leningrad, which asked viewers to consider the hypothetical outcome of a surrender of the city to the Germans – was ousted from all official TV providers in 2014. As part of a fundraising campaign to re-establish broadcasting, the channel created a promotional video titled *The Strength of Words* (*Сила слова*), which featured the reading of a Pushkin poem on public transport that defends the idea of free speech.<sup>329</sup> As of 2020, the channel is still limited to online streaming – which is also under threat following gradual changes to Russia’s internet laws.<sup>330</sup>

The short period of the Medvedev interregnum (2008-2012), although often lauded for its moderately successful ‘reset’ of US-Russian relations, did not introduce

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<sup>326</sup> Merridale, “Redesigning History in Contemporary Russia,” 22.

<sup>327</sup> Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 140.

<sup>328</sup> McDaniel, *The Agony of the Russian Idea*, 35. Cf. Leonid Bershidsky, “Russian Schools to Teach Putin’s Version of History,” *Bloomberg.com*, June 18, 2013, <<http://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2013-06-18/russian-schools-to-teach-putin-s-version-of-history>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>329</sup> The clip can still be watched on Youtube: “Rolik v podderzhku Dozhdia ‘Sila Slova’ (korotkaia versiia),” video file, 2:14, YouTube, posted by TV Rain, June 20, 2014, <<http://youtu.be/ATXuEiOLmHQ>> [accessed 10 June 2019].

<sup>330</sup> Cf. Pavel Merzlikin, “V ideale nas byt’ ne dolzhno,” *Meduza.io*, April 16, 2019, <<https://meduza.io/feature/2019/04/16/v-ideale-nas-byt-ne-dolzhno>> [accessed 7 February 2020]

any considerable changes into official memory politics, particularly those concerning the Soviet Union.<sup>331</sup> In 2008, the NGO *Memorial* – a perestroika-era organisation that researches Soviet totalitarianism and human rights issues in post-Soviet states – became a target for state repressions and had its digital archives confiscated, before being placed on the list of so-called foreign agents. Subsequently, *Memorial* was subjected to a lawsuit that almost caused its liquidation.<sup>332</sup> In 2009, the ‘Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests’ (*Комиссия при президенте Российской Федерации по противодействию попыткам фальсификации истории в ущерб интересам России*) was established; political historian Mark Kramer reads this as evidence for Putin’s puppeteering of Medvedev, and states that the “mere existence of the commission was a symbolic reminder of Putin’s interest in fostering a particular historical narrative with little regard for what the evidence might show”<sup>333</sup>.

Putin’s rehabilitation of the Soviet past for a post-Soviet usability intensified after his return to the Presidency in 2012. Acts such as the reactivation of Hero of Labour medals, the construction of a Russian Disneyland featuring a Berlin Reichstag waiting to be stormed by teenage cadets, and the return of Stalin memorial plaques, statues and busts in official institutions across the country all confirm what Dobrenko has called Putin’s removal of the post- from the post-Soviet space.<sup>334</sup> Not all of these elements were innovations by the Putin regime – Gregory Feifer, for instance, wrote as early as

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<sup>331</sup> Some scholars would disagree with me on this. Stephen M. Norris, for instance, noted the development of a veritable ‘memory supermarket’ with relation to the Second World War at his time of writing in 2011. However, while differing views to the official cultification of the war exist (particularly in popular culture), I think it was premature to talk about the existence of a healthy memory culture in a Russian context, which suffered a considerable setback following the failed protest movement of 2011/12 (cf. Stephen M. Norris, “Memory for Sale: Victory Day 2010 and Russian Remembrance,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 201-29).

<sup>332</sup> The corresponding ‘foreign agent’ law was extended in November 2017 to include not only NGOs and civil rights organisations, but also foreign media broadcasters; it was further extended in November 2019 to potentially apply to ordinary citizens.

<sup>333</sup> Mark Kramer, “Archival Policies and Historical Memory in the Post-Soviet Era,” *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 3 (2012): 204-215, 213. In 2012, the Commission was disbanded amid claims that it had achieved a ‘lasting legacy’.

<sup>334</sup> Cf. Dobrenko, “Utopias of Return.” For the examples given, cf. “V Kremle vrucheny medali ‘Geroi Truda Rossiiskoi Federatsii’,” *Kremlin.ru*, March 1, 2015, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49382>> [accessed 17 December 2019]; Dmitrii Okrest, “Russkii Disneiland: ‘Buk’, ‘Topol’-M’ i partizany v parke ‘Patriot’,” *Snob.ru*, July 13, 2016, <<http://snob.ru/selected/entry/110846>> [accessed 17 December 2019]; Genri Reznik, “Ne demoniziruem - otbelivaem,” *Echo Moskvy* (blog), June 26, 2017, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/reznik\\_h/2007712-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/reznik_h/2007712-echo/)> [accessed 17 December 2019].

1999 about the surge of Soviet military medals displayed on inner-city buildings alongside Tsereteli statues in central Moscow, asking: “What kind of history is that? It is myth as history, and it works all the better in Russia’s feeble knowledge of the real, disappointing thing – and society’s reluctance to ponder it”<sup>335</sup>. However, the Putin regime was happy to further the nation’s ignorance and capitalise on the existing reactionary trends in society – and it did so to noticeable success.

Today’s cultural climate in Russia not only openly supports, but actively yearns for “a politics whose objective is the positive recording of nostalgia for the Soviet past into a new form of Russian patriotism”<sup>336</sup>. Opinions such as Likhacheva et al.’s, who claim that “[t]he last remnants of the Soviet identity are dying out”<sup>337</sup>, therefore need to be read with a generous amount of scepticism. Nothing seems off limits in the wide range of commemorative practices aimed at remembering the Soviet past, as long as practitioners stay within the political agenda set by the regime – which has led to the emergence of some unsettling memory practices, such as the creation of a privately-owned TV channel called *Nostalgia* (showing round-the-clock reruns of Soviet films and TV programmes and featuring a sickle and hammer on its channel logo), the offer of Hitler Youth haircuts in Russian hair salons and the emergence of a popular Stalin selfie app.<sup>338</sup> In Kalinina’s words, the “Soviet past [has become] an emotional currency”<sup>339</sup> that feeds both patriotic and nationalist sentiments.

It is crucial to point out that this is no longer the emotional currency of illusory childhood stability as purported in *Old Songs About Main Things*.<sup>340</sup> However, it does carry familial bonds of a different kind, representing the emotional currency of a nation indebted to its paternal leader figure. Just as the Putin regime’s use of Russia’s victory

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<sup>335</sup> Gregory Feifer, “Utopian Nostalgia: Russia’s ‘New Idea,’” *World Policy Journal* 16, no. 3 (1999): 111-118, 112.

<sup>336</sup> Ilya Kalinin, “Nostalgic Modernization: The Soviet Past as ‘Historical Horizon,’” *Slavonica* 17, no. 2 (2011): 156-66, 157.

<sup>337</sup> A. Likhacheva, I. Makarov, and E. Makarova, “Post-Soviet Russian Identity and Its Influence on European-Russian Relations,” *European Journal of Futures Research* 3, no. 1 (2015): 1-8, 3.

<sup>338</sup> Cf. Sergey Medvedev, “Izobrazhaia Gitlera. Kak pamiat’ o voine prevrachaetsia v igru,” *Republic*, May 5, 2017, <<http://republic.ru/posts/82518>> [accessed 17 December 2019]; Hannah Thoburn, “For Putin, For Stalin,” *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2016, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/25/for-putin-for-stalin-russia-propaganda>> [accessed 17 December 2019].

<sup>339</sup> Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia*, 232f.

<sup>340</sup> Dobrenko has called Putin the creator of his own version of the show, stating that “President Putin should be recognised as the most consistent contemporary postmodern artist [...] he has managed to create a genuine sots-art political collage: there are new words in the Russian national anthem, but the music is Soviet (real Starye pesni o glavnom) [...],” Dobrenko, “Utopias of Return,” 170.

in the Second World War masks the fact that the war was won despite, not because of, Stalin, it also effectively reframes Stalin's role into that of Russia's paternal saviour – the iron-fisted 'Father of the nations' who commands blind obedience from his 'children' in exchange for the services rendered to the country.

By expounding on his own KGB history and devising a clever PR strategy (complete with bare-chested horseback riding, martial arts photo shoots, and public puppy cuddling), Putin successfully updated the old operating modes of Stalin's personality cult for a modern-day usability. While presenting himself as the diametrical opposite to the feeble, indecisive alcoholic Yeltsin, he also drew legitimacy for his turn towards authoritarianism from a combined nostalgia for Stalin and superpower glory. The success of this strategy can be seen in poll results that have been naming Stalin as the most outstanding Russian in world history for years – closely followed by Putin himself.<sup>341</sup>

I therefore fully agree with Nikolai Petrov's suggestion to label the current Putin regime as 'Stalin light', with a tendency towards 'Stalin medium'.<sup>342</sup> Rudra Sil and Cheng Chen have documented the return of a curious doublethink in response to this newly authoritarian turn in politics, which they describe as a willingness to unite "continued support for democracy [with] declining state legitimacy and rising nostalgia for the Soviet regime"<sup>343</sup>. The coining of the term 'sovereign democracy' under Putin's leadership successfully cemented this growing "demand for non-democracy"<sup>344</sup> into a linguistic caveat of uniquely Russian proportions – and lent a name to the fact that "the Kremlin is no longer trying to act as if open-ended elections, a division of powers, local self-administration and the rule of law still existed in Russia. The attempt to appear as a legitimate power in this way has been left

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<sup>341</sup> Cf. Vasily Maximov, "Russians Name Stalin 'Most Outstanding' World Figure, Putin Ties for Second," *RT*, June 26, 2017, <<http://www.rt.com/politics/394158-russians-name-stalin-most-outstanding/>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>342</sup> Cf. Nikolaj Petrov, "Legitimität, Repression, Kollaps: Entwicklungsstadien Des Putin-Regimes," *Osteuropa* 64, no. 8 (2014): 85-98, 96-7.

<sup>343</sup> Rudra Sil and Cheng Chen, "State Legitimacy and the (In)significance of Democracy in Post-Communist Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56, no. 3 (2004): 347-68, 353.

<sup>344</sup> 'Nachfrage nach Nichtdemokratie'. Boris Makarenko, "Repressionsindolenz: Politische Kultur Und Autoritäre Herrschaft in Russland," *Osteuropa* 64, no. 8 (2014): 113-20, 118. The return to a narrative about the inviolability of the national leader was made quasi-official in 2019, when Putin signed a law that introduced fines and potential prison sentences for 'disrespecting authorities' online. This law was followed by a no less controversial law about a sovereign Russian internet under state control. As of yet, both laws are still being carried out inconsistently. However, this should not distract from the fact that they spell out a disastrous verdict on the state of democracy in contemporary Russia.

behind”<sup>345</sup>. The cult figure of Russia’s iron-fisted leaders plays an inherent part in this shift in perception about what constitutes political legitimacy.

### *Imperial Nostalgia*

The Soviet period is not the only source of nostalgic capital for this endeavour. The Putin regime’s fixation on the cult potential inherent to strong leadership also provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to seize hold of the existing discourse about Imperial nostalgia in Russian culture. According to Khapaeva,

Re-Stalinization and Russian neo-medievalism represent two interrelated trends of a complex ideological process. At the core of this process, which depends on aesthetics for its expression, is the reconsideration of the concept of citizenship and of the social contract between the authorities and the majority of post-Soviet society. That consensus is thoroughly grounded in the unprocessed memory of Soviet crimes and collective denial of historical responsibility.<sup>346</sup>

Far less controversial than the Soviet horrors, removed from individual remembering and pre-popularised during the 1990s, the late Imperial period offered an attractive “source (or resource) for the extraction of symbolic capital”<sup>347</sup> for the Putin regime – along with a long list of paternal leader figures to emulate.

Over the course of his presidential terms, Putin reinstated the image of some of Russia’s most notorious iron-fisted rulers to the national memory – Vladimir the Great and Ivan the Terrible among them.<sup>348</sup> By doing so, he not only allowed, but openly enforced a positive remembering of their role in Russian history – making his own, initially proverbial identification with the role of ‘Father figure Tsar’ (a logical extension from the ‘Father of the Nations’ that was Stalin) obtain an increasingly literal meaning over the years. This process reached its temporary climax in 2016, when a new monument to Vladimir the Great was unveiled in front of the Kremlin. Not

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<sup>345</sup> ‘Der Übergang zu einem offen autoritären Regime bedeutet, dass der Kreml nicht mehr versucht so zu tun, als gebe es in Russland Wahlen mit offenem Ausgang, Gewaltenteilung, lokale Selbstverwaltung und Rechtsstaatlichkeit. Der Versuch, auf diese Weise als rechtens erachtet zu werden, wurde abgebrochen.’ Petrov, “Legitimität, Repression, Kollaps,” 86.

<sup>346</sup> Dina Khapaeva, “Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin’s Politics of Re-Stalinization,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 61-73, 72.

<sup>347</sup> Ilya Kalinin, “Petropoetics,” in *Russian Literature Since 1991*, 120-144, 121.

<sup>348</sup> Cf. Alexander Baunov, “A Tale of Two Statues,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 7, 2016, <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2016-11-07/tale-two-statues>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

without reason, many citizens took it to represent “a thinly veiled tribute to the Vladimir residing within its walls: two bookends of a millennium of Russianness”<sup>349</sup>.

Unlike Yeltsin’s version of Imperial nostalgia, which was mainly saturated with the myth of Russia’s pre-Communist cultural greatness, Putin’s version of remembering Empire was initially focussed on the sacrosanct image of the royal family and their status as defenders of the Orthodox faith.<sup>350</sup> Indeed, Orthodoxy has made a return in the definition of Russian national identity that often interlinks with nostalgia for Empire. In 2000, Nicholas II – the last Russian Tsar – was canonised by the Orthodox Church. In 2007, a school dubbed ‘Orthodox Eton’ was founded in Moscow, aimed at prepping students for the return of the monarchy.<sup>351</sup> Likewise, marches commemorating Nicholas II and other members of the murdered royal family draw thousands of spectators every year; in 2016, a Duma deputy even carried Nicholas II’s portrait on a march of the *Bessmertny polk* – providing a senseless, yet telling example of the way Soviet and Imperial nostalgia for patriarchal rule mix in the official discourse.<sup>352</sup>

Over the years, Putin’s self-stylisation into a new Tsar-like figure has also been adopted by Western and opposition media outlets. The October 2017 edition of *The Economist* featured a cover image of Putin’s head, photoshopped onto an Imperial uniform and running the headline ‘A Tsar is Born’.<sup>353</sup> In 2018, Alexei Navalny’s protest movement against Putin’s fourth inauguration as president used the slogan ‘He is no Tsar to Us’ (*он нам не царь*), which criticised Putin’s authoritarian power grab

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<sup>349</sup> Shaun Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 246. Peter the Great is conspicuously absent from this list, although he still figured in Luzhkov’s building mania of the 1990s.

<sup>350</sup> Putin’s closeness to the Orthodox Church and his apparent openness towards including Orthodoxy into a neo-Imperial Russian identity narrative have been a continuous subject of academic debate in recent decades, cf. John Anderson, “Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church: Asymmetric Symphonia?,” *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no. 1 (2007): 185-201; Alexander Agadjanian, “Tradition, Morality and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity in Putin’s Russia,” *Religion, State & Society* 45, no. 1 (2017): 39-60.

<sup>351</sup> Shaun Walker, “Russia’s Soul is Monarchic,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2017, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/06/russia-revolution-tsarist-school-moscow-nicholas-ii>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>352</sup> Cf. Shaun Walker, “Thousands of Pilgrims Walk to Commemorate Russian Tsar Nicholas II,” *The Guardian*, July 17, 2017, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/17/thousands-of-pilgrims-walk-to-commemorate-russian-tsar-nicholas-ii>> [accessed 17 December 2019]; “Poklonskaia vyshla na aktsiiu ‘Bessmertnii polk’ s ikonoi Nikolaia II,” *Lenta.ru*, May 9, 2016, <<http://lenta.ru/news/2016/05/09/polok/>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>353</sup> “A Tsar is Born,” *The Economist*, October 26, 2017, <<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/10/26/a-tsar-is-born>> [accessed 7 February 2020]

whilst – somewhat idiosyncratically – using the word Tsar as if it really did carry the right to omnipotent almightiness.



Figure 3 *A Tsar is Born*  
(*The Economist*, October 26, 2017.)

Indeed, the memory of Russian Tsars in post-Soviet Russia is increasingly shrouded in an aura of historically inscribed and officially promoted inviolability – the transgression of which can be met with vehement opposition. This was the case in 2017, when a scandal erupted in the run-up to the release of Alexei Uchitel’s film *Matilda* (*Матильда*). Strongly opposed by the conservative and ultra-orthodox camp for its allegedly blasphemous and heretical portrayal of Nicholas II, Uchitel’s film about the last Russian Tsar’s pre-marital affair with Polish-born ballerina Kshesinskaya led to terrorist attacks on cinemas, advertising pull-outs on national TV, a social media campaign under the hashtag #wewillstopmatilda (*#остановимматильду*) and a barrage of threats against Uchitel. A further reason for protest was the choice of a German actor to play Nicholas II, which offended the nationalist sentiments of hardliners such as Duma deputy Poklonskaya – the very one who carried Nicholas II’s portrait on a march commemorating victims of World War II in the year prior.

If we consider that up until perestroika, “the official Soviet attitude to the last Tsar and the immediate pre-revolutionary period had been one of unalloyed hostility, [portraying] Tsar Nicholas II and his Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna, if they were mentioned at all, [...] as parasites and oppressors”<sup>354</sup>, then the observable shift in memory culture is truly tremendous. The scandal surrounding *Matilda* forced people

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<sup>354</sup> Marsh, *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia*, 174.

to engage with the question of whose stance was more nostalgic: that of the filmmakers, who produced an aesthetically spectacular, but clearly romanticised vision of the late Imperial era, or that of the film's critics, who claimed interpretative agency and a right to historical distortion for the sake of preserving a dead dictator's public image and the religious sentiments of Orthodox believers. Who wields the cultural authority to dictate which comfortable lies to remember, and which uncomfortable truths to forget?

### *Imperial Nostalgia in Literature*

Russian film and cinema were not the only cultural sphere that discussed these issues, no matter how hesitantly. Another powerful strand within the neo-Imperial nostalgic discourse was post-2000 Russian literature, which quickly proved that “empire survived 1917 and 1991”<sup>355</sup>. As summarised by Marsh, a specific kind of nostalgic literature best labelled “serious historical fiction written from a Russian nationalist viewpoint [...] began [to emerge] during perestroika”<sup>356</sup>, grew in prominence during the late Yeltsin period, and experienced a veritable popularity boost following the official sanction given to it by the Putin regime.

Unlike the sense of existential insecurity and inadequacy that was engendered by the “emphasis on post-Soviet national humiliation and the tragic dissolution of former frameworks of collective belonging”<sup>357</sup> during the 1990s, the literature of the 2000s was largely dominated by works and authors who espoused a “militant devotion to ‘an empire we have lost’”<sup>358</sup>. The seeds for this trend had clearly been sown in the decade prior; however, with the perceivable lack in opposition from intelligentsia quarters and the added support from above, openly nostalgic voices for Empire were at liberty to freely discredit both the postmodern experiment in literature and the democratic experiment in politics. The work of Aleksandr Dugin is a case in point: apart from turning postmodernism into a weapon against itself, Dugin – who published his first

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<sup>355</sup> Jane Burbank and Mark Von Hagen, “Coming into the Territory: Uncertainty and Empire,” in *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700-1930*, eds. Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007): 1-29, 25. However, the term ‘Soviet Empire’ was considered taboo in the Soviet Union itself, cf. Marsh, “The Concepts of Gender, Citizenship, and Empire,” 194-5.

<sup>356</sup> Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 318.

<sup>357</sup> Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, 3.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

books in the mid-nineties – also used “neo-imperial metaphors of Eurasian geography and territory”<sup>359</sup> to support his rewriting of the Russian national identity narrative.

The success of the neo-Eurasianist movement signalled a public departure from Yeltsin’s pro-Western orientation of the early and mid-nineties. Originally a 1920s movement that emerged in the Russian émigré community, Eurasianism was created in opposition to the doctrines of the Soviet Union and “the repressive Russification of the nineteenth century”<sup>360</sup>. It started to flourish again in the late 1990s, when neo-Eurasianists began to take an interest in Asia by merit of it *not* being the West. Their flirtations with the idea of neo-Imperial grandeur made heavy use of pseudo-scientific racist doctrines and stressed Russia’s kinship with the East; during the 2000s, neo-Eurasianism grew into “the legitimating ultra-nationalist ideology of the new [Putin] regime”<sup>361</sup> and “a Kremlin-sponsored ideology that aims to reconstruct a pseudo-medieval society of orders and lead Russia into the new Middle Ages [...] [it is] instrumental in solidifying popular support for Putinism”<sup>362</sup>.

Some popular novels that fall into the neo-Eurasianist category are Aleksandr Prokhanov’s *Gospodin Geksogen* (2002), the *Etnogenez* project (*Этногенез*, 2009-2012) under the leadership of Konstantin Rykov and Vyacheslav Rybakov and Igor’ Alimov’s *Eurasian Symphony* (*Евразийская симфония*, 2000-2005) – a series of novels written in the ironical detective style. With their strong geopolitical focus, these novels provide easily digestible historical ‘truths’ about Russia’s unique mission in the world while employing “various degrees of fanaticism and seriousness [...] [to] construct cultural continuities in response to social chaos and historical breaks”<sup>363</sup>.

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<sup>359</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 44.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>361</sup> Mervyn F. Bendle, “Putin’s Rasputin: Aleksandr Dugin and Neo-Eurasianism,” *Quadrant* 58, no. 9 (2014): 14-20, 14.

<sup>362</sup> Khapaeva, “Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators,” 69.

<sup>363</sup> Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, 106. Marsh raises the interesting point that most of contemporary neo-Imperial fiction on the Russian market is of male authorship, particularly in the case of the new genre of the imperial novel (e.g. Pavel Krusanov’s *Bite of an Angel* (*Укус ангела*, 1999)). While I do not want to enter the gender debate in this thesis, I think it is worthwhile to point out that Akunin does not conform to this paradigm, further strengthening his position as an author of note in the post-Soviet literary landscape. Clowes provides another case in point for Marsh’s hypothesis when she lists Ulitskaya and other women writers as the authors who attempt to rewrite the history of centre and periphery by trying to give voice to “the disenfranchised, the outsider, as well as the ‘typical’” (Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 139) and create a picture of modern Russia that incorporates all these groups without any inherent conflict.

Many followers of the school of Neo-Eurasianism also belong to the literary group of the Petersburg fundamentalists, which, in 2001, penned a letter to Putin that stated that “(geo)political action and imperial expansion were the only possible compensation for Russia’s humiliating and paralyzing postimperial status”<sup>364</sup> – an aggressive, revisionist stance that went beyond the identification with the royal family and simultaneously carried the kind of ambiguity characteristic of *stiob*. Boris Noordenbos coined the term ‘imperial *stiob*’ for this phenomenon, calling it an attitude that brings “conformism and consensus to their limits, by creating sweeping claims about collective missions and strong leadership, and by noisily echoing a new superpower rhetoric expressed in Russian politics since Putin first took office as president”<sup>365</sup>.

As lies in the nature of *stiob*, it remains unclear to what extent the work of the Petersburg fundamentalists ought to be considered a parody or an outright expression of support for irredentist geopolitical action. However, *stiob*’s reappearance in post-Soviet Russia’s cultural sphere fittingly illustrates the long hangover of Soviet modes of thought, along with the new-old forms of reactionary conservatism in art that it can engender.

### *Geopolitical vs Cultural Nostalgia*

A strong geopolitical focus remained a defining characteristic of Imperial nostalgia in post-Soviet Russia up until 2014. By reactivating the memory of Empire and its vast borders – borders that had remained largely the same throughout the Soviet period – supporters of the neo-Imperial doctrine exploited the fact that Russia’s “extensive territory was a source of state pride and self-definition”<sup>366</sup>. Putin’s 2005 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, in which he described the break-up of the Soviet Union as the “крупнейшей геополитической катастрофой века [...] настоящей драмой [...] Эпидемия распада [...] перекинулась на саму Россию”<sup>367</sup>, had not only explicitly framed the loss of territory as a loss of strength and power, but had also superimposed the narrative of a lasting post-Soviet trauma

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid, 131.

<sup>366</sup> Burbank and von Hagen, “Coming into the Territory,” 16.

<sup>367</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” *Kremlin.ru*, April 25, 2005, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

back onto the Russian national consciousness. Kalinin speaks of an “exploitation of trauma”<sup>368</sup> in this context – a rhetorical exploitation which ultimately led to a very real act of geopolitical aggression.

The annexation of Crimea notably heightened the neo-Imperial elements in Putin’s historical narrative, but it also initiated a change in trajectory for the Kremlin’s nostalgia manipulation. Most notably, the “choice to make war rather than culture the symbol of national identity”<sup>369</sup> was partially reversed. Instead, a ‘Russkiy Mir’ world-view – a term that describes the invented concept of a spiritually and culturally linked ‘Russian World’ of historical prominence – began to be propagated, which helped legitimise Russia’s geopolitical transgressions by promoting a defensive patriotism under the unifying strength of Russian literature and culture. As a result, the aura of inviolability previously attached to Russian leaders of state was expanded to include Russia’s cultural as well as its political heritage.

Ilya Kalinin has provided one of the most astute analyses of the Putin regime’s belated attempts to create a ‘cultural citizenship’ from above. Kalinin calls the ideological construction of the ‘Russkiy Mir’ the “сновидение постимперского субъекта, грезящего об утраченном”<sup>370</sup> and describes how the current regime portrays past truths as if they dictated the reinstatement of these lost status quos in the present – regardless of changed geopolitical realities or legal obstacles: “причастность к почве становится значимее обладания территорией: первую освящает традиция, вторая закреплена лишь международным правом”<sup>371</sup>. Thus, the Putin regime’s use of nostalgia’s characteristic “aura of ‘inevitability’”<sup>372</sup> helps to inscribe the myth of Empire with the historical authority to overrule the present. It also imbues the Imperial period with even greater ideological worth for the Kremlin-guided nostalgia discourse than the Soviet past.

Through a skilful manipulation and streamlining of the haphazard nostalgic landscape of the 1990s, the Putin regime has officially returned history to the people

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<sup>368</sup> Kalinin, “Prazdnik identichnosti,” 256.

<sup>369</sup> Kопosov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars*, 253.

<sup>370</sup> Kalinin, “Prazdnik identichnosti,” 254.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid*, 252.

<sup>372</sup> Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, “The Politics of Nostalgia: A Case for Comparative Analysis of Post-Socialist Practices,” *Ab Imperio* 2004, no. 2 (2004): 487-519, 489-90.

– but it has done so in an extremely limited offer of nostalgia-on-demand that feeds solely off bite-sized historical myths. In Angela Stent’s words,

[by] the end of his first term as president, Putin had answered the question of Russia’s national idea by restoring both Tsarist and Soviet-era symbols of Russian identity [...] By the end of his second term, this blend of Tsarist and Soviet symbols had answered the question of Russia’s search for a ‘usable past’ that could unite the nation [...] by the political exploitation of nostalgia.<sup>373</sup>

The memory and (re-)enactment of war as a means of national self-assertion, the concomitant belief that Russia and the West are intrinsic Others, and the reactivation of personality cults, along with the belief that a strong political leader will act as saviour and repairman to a battered national pride, all feature as central components for Putin’s official narrative of historical legitimisation.

The sacrosanct positioning of historical memory as an integral part of culture under the current regime has also made it exempt from re-tellings, analyses, or, indeed, academic discussions. In comparison to the cultural productions that dealt with issues of nostalgia in the 1990s, a great loss in versatility and critical-minded playfulness is observable. Some Russian writers have challenged the increasingly politicised use of nostalgia in official culture, but their number is shrinking. Tatiana Tolstaya, for instance, has fallen noticeably silent on her 1990s stance of anti-nostalgia. Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin, whose novels *Empire V (Амнуп V)* and *Day of the Oprichnik (День опричника)* made quasi-prophetic predictions about the return of mediaeval-esque Empires in 2006, have likewise turned away from historical subject matters, embracing dystopian science fiction projects instead.

A notable exception to this rule is Russian popular and youth culture, which appears to be the main frontline that openly engages with the political doctrines set by the state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – be it via hip hop, the world of YouTube vlogs or individual picket lines as part of a new protest culture.<sup>374</sup> More often than not,

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<sup>373</sup> Angela E. Stent, “Restoration and Revolution in Putin’s Foreign Policy,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 6 (2008): 1089-1106, 1091.

<sup>374</sup> Cf. Leonid Bershidsky, “Russian Rappers Give Up on Putin,” *Bloomberg.com*, December 14, 2018, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-12-14/russian-rappers-give-up-on-putin>> [accessed 7 February 2020]; “Siloviki Ob”edinilis’ Protiv Nas | Massovye Aresty Posle 27 Iiulia,” video file, 13:05, YouTube, posted by Komanda Zhukova, August 1, 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNxYQ1d7KHA>> [accessed 7 February 2020] and “vDud’,” YouTube channel, started January 2, 2014, <[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMCgOm8GZkHp8zJ6l7\\_hIuA/](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMCgOm8GZkHp8zJ6l7_hIuA/)> [accessed 7 February 2020].

however, these instances of counterculture address present-day issues like corruption, censorship and human rights violations, not the task of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.<sup>375</sup>

However, there is also the case of Boris Akunin. In 2005, Marina Koreneva stated that the Fandorin project is “good enough for readers who want to receive a nostalgic positive impression of the state: back then, in the past, good did have a fighting chance of triumphing over evil”<sup>376</sup>. Yet if we take a closer look at Akunin’s detective novels, the very opposite appears to be the case: written at the junction of not just two millennia, but also of two political reigns in Russia, Boris Akunin’s *Fandorin* project offers a critical and at times scathing testimony to the socio-political moods, issues, and challenges that shaped not only Russia’s past, but whose nostalgic revival continues to stymie post-Soviet Russia’s future.

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<sup>375</sup> At the same time, this shift away from the past could also indicate the end of the nostalgic era in Russia, initiated by the first generation not to be burdened by memories of the Soviet experience. Whether such an estrangement from the nationwide nostalgia discourse is truly underway remains to be seen, however.

<sup>376</sup> Marina Koreneva, “Russian Detective Fiction,” in *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, eds. Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (Munich: Sagner, 2005): 57-101, 97.

### 3. The Fandorin Project: Against a Canonisation of the Past

Ну и какое же будущее ожидает Россию в XX веке? [...] - Самое великое! Нужно только [...] образовывать и постепенно воспитывать в [обществе] чувство самоуважения и достоинства. Это самое главное! Если этого не сделать, то Россию ожидают самые чудовищные испытания...<sup>377</sup>

In 1998, Rosalind Marsh and Stephen Lovell issued a prediction for the post-Soviet book market that foresaw a high probability “that the Russian best-seller, when it arrives, will neglect the ‘accursed questions’ of Russian intellectual history while in some way exuding confidence in what tomorrow will bring”<sup>378</sup>. Only a few months later, the Russian best-seller did arrive – but it turned out to be neither anti-intellectual nor overly optimistic about Russia’s future. Instead, Akunin became the only author who approached Imperial nostalgia from the postmodern point of view of historiographic metafiction – and who created a continuous body of work that chronicled the post-Soviet nostalgia discourse from the late-1990s up to the Crimean crisis and beyond. As readers are taken on a journey covering the last four decades of the Russian Empire, they are provided with a chance to compare their own lived experience with that of another, similarly portentous transitional period in Russian history.

The results of my nostalgia chapter dictate the focus on a set number of reference points for my subsequent analysis of three Fandorin novels. If we assume the Fandorin project to be an anti-nostalgic re-writing of the post-Soviet discourse on Empire, then the glorification of the Romanov family, the authority of autocratic leadership, the image of Empire as a stable and unified governing unit, and Empire’s desirability as a geopolitical and cultural model for Russia’s future all ought to feature in this discussion. Similarly, myths about Russia’s national exceptionalism and the question of its self-positioning between East and West must be addressed, as they feature heavily in both the neo-Imperial and the neo-Eurasianist discourse about Empire.

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<sup>377</sup> Boris Akunin, *Statskii Sovetnik* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2014), 29. All further quotations will be referring to this edition, abbreviated as (SS).

<sup>378</sup> Rosalind Marsh and Stephen Lovell, “Culture and Crisis: The Intelligentsia and Literature after 1953,” in *Russian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, eds. David Shepherd and Catriona Kelly (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998): 56-87, 82.

The topic of the periphery, both in a literal and in a figurative sense, will also need to play an important role in my analysis. As stated by Clowes, the periphery “has become the crucial problem for post-Soviet identity”<sup>379</sup> as well as a pivotal concept in post-Soviet discussions about Empire – not least because it poses a conceptual anomaly. Unlike Western Empires, Russia never possessed any overseas colonies; as a result, “the periphery could be as close as a rural province in European Russia or as far as the farflung borderlands of the empire”<sup>380</sup>. The paradoxical desire to return Russia’s dominion of influence to the dimensions of the original Imperial space is rooted in the historical conviction that “there is no Russian identity without empire [...] and no personhood outside of the ruler”<sup>381</sup>.

In my thesis, I conform to the identity-forming power of the periphery in Russian consciousness by treating it as a geopolitical and a cultural concept. More important than the geographical fluidity of invisible peripheral borders is the psychological effect that this non-fixability creates: by feeding into a (literal and proverbial) state of anxiety and fear, the problem of the ubiquitous periphery creates the desire to control the dangers that seemingly lurk within. As my selection of novels will show, Akunin developed the topic of a homegrown cultural peripherality in his treatment of Russia’s historical process of self-colonisation, writing anxiety into the very make-up of Russian society itself.

This takes me back to Akunin’s parallel narrative of writing *Nation*. Whereas the first part of my subsequent analysis chapters will focus on Akunin’s uncovering of the internal fault lines of Empire, the second part will outline the ways in which Akunin engages with the cultural and intelligentsia heritage of the Imperial era. While addressing Akunin’s portrayal of alternative voices for identification among Russian classical literature and the way he questions the (un)suitability of the hero paradigms provided therein, I will also delve into Akunin’s discussion of the post-Soviet intelligentsia’s failure to provide a counternarrative to Empire’s continued glorification in present-day Russia. Traditionally tasked with closing the “profound gap between the sanitized nostalgic reproductions and the actual traumatic history”<sup>382</sup>,

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<sup>379</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 4.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>382</sup> Sergei Oushakine, “‘We’re Nostalgic but We’re Not Crazy’: Retrofitting the Past in Russia,” *Russian Review* 66, no. 3 (2007): 451-82, 452.

the post-Soviet intelligentsia instead chose to engage in a nostalgia crisis of its own – thus creating an act of self-silencing so egregious that it prompted Akunin to place an intelligentsia detective hero of his own invention in their midst.

Erast Petrovich Fandorin will form one of the main objects of discovery in the ‘Writing Nation’ chapters. Described as aloof, collected, and a person of little outward emotional range – all of which fits the bill of the detached, gentlemanly amateur whose blueprint was created by Conan Doyle – Fandorin both is and is not a recognisably Russian protagonist. Where Holmes carries traces that indelibly mark him as English and Poirot celebrates his Belgian roots, Fandorin embodies a transcultural set of values, tastes, and principles that creates an accurate reflection of 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia life: “citizenship in the Russian ‘republic of letters’ presupposed a cosmopolitan upbringing, the sense that one’s roots were as much in Paris, London or Göttingen [...] as they were in Moscow or St Petersburg. To be fully Russian, one had to be a citizen of the world”<sup>383</sup>. Yet at the same time, Fandorin has also been described as a literary novelty because he is “a prototypical *intelligent* [...] depicted as serving the state (and not trying to undermine or destroy it)”<sup>384</sup>. Unlike his Western counterparts, Fandorin does *not* act in an amateur capacity, but was conceived as a state servant from the start – thus following in the footsteps of Russian detective heroes from 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, but certainly not in the footsteps of 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia members.

The resulting paradoxical character portrait was first problematised by Leon Aron in 2004. Linking his analysis to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century journal *Vekhi* – an intelligentsia mouthpiece that advocated individual self-improvement over a passive waiting for state solutions to Russia’s problems – Aron claimed that Fandorin’s behaviour was much closer to *Vekhi* in spirit than to the actual 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia heritage, calling “Fandorin’s credo [...] the opposite of the intelligentsia’s [...] Chkhartishvili seems to have constructed his hero as a living antithesis to every negative stereotype of the Russian *intelligent*”<sup>385</sup>. This reading would make Fandorin a forerunner of the

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<sup>383</sup> Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*, 290. Akunin makes Sherlock and Fandorin meet in the currently untranslated short story *The Tower Prisoner, or The Short, but Illustrious Path of Three Wise Men* (*Узница башни, или Краткий, но прекрасный путь трех мудрых*, 2006), in which the two super-sleuths collaborate on a case – aiming to catch none other than Arsène Lupin.

<sup>384</sup> Dobrenko and Lipovetsky, “The Burden of Freedom,” 5.

<sup>385</sup> Aron, “A Champion for the Bourgeoisie,” 153-4.

early 20<sup>th</sup>-century “modernist self-consciousness”<sup>386</sup> that was beginning to take root amid the intelligentsia, and whose further development was disrupted by the onset of the revolution.

The subsequent development of this heritage was illustrated by Zubok, who arrived at a similar conclusion to Aron’s at the end of his book on Russia’s modern-day intelligentsia. According to Zubok, the newly minted post-Soviet intelligentsia had completed “‘a voyage from the coast of Utopia’ into the turbulent open sea of individual self-discovery”<sup>387</sup>. In Zubok’s reading, this seems to spell out an end to all social and political activism on the part of the intelligentsia – a verdict that, paradoxically, goes hand in hand with the age-old reproach about the intelligentsia’s verbose ineffectiveness. I disagree with this reading, however. Why should a heightened awareness of individual responsibility not also lead to a revival of socio-politically engaged intellectualism?

Akunin’s creation of Fandorin appears to follow a similar thought experiment: combining self-determinacy with state service, Fandorin occupies an in-between place in post-Soviet Russia’s intelligentsia debate that embodies both late Imperial intelligentsia hesitancy and perestroika-era intellectual activism. Deviating markedly from the notoriously charming, yet arrogant Western prototypes of his kind, Fandorin’s main merit and strength lie not in his unique skills, unparalleled cleverness or quirky behaviour – although he does possess all of those traits, too – but in his stalwart moral integrity.<sup>388</sup> As a result, Fandorin’s “moral qualities capture the spirit of two ages that are outwardly different, but inwardly remarkably alike”<sup>389</sup>.

By thus highlighting the historical dimensions to Russia’s post-Soviet intelligentsia problem, the character of Fandorin also acts as a ‘hero of two times’:

[b]y understanding the needs of his readers and the Zeitgeist of the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, Akunin limned a hero whose qualities met the requirements of those times. Indeed, his fictional protagonist could compete with the likes of folk heroes (*bogatyri*), historical figures, literary protagonists, comic book figures, and child heroes for the title of ‘hero of our time’.<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>387</sup> Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 361.

<sup>388</sup> In fact, most of Fandorin’s recognisable character traits and slightly unusual pastimes are connected to his time in Japan. He practises calligraphy and meditation, acquired the habit of taking ice baths, and moved from doing English gymnastics to Japanese training techniques. In terms of his appearance, Fandorin demonstrates a penchant for modern, dandy-like clothing and is repeatedly described as attractive by characters of both genders – a fact that he is unabashedly conscious of.

<sup>389</sup> Mulcahy and Goscilo, *A Hero of Two Times*, 200.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid, 203.

Given the complex political and nostalgic developments that followed the initial inception of the Fandorin figure in Russia, a careful reading of this character's evolution over the course of the Fandorin project is in order. My 'writing Nation' chapters will focus on Akunin's search for old intelligentsia offers of identification in classical Russian source texts, along with the ways in which Fandorin embellishes their legacy into a new offer of civic citizenship. What kind of cultural authority does Akunin attribute to the Imperial era, and which weaknesses in post-Soviet Russia's cultural nostalgia for Empire does he reveal? More importantly, how did Akunin's alternative intelligentsia hero paradigm fare against the backdrop of increasing nostalgic and neo-Imperial tendencies in Russian politics and culture – and where did it lead him in the overall debate about the death of the intelligentsia?

### 3.1. *The Death of Achilles (1998)*

Во что бы он превратился, получив  
возможность вершить судьбами  
миллионов? Страшно подумать.<sup>391</sup>

*The Death of Achilles* is the fourth novel in the Fandorin series and was among those published in 1998, the year when Akunin first entered the literary stage. The novel has been described as “the most straightforward, even conventional, of Fandorin's adventures”<sup>392</sup> – yet there is little that is conventional about it. *The Death of Achilles*'s events are set during 1882, the year of Fandorin's return to Russia after a six-year diplomatic absence. Upon his arrival in Moscow, Fandorin discovers that his old friend General Sobolev – whom he had met during the Russo-Turkish War, in events described in the novel *The Turkish Gambit* (*Турецкий гамбит*, 1998) – resides at the same hotel as him. When Fandorin asks to be shown to the General, his request is refused; a day later, news of Sobolev's death is broadcast. Fandorin suspects foul play and starts to investigate, uncovering a private scandal that quickly grows into an

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<sup>391</sup> Boris Akunin, *Smert' Akhillesa* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2002), 179. All further quotations will be referring to this edition, abbreviated as (SMA).

<sup>392</sup> “The Death of Achilles,” *Kirkus Review*, May 20, 2010, <<http://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/boris-akunin/the-death-of-achilles/>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

international conspiracy involving both international secret agents and the Russian government.

The novel's subtitle, 'a hired killer detective novel' (*детектив о наемном убийце*), hints at *The Death of Achilles*'s underlying murder mystery: the novel ends with the revelation that Sobolev was murdered by Achimas, a contract killer who worked at the behest of the Russian government. This choice of criminal plot signals a change in the *Fandorin* series, as it not only introduces a larger range of historically identifiable figures than in any of the previous novels, but also sets an unambiguously political stage – making *The Death of Achilles* the first explicitly political novel in the Fandorin project and a suitable case study for Akunin's interrogation of Empire and Nation in response to the post-Soviet nostalgia crisis.

The first part of my analysis will deal with Akunin's presentation of Empire in *The Death of Achilles*. Akunin's use of the detective genre allows him to posit Fandorin in the traditional role of the detective-flâneur, merging a spatial exploration of Moscow with a discovery of its historical characters and cultural landmarks. The central nostalgic issue Akunin investigates in *The Death of Achilles* is that of Moscow's symbolic function as Imperial heartland and microcosm, which places the city within a colonial paradigm while also addressing Russia's conflicting position between East and West. Unlike the geographical capital Saint Petersburg – a carbon copy of the ideal European city, built on the very edge of Empire – Moscow is commonly perceived as Russia's ancestral seat of tradition and governance. Yet scholars such as Clowes argue that the city “stands out because of its disconnectedness from its peripheries[, resembling] the utopian and dystopian traditions of the island or insular city”<sup>393</sup>. In post-Soviet literature, this theme has been explored in works as diverse as Viktor Pelevin's *Buddha's Little Finger* (*Чанаев и нымтома*, 1996), Tatiana Tolstaya's *Slynx* (*Кысь*, 2000), and Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* (*Метро 2033*, 2002). Where does Akunin position Moscow along the spectrum of heartland and periphery, and how does he use the detective genre to uncover and dismantle mythologised categories of Imperial geography in the post-Soviet neo-Imperial discourse?

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<sup>393</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 21.

The second part of this chapter will then address Fandorin's own peripherality as a character. I will read Fandorin's status as a returnee against the traditionally liminal position of literary detectives, taking into account the added geographical and psychological othering present in *The Death of Achilles*. Akunin uses Fandorin's role as a semi-outsider to engage in a rediscovery of Russian literature's traditional hero narratives, most notably the cult surrounding Pushkin – a cult that was started in the Soviet period and furthered by Yeltsin and Luzhkov, only to be fully instrumentalised under the Putin regime. How does Akunin evaluate the nation-building potential inherent in this and other hero narratives in *The Death of Achilles*, and to what extent does he challenge their officially codified forms? A juxtaposition of Fandorin and Achimas, his antagonist, will reveal the two characters' relation to 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia thought and highlight their potential to fulfil a new national hero role in Russia – amid a discussion of fate and established literary blueprints of individual agency, as well as the true meaning behind *The Death of Achilles*'s title.

### 3.1.1. *Re-Writing Empire: (M)Other Moscow*

From the very start of *The Death of Achilles*, Akunin approaches the conceptual parallel between the late Imperial and the post-Soviet timelines through the fixed spatial point of Moscow. The city appears as the metonymic heartland of Empire, of which readers receive their first glimpse through the eyes of Fandorin. Akunin's protagonist is nothing short of enthusiastic about his return to Russia: “Оглядев скучные станционные строения, молодой человек с не вполне понятным волнением вдохнул прокопченный вокзальный воздух и прошептал: ‘Господи боже, шесть лет’” (SMA 4). This scene is charged with symbolic meaning: as Fandorin is said to have arrived on the Saint Petersburg train, he would have been traversing the country for at least a day prior to his arrival in Moscow. Yet his moment of homecoming is deferred until Fandorin's actual arrival in the heartland of Empire – suggesting that only Moscow, not Saint Petersburg, carries the potential to evoke the image of Mother Russia for the Imperial citizen.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> At the time of the novel's events, the most logical way for Fandorin to return to Russia from Japan would have been via steamship. Construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway only began in 1891.

The search for a historically viable and emotionally charged version of Moscow permeates *The Death of Achilles*. Akunin employs generous amounts of postmodern playfulness in his construction of 1882 Moscow, imbuing the city with several easily identifiable landmarks and characters of post-Soviet consequence. One of the latter is Prince Dolgorukoi, the Governor General of Moscow. In the Russian system of administration, Governor Generals were “supreme commanders of their territories when the monarch was absent [...] they also controlled the police [...] had the power to impose emergency measures [...] and to report directly to the emperor”<sup>395</sup>. Governor Generals also considered themselves “omnipotent rulers [*gosudari*] of their territories”<sup>396</sup>, which in effect turned them into miniature versions of local Tsars. Rather fittingly, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their “main tasks [...] were limited to combating enemies of the autocracy”<sup>397</sup>. The post was abolished under the Communist regime, but reinstated, albeit under a different name, under the Yeltsin government, making Akunin’s depiction of the role an exploration of both: authoritarian Imperialism and post-Soviet nostalgia for Empire.

The presence of several historical and contemporary doubles for Prince Dolgorukoi heightens this impression of an exploration of parallel timelines. As previously pointed out by Baraban, Akunin’s fictional Dolgorukoi can be linked to three different historical prototypes: “the real historical figure, Prince Vladimir Andreevich Dolgorukov (1810-1891), who was the Governor General of Moscow from 1864 until 1891 [and] a descendant of the old noble family of princes Dolgorukoi [...] the current mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov, and Prince Yury Dolgoruky”<sup>398</sup>. For a study of post-Soviet nostalgia, the link to Luzhkov, Moscow’s mayor from 1992 to 2010, is the most evocative.<sup>399</sup> Indeed, *The Death of Achilles* introduces Dolgorukoi as “всемогущий хозяин матушки-Москвы” (SMA 9) and the person who

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<sup>395</sup> A. G. Trifonov and B. V. Mezhev, “The Governor-Generalship in the Russian System of Territorial Administration: An Exercise in Historical Reminiscing,” *Russian Politics & Law* 39, no. 4 (2001): 76-88, 80.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>398</sup> Baraban, “A Country Resembling Russia,” 404.

<sup>399</sup> Unconnected to a reading of Akunin, Kalinin delineated the nostalgic modernisation of Russian history in the service of a political re-imagining of Empire, mentioning that “in the framework of such a narrative, there is no clear-cut difference between Stolypin and Stalin (efficient managers), Nikolai II and Solzhenitsyn (national martyrs) [...] or, finally, Yury Dolgoruky and Yury Luzhkov (founders of Moscow),” Kalinin, “Nostalgic Modernization,” 158.

“[п]олтора десятка лет правил [...] мягко, но хватко, за что недруги называли его Юрием Долгоруким и Володей Большое Гнездо, а доброжелателем Владимиром Красно Солнышко” (SMA 10).<sup>400</sup> Both Dolgorukoi’s manner of speech and his condescendingly paternal, yet in times of crisis demanding attitude to his subordinates play on Luzhkov’s own public image; lastly, both Luzhkov and Akunin’s Dolgorukoi possess a range of nicknames, which touch in similar ways upon their place in Russia’s greater historical hero narrative:

Luzhkov has been called not only the ‘mayor in a cap’ but also the ‘Boss’ [...], ‘Iurii Dolgorukii’ [...] and the ‘Moscow bear.’ [...] ill-wishers call him the ‘godfather,’ ‘Papa Doc,’ even ‘Il Duce.’ But [...] most Muscovites who vote for him as mayor consider him [...] one of the epic heroes that our country invariably produces in times of trial and trouble.<sup>401</sup>

However, Akunin follows a slightly more complex juxtaposition than this, avoiding a simplified dichotomy of supposedly ‘positive’ vs. ‘negative’ influences from Russian history for a more variegated portrayal. Thus, Akunin’s Dolgorukoi receives the nickname of Yuri Dolgoruki, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century founder of the City of Moscow, from his adversaries – not his supporters. The name of Dolgoruki’s son, Volodya Bolzhoe Gnezdo – who was known for his success in expanding the reach and power of Kievan Rus’ – is likewise given to the Governor General by his critics. From a historian’s perspective, this approach is not unfounded: after Bolzhoe Gnezdo’s death, his progeny descended into prolonged years of familial strife that quickly undermined the strength of the budding Russian state and served as a case study for the dangers of nepotism. However, these aspects are not commonly included in official portrayals of Russian history, and therefore prompt readers to find explanations for their seemingly paradoxical attribution to Dolgorukoi by themselves.

In a similar vein, Akunin also problematises the incomplete and incorrect remembering of Vladimir the Great, who was the ruler of Kievan Rus’ from 980 to 1015.<sup>402</sup> Although Dolgorukoi is put in connection with this national figure in Russian history by his well-wishers – indicating an open appraisal of Vladimir’s active

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<sup>400</sup> These nicknames were not made part of the English translation of the novel, which suggests a bias towards the Western reader as unable to make the necessary connections to Russian history.

<sup>401</sup> Roy Medvedev, “The Yuri Luzhkov Phenomenon,” *Russian Politics & Law* 42, no. 5 (2004): 50-63, 63.

<sup>402</sup> The fact that the name ‘Vladimir Krasno Solnyshko’ is typically reserved for Russian *bylini* or epic poems adds an extra layer of mythical heroism to its use. This is also the same Vladimir whose statue was erected in front of the Kremlin in 2016.

diplomatic ties with other countries such as the Byzantine Empire – Akunin omits this part of his reign, and chooses to subvert one of its better-known aspects instead: Vladimir’s adoption of Christianity on behalf of the entire Rus’. In Dolgorukoi’s first appearance, he laments:

[...] по пятницам [...] у меня заведено разные секретно-деликатные дела обсуждать. Сейчас вот намечено тонкого вопроса коснуться – где достать денег на завершение росписи Храма. Святое дело, крест мой многолетний. [...] Будем думать, как с московских толстоумов на богоугодное дело миллион вытрясти. (SMA 11)

For any reader vaguely familiar with Russian news during the 1990s, the cathedral referenced here could be none other than Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Even the time frames match: while the novel’s events take place in 1882, shortly before the original building project was finished, Akunin’s book was published in 1998 – just months before Luzhkov finished his own megalomaniacal (re-)building project.

#### *Mythical Past and Modern Illusions*

The reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was Luzhkov’s most ambitious and, potentially, most controversial nostalgic building project, and it sparked a range of different reactions across the Russian public. Akunin incorporates several of these commentaries into his portrayal of the Cathedral’s original erection, such as when he references the enormous costs of (re-)building the Cathedral (now estimated at 300 million dollars). In the novel, the financing talks are said to be part of Dolgorukoy’s weekly slot for secret affairs – making it not so much a public endeavour as a private vanity project. Such a reading calls to mind Andrew Gentes’s verdict that “[h]ow much the city and federal governments have actually spent on construction is a closely guarded secret, though it appears significant”<sup>403</sup>. Moreover, discussions about alternate, more useful ways of spending the city’s money not only took place during the 1990s, but are also echoed by Moscow’s chief of police in *The Death of Achilles*: “А пресловутый Храм! Ведь все соки из города высосал. Зачем, спрашивается? Сколько приютов да больниц на этикие деньжищи можно бы построить! Нет, наш Хеопс новоявленный желает непременно пирамиду после себя оставить” (SMA 76).

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<sup>403</sup> Andrew Gentes, “The Life, Death and Resurrection of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Moscow,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 46 (1998): 63-95, 87.

Rather than profess a need for grandiose spiritual salvation, the characters in Akunin's novel consider religion and state welfare as two separate spheres, counteracting the image of an overarching Orthodox mind-set in the Imperial era as well as the idea of an unbroken unity between state, Church and nation – or the appeal of leaders turning themselves into cult figures. The fact that such an idea was an integral part in the building of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is attested by Kathleen Smith, who states that Alexander I “meant the cathedral to be ‘a visible manifestation of the credo of ‘Official Nationality’, (that is) ‘Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality’ – thereby linking the notion of one god and one emperor with the idea of the distinctiveness of the Russian people”<sup>404</sup>. In transplanting this credo onto a post-Soviet context, Akunin not only alludes to Russia's nationwide search for a national identity, but also provides a remarkably accurate foreshadowing of its subsequent manipulation under the Putin regime.

Akunin also works to dismantle claims about the Cathedral's inherent national identity potential, repeatedly framing its construction in terms of corruption and conspiracy. One of the final plot twists in *The Death of Achilles* is that the money used for the completion of the Cathedral is donated by Fandorin himself, who, in turn, retrieved it from the assassin that was hired to kill Sobolev:

- [...] Ишь, какой портфельчик-то у вас. Хорошая вещь. Поди, иностранной работы?
- Портфель не мой [...] Собираюсь в городскую Думу переслать. Крупное пожертвование от анонимного дарителя, на завершение устройства Храма.
- И сильно крупное? – внимательно взглянул на молодого человека камердинер.
- Почти миллион рублей. (SMA 365)

The scathingly bitter irony inherent in this situation stems from the circumstance that the killer was in the employ of a Government official, making it not only blood money, but a symbolic investment into the strengthening of authoritarian and Moscow city rule. This, too, bears a contemporary parallel: according to Smith, “[d]espite the current prevailing myth that the cathedral was raised on the basis of small contributions from ordinary Russians, the state provided by far the major part of the funding”<sup>405</sup>. As a result, the only tradition that the new-old Cathedral manages to uphold is that of a

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<sup>404</sup> Kathleen E. Smith, “An Old Cathedral for a New Russia: The Symbolic Politics of the Reconstituted Church of Christ the Saviour,” *Religion, State and Society* 25, no. 2 (1997): 163-75, 164.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

government reinforcing hollowed-out myth-making processes about its own past as an Empire.

The latter impression is heightened in the context of a discussion about the essential lack of authenticity surrounding the Cathedral building project. Instead of following original building plans, Luzhkov's reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour used exclusively modern materials such as steel and bronze, foregoing even the use of several surviving stone busts from the original.<sup>406</sup> This reconstruction method not only raised justified warnings by architects about the future of Russia's restoration culture, but also revealed the fundamental hollowness of official attempts at rebuilding Russia's past. What is being recreated and chosen as part of the official narrative about the Imperial period are external glamour and richness, which lack in historical weight and serve as cheap – albeit convincing – copies instead.

For present-day critics, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour is a culturally empty replica that “demonstrates the futility of trying to establish links with the imperial past”<sup>407</sup>, mirroring “the new cultural landscape of Russia [...] as an indecipherable and sometimes impenetrable maze”<sup>408</sup>. Akunin takes this criticism a step further by questioning not just the original Cathedral's claim to authenticity, but also its subsequent benefit to the neo-Imperial discourse, thus ridding both of their elevated statuses and turning the Cathedral's supposedly glorious reconstruction into twice the farce.

Akunin's repeated references to Luzhkov's personality cult also play an important role in this depiction. As pointed out by Baraban,

[the] ironic attitude of Akunin's narrator to Dolgorukov's megalomania is a projection of Russians' irony about Luzhkov's megalomania, which, in turn, is a manifestation of the neo-imperial attitude in Russia, the desire to reinstate Russia's greatness through pursuing grandiose projects such as the erection of the WWII memorial on Poklonnaia Hill, the celebration of the 850th anniversary of Moscow, and Pushkin's bicentennial in 1999.<sup>409</sup>

In this comment, Baraban constructs two clearly separate fronts: the desire for a nostalgic reconstruction of a neo-Imperial heritage is limited to Luzhkov and the

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<sup>406</sup> Cf. Clementine Cecil, “‘We Shall Soon Have the Newest Ancient Heritage in the World’: The Rise of the Sham Replica under Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and Its Implications for Russia's Architectural Heritage,” *The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2011): 68-102, 81-2.

<sup>407</sup> Gentes, “The Life, Death and Resurrection of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour,” 89.

<sup>408</sup> Barker, “Rereading Russia,” 4.

<sup>409</sup> Baraban, “A Country Resembling Russia,” 404.

political strata of post-Soviet Russian society, whereas a predominantly ironical attitude towards these projects is attributed to the Russian general public. Indeed, public opinions about the Cathedral were mixed, despite “initial efforts [by] preservationists and believers”<sup>410</sup> to support the project. As early as 1995, the Cathedral was called both “an expression of the autocratic vertical power structure in Russia, in which personality and power count for more than the law”<sup>411</sup> and a building that “evokes the ugly, autocratic, face of Imperial Russia”<sup>412</sup>. Chrystia Freeland called Luzhkov the “country’s first mainstream [politician] to flirt with Russian nationalism”<sup>413</sup>. The various voices in Akunin’s novel that criticise the Governor General’s grandiose construction projects thus become an echo of the public voice of discontent of the 1990s, which also expressed scepticism about personality cults and the perceivable shift in public opinion towards the far right. Akunin extends the reach of these sceptical voices in his novel by putting them into the mouths of members of the police apparatus and even the Governor General’s advisor, which creates a true social network of critically-minded feedback.

As Fandorin’s investigation into Sobolev’s death leads him to rediscover Moscow as part of his detective journey, he also comes across yet another symbolically charged architectural landmark of Empire: the Swedish Gates,

с деревянным навесом, с резными столбами. Исконно русские, допетровской конструкции, а зовутся почему-то ‘свейскими’. Видно, в незапамятные времена научились москвитяне этой плотницкой премудрости у какого-нибудь шведского купца. (SMA 354)

The oxymoron in this statement could not be more obvious, despite the fact that Akunin changed the name of the original structure from *Spasskie*, or Saviour, to *Sveiskie vorota*, or Swedish Gates. The apparent naivety with which Fandorin describes the gates’ history evokes an ironical distance on part of both the narrator and the reader – not least because the gates’ re-naming hints at Russia’s controversial Norman theory, which outlines the role that Scandinavian rulers played in resurrecting the faltering Rus’ in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Ever since its first formulation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Norman theory has sparked controversy as to Russia’s national origins.

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<sup>410</sup> Gentes, “The Life, Death and Resurrection of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour,” 64.

<sup>411</sup> Cecil, “We Shall Soon Have the Newest Ancient Heritage in the World,” 70.

<sup>412</sup> Chrystia Freeland, “Moscow Puts Its Faith in a Capital Project,” *The Financial Times*, August 24, 1995.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

Akunin's invention of an architectural structure that links the word Swedish to the concept of Saviour serves as both a historical reminder and a terminological question mark in the very heart of Moscow's claim to authenticity. Akunin neither mentions the Norman theory by name nor does he explicitly refer to it, but he nonetheless challenges the image of a distinctly Russian Imperial past – along with the portrayal of Peter the Great's reign as a clear demarcation line for the onset of European influences in Russian culture. Fandorin's thoughts not only point out that Europe played an integral part in Russia's development long before Peter the Great took power, but they also reveal the historical palimpsest that is inherent to all so-called national memoryscapes. Rather than appear as a seat of ur-Russian values, Moscow becomes a core representation of the cultural influence of the other instead – and reveals the manifold ways in which it has enriched Russia in the process.

The fruitlessness of trying to utilise a nostalgic vision of the past as a *raison d'être* for retro-imperial sentiments about Russia's distinctiveness is also shown in the description of government buildings and the Imperial bureaucratic apparatus in *The Death of Achilles*. As Fandorin walks past the house of the chief of police on Tverskoi Boulevard – the supposed seat of law and order in the city – he describes it as follows:

Дом обер-полицеймейстера на Тверском считался одной из достопримечательностей первопрестольной. Выходя фасадом на респектабельный бульвар, где в погожие дни прогуливалось лучшее московское общество, двухэтажный дом [...] словно оберегал и в некотором роде даже благословлял приличную публику на изящное и безмятежное времяпрепровождение. Гуляйте, мол, просвещенные дамы и господа, по узкому европейскому променаду [...] пусть вас не тревожит сопение огромного полу-азиатского города, населенного по преимуществу людьми непросвещенными и невоспитанными – власть здесь, вот она, на страже цивилизации и порядка, власть никогда не спит. (SMA 193)

Akunin's use of irony in this passage is overwhelming, mocking a shallow adaptation of Western mannerisms that fails to transcend to the level of principles and values by describing the police headquarters as a tourist attraction ('одной из достопримечательностей первопрестольной') and a place for rich Muscovites to flaunt their fake Western-ness.

As the European image of Moscow is shown to be nothing but a façade, the city's wholesomeness begins to appear like a Potemkin village, using civilised elevatedness to mask the underlying reality of frailty and decrepitude. The sickness of Moscow's organism is given voice through the heavy breathing of the city, which reveals its laborious effort to function. The official representatives' love for a mere veneer of

Europeanism is shown to be lacking in substance just as much as the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour was shown to be lacking in authenticity: by coveting a Western appearance, the city's elite affirms the desirability of an idealised West, but at the same time, the integrity and initiative to act on this ideal remain absent. The narrowness of the described European promenade symbolically reflects this process of selective Westernisation, which was as topical of Russia in the 1880s as it was of the 1990s.<sup>414</sup>

The inside of the police apparatus in *The Death of Achilles* is shown to be similarly inefficient and outdated. Fandorin criticises the use of antiquated fighting techniques in the gendarmerie as proof of an obsolete mind-set within the administration:

Фандорин скептически покачал головой: тоже еще жизненная необходимость для жандармского офицера – на рапирах фехтовать. С кем, спрашивается? С бомбистами? Все пережитки прошлого. Лучше бы дзюдоцу изучали или, на худой конец, английский бокс. (SMA 155)

Moreover, mistrust and suspicion reign supreme, hinting at the ruling elite's failure to fulfil their role as “столп законности и порядка” (SMA 163). Yet they also indicate the resurfacing of a surveillance state that contradicts both Moscow's and Russia's claim to kinship with the West: as the police and official representatives of the state begin to live in a state of permanent fear, the fact that ‘power never sleeps’ (‘власть никогда не спит’) turns from a reassurance to a threat.

The way Akunin repeatedly phrases the state as an unknowable or unintelligible entity in *The Death of Achilles* duplicates the narrative of the crime novel onto its intratextual reality, recreating a claustrophobic atmosphere of secrecy that is both recognisable and oppressive for the modern-day reader. The unassailability of the state is mirrored in the arbitrary violence it exacts upon its people; in the end, the Empire's own police officials are turned into the victims of their own panoptic spectacle: “[он] был приставлен наблюдать за наблюдающим – у нас в ведомстве это часто бывает” (SMA 169). Nobody, however, appears to be aware of this fact other than Fandorin, the semi-foreigner who captures everything through the internal outsider's inquisitive gaze: “Ни шагу без охраны. Боже, куда катится Россия... [...] мне все теперь кажется подозрительным!” (SMA 194-6).<sup>415</sup> Despite being a historical

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<sup>414</sup> It is also an oddly prophetic statement about the way in which protest spaces for the liberal opposition movement were firmly restricted in Moscow during the 2011/12 protests.

<sup>415</sup> Akunin's choice of words in the Russian original, in particular the verb *катиться* (‘to rush’ or ‘to roll’), calls to mind Gogol's *The Dead Souls*, which posits this very question as its final sentiment and

insertion into an alternative past, this is the voice of the modern Muscovite – left adrift in a plurality of truths, finding its echoes in the sentiments of a fictional forebear.

### *Moscow's Urban Jungle*

The impossibility of arriving at a part of Moscow that offers a stable narrative of distinct Russianness also draws Moscow's identification within the Imperial heartland into question. Surprisingly, it is Fandorin's colleagues and superiors who introduce this thought into the conversation, as they repeatedly voice colonial attitudes about the city they call home:

- [...] Не Москва, а чистые джунгли.  
- Что? – не понял Фандорин.  
- Джунгли. Зверь на звере! (SMA 71)

- Вы в наших московских джунглях человек новый..., - осторожно начал он.  
И этот про джунгли, мысленно удивился Эраст Петрович, но виду не подал. Сказал лишь: - Да и в российских тоже. (SMA 75)

At first, Fandorin is reluctant to adopt this terminology, but he eventually succumbs to its usage: “В самом деле, не первопрестольная, а какие-то джунгли, подумал Эраст Петрович” (SMA 76). Thus, Moscow is not perceived as the core of the Empire, but as an exotic, ungovernable periphery instead. The use of the word ‘jungle’ is noteworthy, as it is a term better associated with Western colonial narratives and the colonial boomerang than with Russian colonialism – particularly as the Russian Empire never possessed any overseas colonies in tropical climates.<sup>416</sup> However, Akunin's use of it conveys a slightly different meaning. Whereas the term ‘urban jungle’ was traditionally used to suggest a focus on the maze-like urban structures of the city, the mention of beasts (‘Зверь на звере’) in *The Death of Achilles* brings the behavioural codes and interactions of Moscow's inhabitants to the fore instead.

In a paradoxical twist, Akunin's characters fall back on Western terminology just as they have stumbled upon a phenomenon that does differentiate Russia from the West. According to Steven Sabol, the Russian Empire was “not [an] accidental [empire]; instead, [it was] opportunistic, deliberate, and aggressive [...] the Russian

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also uses a verb that implies an out-of-control movement. The question of political terror, here only mentioned fleetingly, will be explored in more detail in chapter 3.2 (*The State Counsellor*).

<sup>416</sup> Cf. Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 2000).

Empire colonized, but it had no colonies”<sup>417</sup>. Alexander Etkind took this definition a step further, resurrecting the term self-colonisation from Russia’s historiographical annals, where it had first been discussed in some depth by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century historian Vasily Kliuchevskii.<sup>418</sup>

As described by Etkind, Russia’s development into an Empire was not only accompanied by a conquering of people of different ethnicities and faiths in Asia and Central Asia, but also by a colonisation of Russia’s own people via serfdom – which was a phenomenon primarily located in the Imperial heartland: “There were few privately owned serfs in northern Russia and Siberia; no serfdom among Kalmycks, Kazakhs, Jews, or peoples of the north; few serfs among Tatars [...] However one defines the core of this Empire, the closer one got to it, the more serfs there were”<sup>419</sup>. Paradoxically, the majority of serfs were Orthodox Russians who were treated akin to ‘white negroes’ – regardless of the fact that they were still viewed as humans and Christians. They were not, however, viewed as part of the Europeanised elite and, as a result, relegated to a place in Russian society that was culturally peripheral.

Akunin problematises the lack of awareness about this historic process of internal colonisation in his use of jungle-rhetoric, but also in the way his characters associate Asia with either despotism or danger. The reactions to Masa, Fandorin’s Japanese assistant and manservant, are indicative of this process. While Masa is dressed as a beggar as part of their investigation, he is mistaken for a “чумазый киргиз в засаленном халате и драном малахае. Господи, кого только в матушку-Москву не заносит” (SMA 129). Voiced by a servant herself, this statement turns Masa’s Asian features into a threat, whilst linking the image of ‘Mother Moscow’ to the concept of non-Asianness – an interesting statement to make, given that Moscow is traditionally portrayed in Russian literature as the antidote to Saint Petersburg’s excessive Europeanism. Akunin uses the apparent contradiction in this statement to point out Russia’s historic problems with verbalising its own in-betweenness.

A further parallel between the Russian Empire and the post-Soviet context is to be found in the contextualisation of present-day racism in the unmistakably Imperial

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<sup>417</sup> Steven Sabol, *The Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016), 4.

<sup>418</sup> Cf. Vasilii Osipovich Kliuchevskii, *Sochineniia v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo. politicheskoi lit-ry, 1956-1959).

<sup>419</sup> Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 125.

narrative of the ‘Yellow Peril’. In turn-of-the-century Russia, “the East and Asia loomed ever larger in Russian intellectual discourse”<sup>420</sup> as sources of an existential threat to both the Russian Empire and its civilisation – a discourse that was shared by other Empires in the West, but which carried particular poignancy in the Russian Empire for obvious geopolitical reasons. One of the most famous literary reflections of this fear was rendered immortal in Andrei Bely’s novel *Peterburg* (*Петербург*, 1913), in which Bely “plays on the figure of the ‘yellow peril,’ not as an impending threat [...], but rather as a form of confusion about Russia’s origins”<sup>421</sup>. Even though Masa is Japanese, he is automatically perceived as Kirghiz – mirroring a similar confusion about Russia’s ‘internal’ Asianness, which appears more threatening and more disturbing than its external equivalent.

As summarised by M. L. Roman, the problem of anti-Asian sentiments in Russia resurfaced with some force after the break-up of the Soviet Union, which resulted in a swift parallel collapse of the Soviet narrative of the brotherhood of all peoples. As widespread racial profiling of Caucasian and Central Asian citizens began to be instated in Moscow, “uncertainty and insecurity on [...] streets and public transport, frequent verbal and physical harassment and arbitrary fines”<sup>422</sup> became everyday occurrences in the city. I concur with Roman in this regard, who convincingly argues that a neo-Imperial subtext needs to be read into this growth in hostile sentiments. According to Roman, the predominant Russian view about the break-up of the Soviet Union contains a strong element of blame for the Central Asian people, who so willingly abandoned their quasi-colonial overlord for a return to the state of self-governance – an illogical embrace of pre-civilised and barbarian roots as well as a rejection of the nostalgically charged heritage of Imperial grandeur.

From a post-Soviet view, the real issue at the heart of this confrontative stance is the lack of a similarly attractive and similarly distinct identity narrative for Russia to fall back on. Only a deeply ingrained inferiority complex along with romanticised views about Imperial superpower glory could explain such an aggressive defence of

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<sup>420</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 13.

<sup>421</sup> Sabine Doran, *The Culture of Yellow, Or, The Visual Politics of Late Modernity* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 134.

<sup>422</sup> M.L. Roman, “Making Caucasians Black: Moscow Since the Fall of Communism and the Racialization of Non-Russians,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 18, no. 2 (2002): 1-27, 19.

the narrative of Russian ethnic superiority. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Western colonial stereotype of the urban jungle harbouring savage beasts unfit to govern themselves therefore finds its double equivalent in Akunin's text: first in a hint at Russia's historical process of self-colonisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the way it imposed a narrative of savagery upon its own people, followed by a more overt description of the post-Soviet adoption of a colonial gaze that openly embraces, rather than repudiates, the widespread contemporary denomination of non-white, non-Russian citizens as 'blacks'.<sup>423</sup>

In *The Death of Achilles*, Akunin does not pass up the chance to reveal the secret reciprocity and accompanying hollowness of such discriminatory thinking. When a Caucasian adjutant lieutenant employs the quasi-Darwinian racist comparison of man to monkey upon seeing Masa dressed in a ceremonial kimono, he exclaims: "Это еще что за макака!" (SMA 36). The scene is rendered parodic by the fact that the lieutenant himself is decked out in his national, Georgian uniform; moreover, Masa – who, at this point in the series, does not speak or understand Russian – responds to the news that the duel will be fought by pistol, not by sword, with the words: "Опять на пистолетах? – разочарованно спросил Маса. – Что за варварский обычай. И кого же вы убьете? Того волосатого человека? До чего же он похож на обезьяну" (SMA 36-7). Scenes like these undoubtedly serve a humorous purpose, but there is an underlying bite of bitter irony to them: as Japan is shown to harbour the same pretensions towards national superiority as Russia does about its Eastern neighbour, the inherent meaninglessness of statements of this kind is laid bare. The horizontal axes of the equation are inversed: West mocks East and East mocks West, ridding both

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<sup>423</sup> The portrayal of other non-Russian characters in *The Death of Achilles* likewise brings the existence of a range of national stereotypes to the fore. Germans are repeatedly described as 'sausage eaters' ('колбасники') who value punctuality and possess a "[ч]исто немецкая, топорная хитрость" (SMA 96); when the suspicion arises that the death of a German spy may be attributable to the German government, the act is described with the words: "Нехорошо, майне херрен, не по-христиански – собственного резидента, как свинью на бойне" (SMA 97) – which, given the resolution of the novel, certainly carries a considerable degree of parodic acerbity. At the same time, Germany is also placed within a terminological fraternity that denotes the West as civilised; thus, while trying to solve the mysterious circumstances surrounding Sobolev's death, the head of the secret section of the police states: "Отравить Белого Генерала? Бред! Не верю, что немцы могли пойти на такой риск. Это же цивилизованная нация, а не какая-нибудь Персия!" (SMA 61). The recollection of Persia recalls the death of the Russian poet Griboyedov, who was serving as the Russian ambassador to Persia in 1829 when he was murdered by an angry mob after signing a treaty that forced the country to cede several of its territories to the Russian Empire – making this also a potential allusion to the break-up of the Soviet Union.

insults of any actual meaning. As Japanese and Russian speakers alike adopt Western colonial attitudes in an attempt to overcome their own sense of inferiority, they strip not only themselves, but all Imperial discourses of their claim to civilised enlightenment.

Masa's description of Achimas, the antagonist who managed to trick him into relinquishing the suitcase containing the contract money, inverts another commonly known racist stereotype: “желтые волосы, водянистые глаза... Мы д-для него все на одно лицо” (SMA 159). Masa's inability to differentiate one Western face from another echoes the alleged indistinguishability of Asian features for people of Western origin. Yet the quote also underhandedly comments on the pointlessness of relying on visual markers of otherness in Russia – an impossibility that is explicitly problematised in the character of Achimas. Born to a Moravian father and a Muslim mother in the Caucasus, Achimas is described as having had “два бога и три языка” (SMA 211) as a child. He also appears as the ethnic *enfant terrible* of the story: optically indistinguishable from an ethnic Russian, Achimas fails to conform to the role of peripheral Asian scapegoat based on his looks alone. For Masa, a Japanese character, Achimas is the embodiment of the stereotypical European; for the Russian characters in the novel, Achimas's place of origin singles him out as the Caucasian, Asian Other.

Achimas's background as a half-Chechen does indeed seem to predestine him for the role of antagonist – both from a historical and a contemporary point of view. On the one hand, Achimas's journey from the southernmost borders of the Empire to its nominal core reflects the classical voyage of colonial-era threats; on the other hand, the context of the 1998 Chechen War and the aforementioned discrimination against ‘people of Caucasian nationality’ provide Akunin with a contemporary link to the narrative of a renewed Asian peril. Yet just as Akunin dissolved the demarcation lines between East and West by playing with the blurry boundaries between Russia's “metropole and colony [...] subject and citizen”<sup>424</sup>, he also reveals the unsuitability of Russia's North-South axis as a historical tool for differentiation and negative self-identification. Achimas does not move to Moscow in the pursuit of private terror

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<sup>424</sup> Alexander Morrison, “Metropole, Colony, and Imperial Citizenship in the Russian Empire,” *Kritika* 13, no. 2 (2012): 327-64, 338.

designs – he simply follows the trail of the highest bidder, i.e. the Russian government, in his search for contract money.

Therefore, transgressions move from the core of the Empire outwards in Akunin's Imperial Russia – not vice versa. By subverting the dictum of the periphery as a zone of violence and instability in the Russian Empire, Akunin challenges its continued use in the post-Soviet space and offers a scathing comment on the pathological post-perestroika flirtation with Imperial categories of thought. The resulting narrative collapses conceptual, rather than geopolitical borders and focuses, first and foremost, on the inborn, not the imported, instabilities of Empire.

### 3.1.2. *Writing Nation: Strolls With Pushkin, Lermontov & Co.*

Another instability of Empire that *The Death of Achilles* deals with is the novel's eponymous crime. Akunin's choice of murder victim places an emblematic figure of Imperial strength and military prowess at the heart of Fandorin's detective journey: General Sobolev, also called the 'White General' or 'Achilles' by his friends, is modelled after real-life General Mikhail Skobelev (1843-1882), who achieved nationwide fame in his lifetime for campaigns in the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78) and the Siege of Goek-Tepe (1881). As an easily recognisable figure from Imperial history for present-day readers, Sobolev is described as "любимец всей России. Да что России – вся Европа Белого Генерала знает" (SMA 17). Correspondingly, his death is framed as a national tragedy that surpasses even the assassination of Alexander II, the 'Tsar Osвoboditel' or 'Tsar Liberator': "Такой скорби город не выказывал и в прошлом марте, когда служили панихиды по злодейски убиенному императору" (SMA 101).

In *The Death of Achilles*, instead of corroborating a view of the deceased as an embodiment of Russian virtue, a summary description of Sobolev's character portrays him as a man of international tastes, who prefers Russia's European capital over its historical one:

Усопший подолгу жывал в Петербурге, в древней столице бывал только наездами, однако же Москва любила его сильней, чем холодный чиновный Питер [...] Достаточно то, что был он хорош собой и славен победами, а более всего полюбился москвичам Соболев тем, что чувствовали они в нем истинно русского человека, без чужестранных фанаберий и экивоков. (SMA 100f.)

Although Sobolev is still presented as a beloved national hero across all strata of society, his public persona appears distinctly different from his private one – hinting at the existence of a double life that draws the General’s suitability as a Russian national hero into question. The notes gathered by Achimas in preparation for the assassination reveal: “[п]ьет умеренно, предпочитает ‘шато-икем’, курит бразильские сигары, любит русские романсы, в особенности ‘Рябину’” (SMA 280). The circumstances of Sobolev’s death pose the final challenge to his unadulterated hero status: although Sobolev’s unexpected demise is passed off as a sudden heart attack at his desk, Fandorin’s investigations soon reveal that the General died in the bed of a well-known German femme fatale of the capital. Unaware of the fact that Sobolev was assassinated, his *svita* subsequently tries to safeguard the General’s hero narrative in a way that remains marketable for the wider public: “Народный герой – и такая смерть. Некрасиво. Как-то не по-русски. Французы своему кумиру, пожалуй, простили бы, у нас же сочтут национальным позором” (SMA 55).

The wish to protect the dead General’s reputation also leads several members of his entourage to desperately attempt to hinder Fandorin from investigating the case:

- Фандорин, обещайте, что не используете свой детективный талант во вред отчизне. Здесь на карту поставлена честь России. Эраст Петрович помолчал. – Обещаю [...] что ничего не сделаю против своей чести, и думаю, этого достаточно. (SMA 40)

For the first time in his career, Fandorin finds himself faced with a moral conflict of interest while carrying out his duty to the state. Although he ignores the military’s wish to keep up appearances, imbuing a full reconstruction of the crime with greater importance than the protection of an official narrative of Empire, Fandorin equally does not suspect any foul play on part of the Russian state. At one point, he even suggests to act in a private capacity – thus offering to preserve the Empire’s face by avoiding diplomatic conflicts with Germany (cf. SMA 73).

Throughout *The Death of Achilles*, Fandorin’s loyalty to the regime is repeatedly put into the spotlight. When Fandorin comes across a newspaper article that details the use of a fake cover story in an American newspaper, announcing the U.S. President’s death as part of an advertisement campaign for woollen underwear – an insertion so random that it begs interpretation – he mentally argues that “государь император это

вам не какой-то там президент” (SMA 44).<sup>425</sup> By condemning the everyday normalcy allowed in the treatment of a democratically elected head of state, Fandorin lifts the image of the autocratic ruler above that of a representative of the people – imbuing the former’s image with the sacred inviolability typical of his post, and embellishing it with the concomitant notions of greater wisdom and competence. Fandorin’s indignation in this scene is an expression of the leader cult thinking that continues to inform Russian culture today, along with the associated metonymic identification of Tsar, Empire and Russia.<sup>426</sup>

What Fandorin fails to perceive, however, is that while an Emperor may be a stronger representation of Empire than a President will ever be, he is always a weaker representative of Nation, too. While reluctant to submit to the irrational concept of blind allegiance, Fandorin still wishes to uphold the reputation of the Russian Empire and professes complete faith in the government’s right to rule – a position that marks him as a highly idealistic intelligentsia member of his time. Although Fandorin is led to suspect a government official as the main culprit early on in the novel, even voicing his doubts in a letter to his superiors, his conviction crumbles to shameful resignation as soon as the order to abandon this investigation comes from above, which effectively places Fandorin under house arrest:

Побледнев, Эраст Петрович медленно поднялся. Нет, не строгая, но, в сущности, справедливая монаршья кара заставила похолодеть его сердце. Хуже всего было то, что позорно провалилась версия, выдвинутая им с таким апломбом. Принять тайного правительственного агента за главного злодея! Какая постыдная ошибка! (SMA 181)

However, Fandorin’s assumptions of guiltlessness on the part of the government are gradually proven wrong as the full circumstances surrounding Sobolev’s death are revealed. Through accounts presented by Achimas and Sobolev’s former lover Ekaterina Aleksandrovna, General Sobolev’s private persona is shown to be even more complex than previously assumed. True to his historical prototype, Akunin’s Sobolev harbours militant pan-Slavist convictions akin to *sonderweg* ideas for Russia’s future, which Ekaterina Aleksandrovna summarises with the words: “Россия для русских,

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<sup>425</sup> Ironically, the headline given in the Russian original, “Президент умер” (‘The president died’), recalls the 2015 internet phenomenon of the website [putinumer.com](http://putinumer.com), which was called to life after Putin failed to appear in public for over a week. The site featured a button that generated satirical answers to the question of whether Putin had, in actual fact, died. It has since been taken off the internet.

<sup>426</sup> At the same time, Putin’s present-day tsar-ification of the Presidential post now makes Fandorin’s distinction appear oddly redundant – in the Russian context, at least.

объединенное славянство, собственный не-европейский путь и прочая дикость” (SMA 105). She also mentions a clear geopolitical dimension to Sobolev’s plans, saying “России нужны не Дарданеллы, а просвещение и конституция” (SMA 178). In the end, Fandorin uncovers Sobolev’s plan to organise “какой-то дерзкий демарш. Возможно, переворот в духе восемнадцатого столетия. В общем то, что немцы называют putsch” (SMA 195). The only further details the reader receives are marked as mere speculations, but they include the idea to take the royal family into custody and establish a military dictatorship in their stead.

Not coincidentally, these plans sound reminiscent of the events of 1917. Akunin lives up to his self-chosen image of the literary trickster and ‘evil man’ by connecting a national hero image with political designs that would have been controversial in the context of the 1990s, when anti-Communist sentiments were still comparatively strong in post-Soviet society and the revolution particularly detested. Even in 2017, commemorative acts to mark the centenary of the revolution were limited to a minimum:

[a]s the centenary of 1917 approached, the focus was not on the two revolutions and their confusing, shades-of-grey meaning for Russia, but on slotting other historical events into place to weave a grand narrative of Russian history. Second-tier heroes and victories, including from the tsarist past, could take their place below the Great Victory and the return of Crimea in an unbroken narrative of Russian success.<sup>427</sup>

Representations like those of Govorukhin’s, who framed the revolution as the year of Russia’s national downfall, certainly prevailed at the time when Akunin was writing *The Death of Achilles*.

The intricacies of Sobolev’s national hero image thus acquire a confounding complexity: on the one hand, his proposal of a politics that envisages ethnic Russian dominance and ultra-nationalist superiority is said to find support across all of Imperial society, in principle answering the demands for a truly Russian national hero: “Есть серьезные основания полагать, что этот безумный прожект будет поддержан значительной частью армии, дворянства, купечества и даже крестьянства. Белый Генерал идеально подходит на роль спасителя отечества!” (SMA 276). On the other hand, the power to unite the highly diverse Russian society behind a common cause places Sobolev in rivalry to the Tsar and in the role of political enfant terrible –

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<sup>427</sup> Walker, *The Long Hangover*, 245.

a threat great enough that it warrants Sobolev's death sentence at the hands of the government. His assassination is deliberately framed in a way that discourages Sobolev's followers from idolising him further, placing a halo of shame on his memory instead.

By unravelling the seemingly straightforward national hero narrative surrounding the White General – whose real death occurred under similarly mysterious circumstances and remains shrouded in speculation to this date – Akunin engages in a play with potentially not-altogether-alternative history and deliberately calls a contested episode in Russian national history back to the attention of his contemporary readership. Without stripping Sobolev's character of his overall identification potential for the population, Akunin still reveals the dark underbelly of his fictional General's activities – which intersect closely with the real Skobelev's historical controversy and thus spell out the complexity of historical hero narratives in general. As the traditional 'whodunit' quest of classical detective fiction is elevated onto a more abstract level and turned into a quest for stabilisers of national identity instead, the question arises: what makes or breaks a national hero?

#### *Achilles, Achimas and the Doubling of the Antagonist*

Akunin further interrogates the seeming givens of the national hero theme through the thinly veiled double meaning inscribed into *The Death of Achilles's* title. Although Sobolev is the most obvious candidate for the nickname of Achilles, the antagonist Achimas also bears several parallels to Homer's original character. Thus, the chapters describing Achimas's childhood reveal that he was secretly trained by his mother to become an invincible fighter; just like Homer's Achilles, he, too, escapes into a temporary hideaway disguised as a girl and eventually goes on to murder a famous general. Whereas Homer's hero was felled by an arrow to the heel, Achimas is killed by a shot in the leg. Finally, Achimas's point of view is explored in a considerably greater number of chapters than Sobolev's, imbuing his character with much greater poignancy and a much more recognisable presence for the reader.

Achimas's traditional doubling function is turned into a three-dimensional character constellation when it is extrapolated onto Fandorin, with whom Achimas shares an equally large number of similarities. Akunin uses the formulaic juxtaposition

of Fandorin and Achimas to paint them as quintessential doubles: both characters embark on quests to discover the identity of a murderer, while exhibiting a distinctive way of enumerating their arguments and reasoning logically.<sup>428</sup> Both also lead an unsteady lifestyle, traversing the Russian Empire and foreign regions to follow assignments on their respective jobs. Finally, both spent their childhoods as orphans, leading Achimas to blandly discredit the idea of father- or motherland altogether: “Мужчина должен [...] защищать себя и честь своего рода.’ Ахимас не знал, что такое честь рода. У него не было рода” (SMA 221).<sup>429</sup> For Achimas, there is no *patria* – meaning there is no need to shackle himself to a reductive sense of national identity or the empty invocation of honour based on the coincidence of birthplace. All that counts for him are individual actions and interests.

The most important connection between Achimas and Fandorin is their preoccupation with the theme of fate and coincidence. According to Achimas, “жизнь представлялась [ему] буйно заросшим газоном, в котором он выстригал линию своей судьбы” (SMA 264). This quotation recalls Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* (*Доктор Живаго*, 1957), who used the phrase “жизнь прожить – не поле перейти”<sup>430</sup> in *Gamlet* (*Гамлет*), one of the best-known poems from the novel. Achimas’s variation of the theme indicates defiance of Zhivago’s submissiveness to the force of fate and his religious beliefs, as life to him is no longer a field – subject to nature’s whim – but merely an overgrown lawn, i.e. an object of human agency and responsibility that can be controlled and cut into the desired shape.

Throughout *The Death of Achilles*, Achimas’s refusal to subscribe to a higher will clashes with his awareness of feeling inserted into events he can only partially control. During Sobolev’s funeral procession, “Ахимас стоял в причитающей, крестящейся толпе и чувствовал себя главным персонажем этого грандиозного представления, его невидимым центром. Это было непривычное, пьянящее чувство” (SMA 331). Achimas’s surprise at feeling at the centre of things proves that he is typically aware of being confined to the opposite role of self-dependent outsider and foreigner. Yet, once arrived in Moscow, he realises he is not so very different from

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<sup>428</sup> Cf. SMA 282.

<sup>429</sup> Translated as ‘family’ by Bromfield, I would suggest a broader interpretation of the original Russian term ‘род’ to suggest a genealogical line and infer a sense of nation and national community instead.

<sup>430</sup> Boris Pasternak, *Doktor Zhivago* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1989), 604.

the Empire's centre – or perhaps it is the heartland that is not so different from the periphery.

Achimas's awareness of his invisible role in the funeral spectacle – in itself a theatrical performance of post-mortem celebration, callously staged by the perpetrator of the crime – focusses on the authority it grants him over the ignorant masses, providing him with a taste of power akin to that of the panoptical, power-wielding state.<sup>431</sup> Translated by Bromfield as 'theatrical production', Achimas's choice of words underlines his instinctually correct perception of the events as staged and choreographed. They also open up a parallel between the real and the written world, divided only by the invisible border between fact and fiction: as Achimas becomes an unwitting actor within a play of deception staged by the state, his condition likewise raises questions about the autonomy of citizens in real political entities.

The role of the state as an authorial presence that imposes its own – potentially violent and transgressive – narrative onto the body politic is also expressed in Fandorin's relationship with fate, which is similarly antagonistic to Achimas's. At one point during the novel's events, Fandorin realises that the Empire and Achimas share an uncanny ubiquity of knowledge, which he expresses through the use of identical terms:

Главное же – откуда такая дьявольская осведомленность, такая фантастическая *вездесущность*? (SMA 168)

Это человек незаурядный, невероятных способностей. Невидим, неуловим, неуязвим. *Вездесущий*, он повсюду появлялся раньше нас с вами, наносил удар первым. (SMA 197) [my emphases]

As omniscience becomes a weapon, knowledge is, quite literally, turned into power – of the surveillance kind. Fandorin bristles at the sensation of existing within a pre-written reality, partly because one of his own character quirks is that he is “истинный баловень судьбы” (SS 256-57) – a person who preternaturally wins at gambling, bets

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<sup>431</sup> In his descriptions of Moscow's Khitrovka district, Akunin creates another parallel like this by describing the city's underworld as a Tsardom, “жуткое [...] местечко, какое-то подземное царство, где обитают не живые люди, а тени” (SMA 132). Akunin goes on to show that the criminal underworld has its own set of rules and moral guidelines, some of which appear to be followed by a stricter code of honour than those entertained on a government level – similar to the way it is portrayed in Aleksandra Marinina's novels. However, unlike Marinina, Akunin does not allow his protagonist to fraternise with these criminal elements out of a supposed lack of alternatives.

and duels. Fandorin dislikes his supernatural luck because he is aware of the imbalance it creates in life: robbed of uncertainty, he also feels robbed of individual agency.

Fandorin's grudging self-perception as a pawn of fate, to be moved randomly across the stage of life, finds its parallel within 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literature and connects both him and his double Achimas to various well-known figures from classical Russian works of fiction. One of these characters is Pechorin, Lermontov's superfluous man in *A Hero of Our Time* (*Герой нашего времени*, 1840). Stuck in the moral morass of uncertainty, hypocrisy, and boredom that was the fate of many nobility members of his time, Pechorin repeatedly engages with the question of destiny: "если точно есть предопределение, то зачем же нам дана воля, рассудок? почему мы должны давать отчет в наших поступках?"<sup>432</sup>. The question of moral integrity and a potential descent into criminality acquires real significance for Pechorin after he kills his former friend and colleague Grushnitsky in a duel, prompting him to famously pronounce the phrase 'finita la commedia' – a statement that expresses both his knowledge of the rigged nature of the duel and his scorn at fortune's script for life in general.

Pechorin's murder of his would-be-assassin Grushnitsky finds its double parallel in Fandorin's and Achimas's final encounter in *The Death of Achilles*. Not only does Achimas attempt to kill the detective during this showdown, he is also revealed to be the person behind the bomb blast that killed Fandorin's wife on their wedding day in *The Winter Queen*. An additional intertextual layer is introduced as Fandorin recalls "сцена дуэли из оперы 'Евгений Онегин'. Сейчас белоглазый запоем: 'Паду ли я, стрелой пронзенный'" (SMA 355). The mention of *Eugene Onegin* creates a mirror connection between Onegin and Pechorin as well as Lensky and Grushnitsky, along with Fandorin and Achimas as their doubles: like Onegin, Fandorin perceives the outcome of his fatalistic encounter with Achimas as preordained by fate; this impression is heightened by the fact that the line he quotes from Pushkin's novel is preceded by the words "прав судьбы закон"<sup>433</sup>. Just like Pechorin, Fandorin also escapes a treasonous murder through an unnatural stroke of luck, but has to save his

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<sup>432</sup> М. Иу. Lermontov, *Geroi nashego vremeni* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1963), 166.

<sup>433</sup> А. С. Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin. Roman v stikhakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1963), 153.

own life by killing his would-be assassin – feeling all the more disillusioned with the state of reality because of it.

The literal death of Achilles-Achimas provides an opportunity for both him and Fandorin to break through the paradigm set by the fate-wielding state. Achimas's final act in *The Death of Achilles* is to defy his pre-written script, performing the move from enemy to the role of conspirator. As he lies dying, Achimas provides Fandorin with proof of the government's complicity in Sobolev's murder, thus destroying the façade of the state's carefully enacted play. With his dying words, Achimas predicts that Fandorin will be erased from the state's narrative of Imperial grandeur, presaging a role reversal that will turn him into enemy number one instead: "Вас убьют ваши же начальники. Они вас вычеркнули. Из жизни. [...] Вы никто и ничто. Вы труп. [...] Теперь вы знаете всю правду. За это вас убьют. Государственная необходимость" (SMA 359-60).

As Fandorin is forced to acknowledge that his view of the Empire was romanticised and wrong, he is also faced with a decision: whether to remain a cog in the Imperial machine – as indeed most Russian literary detectives have done – or whether to act as an individual and reclaim his sense of self-governance in the process. The seeming incongruity of the two options weighs heavily on him, and even after being presented with undeniable proof of the government's involvement in the murder of a national hero, Fandorin struggles to come to terms with the truth laid before him:

Лишился всего – службы, чести, жизненного смысла. Негодяй Караченцев предал его, послал на верную смерть. Нет, не Караченцев – государство, держава, отчина. [...] Оporоченный, преследуемый, бросивший службу, изменивший долгу и отечеству. Нет, не изменивший, это отечество предало своего верного слугу! (SMA 360-61)

The triple invocation of the term 'fatherland' ('государство, держава, отчина') reveals Fandorin's continued desire to uphold the sanctity of the state and patriotic attachment to Empire, which he mistakenly sees as the synonymous embodiment of Nation. As the ultimate expression of his faith in being able to repair the two disjointed narratives, Fandorin returns to state service at the end of *The Death of Achilles* – hoping that he will prove capable of turning the country into a state where *Rossiia* and *Rus'* align. From an intelligentsia standpoint, that potentially makes him into an anti-hero; from the point of view of Akunin's ambition to create a new type of intelligentsia hero, however, it makes perfect sense.

### *Fandorin as National Hero*

The title of the third and final part of the novel, 'White and Black', offers a fitting phrase for Akunin's reversal of hero and anti-hero narratives, which turns established categories of heroism and national belonging upside down. As neither Fandorin nor Achimas agree to act as clear-cut pawns in a simplified game of good vs. evil, they also appear as two different manifestations of the modern, self-determined subject, united in an essentially identical will for independence. What differentiates Fandorin from Achimas is his moral integrity, along with a childlike belief in the righteousness of authorial subservience and the existing social contract. Whereas Achimas dares pick at the notions of the seemingly self-understood, Fandorin only challenges the very foundations of the existing discourse – yet at the same time, Achimas's suggested hero narrative contains violence and transgressions that ultimately result in his death, leaving only Fandorin's much more moderate, critically engaged middle-ground to fill the suggested hero paradigm.

The peculiarity of this hero ideal becomes obvious in the light of Fandorin's cultural otherness from his peers, made manifest from the outset in *The Death of Achilles*. On the very opening pages of the novel, Fandorin discards several conveniently located offers of accommodation in favour of a hotel that fascinates him because of its literary associations: “У Дюссо все наилучшие писатели останавливались – и Достоевский, и граф Толстой, и сам господин Крестовский. [...] Красавец-брюнет ахнул: - Неужто граф Толстой?” (SMA 5). This reaction echoes not so much that of the native Muscovite as the curiously intrigued foreign traveller.

Fandorin's choice of hotel is also revealing in another regard: the Dusseaux (or Duseaux, as it is sometimes spelt) did indeed host both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and was even mentioned by name in *Anna Karenina*: “А я вчера был у Дюссо и вижу на доске ‘Каренин’, а мне и в голову не пришло, что это ты!”<sup>434</sup> and one of Dostoevsky's letters: “О себе скажу, что я было поселился сначала в Москве, у Дюссо, где стоял тоже Филиппов”<sup>435</sup>. Just like Stepan Arkadyevich, Fandorin learns about Sobolev's stay at the hotel because his friend's name is written onto the publicly

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<sup>434</sup> L. N. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (Tula: Tul'skoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1963), 332.

<sup>435</sup> F. M. Dostoevsky, “A. P. Miliukovu, 10-15 iulia 1866, Liublino,” *Sobranie Sochinenii v piatnadsati tomakh, tom XV* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1988), 286.

displayed guest board. Akunin creates a world of well-known literary classics into which to place his protagonist – only to parody, along the way, the post-Soviet distortions of this heritage.

Whereas Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are likely to be recognised by all of Akunin's readers, Vsevolod Krestovsky is a less well-known figure. A literary contributor to the Dostoevsky brothers' journal *Эпоха (Эпоха)* and a writer who – much like Dostoevsky himself – frequently chose Russia's downtrodden society as a leitmotif, Krestovsky became famous for his novel *The Slums of Saint Petersburg (Петербургские трущобы)* in 1864. This novel was turned into a television series during the 1990s, which was named *The Secrets of Saint Petersburg (Петербургские тайны, 1994-1998)* in an obvious attempt to cater to the increased public taste for detective stories. From slums to secrets, the serial showcased the conflicting nostalgic atmosphere prevalent during this period and changed Krestovsky's original text into a romanticised portrayal of Imperial Petersburg. The very first episode begins with a character who, upon returning home from a lengthy absence, proclaims how good it is to be home – finding reassurance in the fact that nothing has changed during his years away. Imperial glamour and the criminal underworld are made to coexist in *The Secrets of Saint Petersburg* in a strikingly flattering symbiosis aimed to make crimes look intriguing, rather than condemnable.

To an extent, the Fandorin series followed the same strategy. On every single book cover of the Fandorin project, readers find a dedication to the 19<sup>th</sup> century that reads: “когда литература была великой, вера в прогресс безграничной, а преступления совершались и раскрывались с изяществом и вкусом”. A similar thought was also voiced in the stories about Sherlock Holmes, who endorsed an aestheticized view of crime and deplored “the decline of the art of crime in his day”<sup>436</sup>. Akunin reactivates this 19<sup>th</sup>-century heritage in literature, but subverts its tenets through the provision of a considerably more sordid, less elegant post-Soviet equivalent. As he uses the genre of detective fiction to strengthen the romanticisation of fictional villainy and yet undermine the concomitant glorification of the criminal mind-set in post-Soviet society, Akunin also challenges the nostalgic chorus of voices that changed

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<sup>436</sup> Paul Barolsky, “The Case of the Domesticated Aesthete,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 60 (1984) 3: 438-52, 440.

Krestovsky's socio-critical novel into shallow bedtime television. By providing this tongue-in-cheek commentary inside a crime story of his own, Akunin issues a poignant verdict on how the genre ought to engage with the past instead: irreverently, but honestly.

Irreverence also plays a part in the way Fandorin's outlandish behaviour is perceived by his compatriots. Fandorin appears as a distinct cultural alien, combining the traditionally liminal position of the eccentric detective figure with the cultural peripherality of the Russian intelligentsia member. During the carriage ride to his hotel, Fandorin confounds his driver by inquiring into the identity of a newly erected statue, asking: "А кому это на б-бульваре памятник поставили? Неужто лорду Байрону? - Пушкин это, Александр Сергеевич, - укоризненно обернулся возница" (SMA 6). Here is a whodunit-mystery that rattles the very foundations of Russian cultural heritage: how could a Russian citizen possibly confuse Pushkin with Byron?

Despite appearing like a mere humorous insertion at first glance, Fandorin's faux-pas carries multiple layers of meaning. On the one hand, the carriage driver's rebuke is a barb aimed at Fandorin's loss of connection with his home culture, particularly as the distance between Fandorin and the rest of his countrymen is linguistically marked by the narrator's use of the pronoun 'ours': "Молодой человек покраснел и опять залопотал что-то *по-нашему* [my emphasis]" (SMA 6) – a distinction sadly lost in translation. On the other hand, Fandorin's statement violates the national hero narrative linked to Pushkin as Russia's national poet. As pointed out by Dobrenko,

Pushkin's unique place in the Russian national consciousness owes less to his greatness as a poet than to the fact that a myth of Pushkin lies at the heart of the Russian national identity which is defined by a conflict between a lofty image of Russia's majesty, and the bleakness of her past and uncertainty of the present. It can be described as a cross between an inferiority complex and a superiority complex [...] Pushkin incorporates everything that Russia wants to be and everything that it fails to be.<sup>437</sup>

Whereas the Communist regime initially deprived Pushkin of his pivotal role in national identity formation, the cult surrounding the poet resurfaced during the Soviet years – quickly imbuing him with the inviolable status of national genius and messiah that continues to inform the political use of Pushkin's name today.<sup>438</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, "Pushkin in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pushkin*, ed. Andrew Kahn (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006): 202-20, 202.

<sup>438</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 205f.

The fixation of Russia's contemporary political elite on utilising Pushkin as their figurehead in the construction of a cultural citizenship narrative first gained momentum during Yeltsin's and Luzhkov's reign, who both played important parts in the nationwide Pushkin bicentennial celebrations in 1999. Under Putin, the image of the national poet was then made into a sacrosanct notion of patriotism, effectively turning any attack on the poet into a collateral ambush on Russia's national prestige and pride. This is why, in the contemporary post-Soviet cultural climate, even films like *Дуэль. Пушкинъ – Лермонтовъ* (2014) can cause a national scandal – simply by suggesting an alternative historical timeline in which neither Pushkin nor Lermontov died in their respective duels.<sup>439</sup>

In his willingness to point out and subvert the ideological corruption of Pushkin as Russia's national poet, Akunin follows in the footsteps of both the Russian futurists and Soviet writers such as Andrei Sinyavsky and Andrei Bitov. Sinyavsky's novel *Strolls with Pushkin* (*Прогулки с Пушкином*, 1975) was heavily criticised at the time because of its attempt to “[liberate] Pushkin from the deadening myth of greatness”<sup>440</sup> – a stance that Fandorin's matter-of-course replacement of Pushkin with Byron mirrors, pointing out the futility of trying to create an aura of national uniqueness around a historical figure who was emblematic for much of the transnationalism of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian thought.<sup>441</sup>

The strong European influences that informed both Pushkin's work and that of many other classical Russian authors strengthens the impression that these writers achieved their immortal renown not through the sheen of national distinctiveness that was belatedly added to their work, but through a cross-fertilisation of literary traditions that put Russian identity into a cultural context of curiosity, open-mindedness and intellectual daring. This is particularly so in the case of Pushkin, who served several

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<sup>439</sup> Ekaterina Aponina, “Al'ternativnaia istoriia. V Krymu vse zhe pokazali ‘Duel’. Pushkin – Lermontov’,” *Argumenty i fakty*, November 6, 2014, <<http://www.krym.aif.ru/culture/events/1376404>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>440</sup> Stephanie Sandler, “Sex, Death and Nation in the Strolls with Pushkin Controversy,” *Slavic Review* 51, no. 2 (1992): 294-308, 296.

<sup>441</sup> In an academic context, the juxtaposition of Pushkin and Byron is a well-established and often discussed subject for research. Cf., among others: Ann Gelder, “Wandering in Exile: Byron and Pushkin,” *Comparative Literature* 42, no. 4 (1990): 319-34; Connor Doak, “Poltava at 300: Re-Reading Byron's Mazeppa and Pushkin's Poltava in the Post-Soviet Era,” *Australian Slavonic & East European Studies* 24, no. 1-2 (2010): 83-101; Monika Greenleaf, “Pushkin's Byronic Apprenticeship: A Problem in Cultural Syncretism,” *The Russian Review* 53, no. 3 (1994): 382-98.

years in exile for his vocal defence of free speech and his frequent criticism of authoritarian rule. The rediscovery of Pushkin's critical spirit is therefore what lies at the heart of Fandorin's mistake – along with his own character construction as an intelligentsia hero of his time(s).

### 3.1.3. Conclusion

*The Death of Achilles* is the first of the Fandorin novels to move beyond a general representation of Imperial Russia and towards an explicit representation – and dissection – of Empire and Nation. Akunin interweaves historical timelines in a way that invites a reading of the novel's events against the backdrop of post-Soviet Russia, creating the impression of a postmodern circularity of history akin to the two sides of a Moebius strip: readers cannot read the past without also reading the present, and vice versa.

This blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction, intensified by the real mystery surrounding Mikhail Skobelev's death, allows Akunin to put an important detective quest to his readers: by prompting them to detect the border between alternative and real history, he simultaneously raises the question as to whether such a border can exist at all. Unlike traditional detective fiction, which reliably provided readers with a reassuring resolution to the dilemma at hand, Akunin's *The Death of Achilles* refuses to generate the impression of such a return to stability. Instead, the novel's ending stresses the *instability* of reality, confronting both Fandorin and Akunin's readers with an epistemological dilemma that spells out the corruption of Empire and raises the spectre of cyclical manipulations of national identity narratives in Russia.

The manipulation of the historical narrative likewise plays a key role in *The Death of Achilles*. Akunin's process of re-writing Empire in the novel focusses primarily on the myth of Moscow as Russia's authentic heartland. Fandorin's spatial exploration of Mother Moscow ('матушка-Москва') perpetually turns into a discovery of the Other Moscow instead, linking architectural landmarks of Empire with cultural elements from abroad that are either hidden or barred from the contemporary discourse. When read as a metonymic microcosm of the vast Russian Empire, Akunin's Moscow reveals

the narrative disfigurement of memories about Imperial stability and cohesion.<sup>442</sup> Symbolic landmarks that carry meaning in both Imperial and contemporary Russian history, such as the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, are given a prominent, but contested place in *The Death of Achilles*: just as Akunin acknowledges their importance as cultural identity structures, he also subverts it, thus highlighting the arbitrariness of all such symbolic narratives.

Akunin also investigates the peripherality of Moscow's populace, thus joining into a dialogue with other post-Soviet writers who have portrayed Moscow as "a centripetal force [that] has isolated itself in three ways: ideologically, through its closed, single-minded leadership; physically, through building walls and barriers; and temporally, by controlling the narrative about its history"<sup>443</sup>. The recognisably colonial stereotype of the urban jungle fulfils a double function in the novel: on the one hand, it places the history of the Russian Empire within the same corrosive framework as Western colonialism, blurring the boundary between Europe and Russia through a shared legacy of oppression. On the other hand, the peculiar singularity of Russia's colonial experience comes to the fore as Moscow's populace – not its territory – is placed in the heart of this colonial paradigm.

Russia's historic process of self-colonisation and the identity split it produced is exemplarily explored in the character of Achimas, who defies attempts at pigeon-holing according to predetermined East-West or North-South dichotomies and introduces the issue of modern-day racism into the novel. While illustrating late Imperial Russia's lack of a stable national identity narrative alongside the fragmentation of its ethnic subtext, Achimas's role also challenges post-Soviet Russia's continued colonial behavioural patterns towards Central Asian and Caucasian citizens. Other than in the Sherlock Holmes stories, where the exotic appears as an unmistakable threat from the outside, in Fandorin's, and by extension the post-Soviet reader's Moscow, no comparable stabilisation point can be found: there is no Other that is not also the own. Imperial Russia, in Akunin's view, is therefore not part of a

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<sup>442</sup> Emma Polotskaya noted the same "paradoxical motif of the claustrophobia of Russia's vast expanse" in the work of Chekhov (cf. Emma Polotskaya, "Chekhov and His Russia," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, eds. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000]: 17-28, 20.) Akunin's close connection to Chekhov's literary and cultural legacy will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.3 (*The Black City*).

<sup>443</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 23.

binary world where West means progress and East means degeneration; instead, the influence of both East and West on Russia's development is represented, but the allegedly irreconcilable otherness of their experiences resisted.

The categorical transnationality of values that forms part of the central mystery of Empire in *The Death of Achilles* is also apparent in Akunin's choice of crime plot. Fandorin's detective journey towards debunking the myth of Empire is intertwined with his investigation of the murder mystery surrounding General Sobolev. By not just spelling out, but commercialising the mortality of one of Russia's best-known national heroes, Akunin uses one of detective fiction's formulas – the need for a crime – as a means to violate the general sanctity of the national hero figure in contemporary discourse. As Russia's fabled military hero of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is shown to be half mirage, half narrative construct, Sobolev's dethronement from the pedestal of Russia's indisputable hero pantheon expands *The Death of Achilles*'s story arc beyond a mere detective plot and reveals a question of general historical significance: does a true national hero show unwavering loyalty to the state, no matter how corrupt, or does he stand out as a daring, potentially brash, free-thinker?

By refusing to provide his readers with a reductionist, clear-cut answer to this question, Akunin successfully demonstrates the transience of national hero paradigms in general. In *The Death of Achilles*, national hero figures are not portrayed as immortal manifestations of unshakeable nostalgia, but as arbitrary objects of selective national memory processes. Akunin expresses the same irreverent attitude in relation to Pushkin, who is not toppled from his place of literary worship, but presented from the alternative angle of critical 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia thought. As a result, Pushkin arises not so much as a cultural copy to the image of the national leader, but as a blueprint for voices that dare resist the petrification of claims to power – be they of a cultural or a political nature.

The same spirit of resistance finds its expression in Fandorin and Achimas's rebellion against fate: as they attempt to break through the pre-written course of their lives, they also end up railing against their creator – establishing an extratextual level of meaning that not only pits the individual citizen against the state, but which also exposes Akunin as the villain he has made himself to be. By problematising his role as author, Akunin draws attention to the role of authorship in the more general sense

of Russia's national identity narrative, while continuing to play with his self-stylization as Russian literature's unruly purveyor of uncomfortable truths.

At the end of *The Death of Achilles*, Fandorin is the only surviving candidate for the role of national hero. His stance is characterised by a conciliatory compromise between the two extreme positions embodied by Sobolev and Achimas: whereas Sobolev appears as the military idealist whose voice bridges 19<sup>th</sup>-century Slavophilism and 21<sup>st</sup>-century conservative thinking, Achimas, whose Machiavellian practicality mirrors much of post-Soviet utilitarianism, spells out a path of bloodshed and violence. Fandorin appears as a less radical version of these turns towards individualistic autonomy, favouring integrity and self-determination over a senseless inflation of empty hero rhetoric and patriotic fervour. The fact that Fandorin's path ultimately leads him back into the folds of Empire is a testament to Akunin's commitment towards fashioning a new intelligentsia ideal that seeks active co-partnership with the state. Yet as subsequent instalments of the detective project show, Fandorin's discovery of the conflicting split between Empire and Nation had only just begun.

### 3.2. *The State Counsellor (2000)*

[...] в самом деле много читал [...] Хотел понять, почему люди мучают друг друга, откуда берется несправедливость и как ее лучше исправлять. Прямого ответа в книгах не обнаруживалось, но, если как следует поразмыслить, его можно было прочесть между строк. (SS 40)

The novel *The State Counsellor (Статский советник)* is the sixth novel in the Fandorin series. It was published in the year 2000 and has been called "the most ceremonious tale of terrorism and counterterrorism you're ever likely to read"<sup>444</sup>. The novel's plot, set in 1891, opens with the murder of one Adjutant-General Khrapov by the Combat Group, a revolutionary terrorist cell. Khrapov, who is acting Governor General of Siberia and soon-to-be Minister of the Interior, is assassinated following a nationwide scandal surrounding his involvement in the hanging of a young revolutionary. Several of the General's attendants identify the escaped murderer as

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<sup>444</sup> "The State Counsellor," *Kirkus Reviews*, April 17, 2017, <<http://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/boris-akunin/the-state-counsellor/>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

Fandorin, who is subsequently arrested, but quickly able to prove his innocence. After realising that the murderer only masqueraded as Fandorin, capitalising on the detective's reputation as a trustworthy and loyal servant to the state in order to gain access to Khrapov's private train compartment, Fandorin's honour is piqued and he begins to investigate the case.

Accompanying him in this task is Prince Pozharsky, a newly arrived detective from Saint Petersburg. Together, Fandorin and he infiltrate the simmering revolutionary circles in Moscow and navigate the corrupt and incompetent behaviour of police and government representatives alike. It soon becomes clear that a conspirator has been passing on government secrets to the Combat Group, helping them orchestrate several successful assassinations. During the final confrontation with the Combat Group, Fandorin uncovers that this conspirator is none other than Pozharsky himself – acting at the behest of the highest echelons of the Tsarist family and causing Akunin's protagonist yet another major identity crisis.

*The State Counsellor's* historical backdrop of revolutionary circles and terrorist conspiracies lends a particular vibrancy and topicality to Akunin's novel, inviting a reading that focusses on the "political parallels between 1891 and Putin-era Russia, a national situation in which the government is besieged by terrorist attacks [...] and heated discussions within government circles about how to confront those attacks"<sup>445</sup>. As *The State Counsellor* explores the cyclical repetition of Russian history through the prism of its terror episodes, it also skilfully broadens the traditional whodunit-structure of the crime novel into an overarching exploration of Russia's problematic revival of Imperial politics. Moreover, Akunin draws attention to the increased theatricalisation of post-Soviet political life through the narrative structure he chooses for *The State Counsellor*: unlike other instalments of the Fandorin series, the novel is framed by a prologue and epilogue, which outline the initial crime and set the stage. In addition, *The State Counsellor* contains a chapter "в которой, как положено, происходит несчастье" (SS 225) – delivering a meta-commentary not only on established crime fiction formulas, but also on Aristotelean drama structure.

By making the careful extremes to which he pushes *The State Counsellor's* self-referentiality obvious, Akunin also parodies his readership's unspoken expectations of

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<sup>445</sup> Mulcahy, "A Not-so-thrilling Thriller," 314.

what constitutes a thrilling plot – pointing out his own powerful position as author and master of the narrative. The paratextual elements that Akunin uses in the construction of his plot – such as newspaper reports, telegrams and secret notes in varying fonts, indentations, and a diagram of rooms needed for a plan of action – conjure up the spectre of historical authenticity, but double-perform as representations of the ludic elements of a play and act as a visual reminder of Akunin’s continued transgression of the border between fact and fiction.<sup>446</sup>

The first part of this chapter will resume my analysis of Akunin’s process of re-writing Empire against the backdrop of these mind-games with Russian history. Akunin continues his previous discussion of Moscow’s peripherality in *The State Counsellor*, but relocates it from a focus on architectural landmarks to a discovery of Imperial power structures instead – questioning both Imperial attitudes towards Eastern and Western forms of governance and the way power distribution works within the Russian Empire. As he traces the remnants of these attitudes into the post-Soviet space, Akunin uses the parallels between late Imperial and post-Soviet Russia to highlight the instability of this (neo-)Imperial experience. Once again, he also touches upon the lasting legacy of Russia’s self-colonisation process, first by exploring conflicting attitudes towards East and West among the Russian characters in his novel and then by positing a Jewish character in the role of main antagonist. How does Akunin utilise the specific backdrop of terrorist activity, led by a character of Jewish origin, to subvert post-Soviet Russia’s problematic search for a negative self-definition of identity – dismantling the neo-Imperial narrative about ethnic Russian superiority in the process?

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<sup>446</sup> Through the provision of these paratextual elements, Akunin also copies both the style of classical crime fiction and of sensationalist and Gothic novels – most notably Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. The first novel to make deliberate use of textual performativity to engage its readers with the fluid borders between textual and historical authenticity, *Dracula* also involved its protagonists in a quest for truth and carried a strong “focus on power (who has it, who wants it, who gets it, and who gets to keep it)” (Harriet Hustis, “Black and White and Read All Over: Performative Textuality in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*,” *Studies in the Novel* 33, no. 1 (2001): 18-33, 18). In the late-Victorian Gothic novel, a preoccupation with power resulted from a sense of the threatening collapse of society, fears about the nature of the self, and, as is particularly prevalent in *Dracula*, concerns about racial impurity and the destabilising influence of the periphery on the heartland of Empire. Akunin uses these elements of Gothic fiction as a foil for the post-Soviet era and a means to criticise Empire, which is why scholars like John Givens count him among Russia’s neo-Gothic writers – who, according to Givens, “[seek] to cope with the recent past by exploring more ancient history or by returning to old literary forms” (John Givens, “The New Gothic, Mythic Prose, and the Post-Soviet Novel [Special Issue],” *Russian Studies in Literature: A Journal of Translations* 46, no. 4 (2010): 3-103, 3).

In the second subchapter, I will return my attention to Akunin's process of 'writing Nation'. Both the revolutionary leader Grin and Prince Pozharsky will appear as doubles to Fandorin's candidacy for the national hero role, and their validity for the part will be analysed through an exploration and juxtaposition of the different 19<sup>th</sup>-century source texts that went into their construction. Through the use of these various doubling processes as well as the notion of the double agent, Akunin once again problematises the fluidity of hero narratives: how can a character who strives to destroy the status quo from within – such as Pozharsky – act as a hero alternative? While this question would not pose a dilemma in other genres such as sci-fi, fantasy, or dystopian novels, disruptive behaviour on the part of a protagonist in detective fiction does constitute a serious breach of genre conventions and therefore begs closer interpretation. Finally, the issue of post-Soviet Russia's need for an identifiable hero figure will return my discussion to Fandorin, whose character development and intelligentsia stance will be re-evaluated against the background of *The State Counsellor's* final plot-twist and the novel's pivotal place in the overall Fandorin project.

### 3.2.1. *Re-Writing Empire: Of Might and Men*

Like so many other Russian novels, *The State Counsellor* begins with a train journey. Just as Adjutant-General Khrapov's train hurtles along snow-covered landscapes, the man himself dies underneath a map of the Russian Empire – imbuing the novel's opening scene with a double symbolic meaning: on the one hand, the fact that Khrapov's train is moving from the colonial hinterland of Siberia to Moscow reactivates the narrative of the periphery as a destabilising force for the Imperial heartland. On the other hand, Russia's geographical vastness dictates that “злодей мог куда угодно податься...” (SS 18), while the layout of Russia's train network simultaneously narrows the available hiding spots for the criminal at large into one logical endpoint: Moscow, the Empire's epicentre of boundless moral lawlessness, sprawling street mazes and diverse societal undergrounds.

Strolling through Moscow at the beginning of the novel, Fandorin experiences a moment of foreshadowing as he reminisces about the city's double-edged beauty: “Москва проделала свой любимый фокус – обратилась из лягушки такой царевной, что вдохнуть вдохнешь, а выдохнуть позабудешь” (SS 27). What starts

like a deep breath of enamourment turns into a stifling chokehold upon closer inspection. Rather than function as the embodiment of the Empire's might and unyielding power, Moscow once again appears as the claustrophobia-inducing source of infection in Russia's overall sick body politic. Both city and countryside, heartland and periphery, thus become spaces of infiltration and danger, once more collapsing the supposed border between the two categories.

Throughout *The State Counsellor*, Akunin moves his discussion of Moscow's peripherality onto the more abstract level of government structures. Instead of focussing on specific landmarks, he explores the historical capital primarily through the prism of its power structures. Neil Weissmann noted that the fragility and fragmentation of concepts such as “*obshchestvo* and *narod*” [...] were deeply rooted in the empire's socio-economic structure and political culture [and] reflected the weakness of institutions which normally provide a kind of social cement - institutions like the school, church, or police [original emphasis]”<sup>447</sup>. The police department is one such structure in Akunin's novel, rendered in a state of complete internal disintegration:

Очевидно, в свое время кто-то мудрый, опытный, придерживающийся не слишком лестного мнения о людской природе, рассудил, что одного надзирающего и приглядывающего ока для беспокойной империи маловато. Ведь недаром и человеку Господь выделил не по одной зенице, а по две. (SS 30)

The use of the old Slavic term *oko* for eye calls to mind the Biblical law of retaliation ‘an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth’ (‘око за око, зуб за зуб’), which shows the state machine's potential for brutality and its capacity to exact, quite literally, biblical revenge. At the same time, the parallel existence of two police branches results in a deliberate obstruction of the law: “по давней традиции отношения между двумя ответвлениями тайной полиции складывались ревнивые и неприязненные, что свыше не только дозволялось, но даже, пожалуй, и поощрялось” (SS 30). If the two warring police departments act as the warring eyes of the governmental head of state, then this also suggests a fundamental incompetence: two eyes that do not look as one may as well leave the state blind.

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<sup>447</sup> Weissman, “Regular Police in Tsarist Russia,” 66.

Prince Dolgorukoi – an old acquaintance from *The Death of Achilles* – further expands the religious narrative of an impending downfall of Empire by linking Moscow’s police department to the biblical image of Babylon:

Вы же видите, какой у нас по полицейской части Вавилон сделался. Под Вавилоном его сиятельство имел в виду хаотическое положение, образовавшееся во второй столице после того, как был отставлен последний обер-полицеймейстер, слишком буквально трактовавший смысл понятия ‘неподотчетные секретные фонды’. (SS 19)

Apart from incorporating the modern-day problem of corruption into the narrative, Dolgorukoi’s use of the Babylonian simile also highlights the break-down of communication within the legal apparatus.<sup>448</sup> The resulting impression of police impotence casts doubts about the longevity of the existing social contract across all levels of society, not just the revolutionary camp; thus, when a young lieutenant by the name of Smol’yaninov starts on his first assignment, Fandorin advises him to carry out his duty in plainclothes because of the “неприязненное отношение, с к-которым к синим мундирам относятся в обществе” (SS 28). However, Smol’yaninov rejects the idea and delivers a fierce defence speech about the special honour that it is to serve Russia – saying that he especially enjoys the “секретные задания, выслеживание опасных преступников [...] и перестрелки” (SS 28).

Akunin’s characteristic meta-textual mockery in this scene breaches the supposed border between fact and fiction: instead of sounding like an actual police officer, Smol’yaninov appears more like a crime fiction reader about to enjoy a good Pinkerton novel. In smiling, however indulgently, at the young lieutenant’s rose-tinted enthusiasm for a good crime story, readers of *The State Counsellor* simultaneously engage in an act of self-observation and are made to reflect on their own reasons for choosing this particular genre. Although Smol’yaninov’s follow-on statement that “эмблема, назначенная Корпусу императором Николаем Павловичем – белый платок для утирания слез несчастных и страждущих” (SS 28-9) could easily be read as a sincere expression of patriotic fervour by readers who are so inclined, Smol’yaninov’s essential naivety is underlined when he claims that people would think better of officials such as him if only they knew about the rigours of their training –

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<sup>448</sup> It is noteworthy that embezzlement on the uppermost levels of government not only serves as a reminder of the parallels between late Imperial and post-Soviet politics, but that it is also considered a crime of such ubiquity in the novel that it does not even invite further discussion.

summed up as having to achieve good grades and not run up any gambling debts. Smol'yaninov ends his speech with the admission that it was his father's influence that ultimately secured him his post in Moscow. Nepotism is alive and well – both in Fandorin's 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia and the reality of most post-Soviet readers.

The ubiquitous state of unchecked corruption and abuse of power in *The State Counsellor* creates an oppressive atmosphere of paranoia, which not only makes an appearance in the revolutionaries' "самая настоящая мания преследования" (SS 263), but also features as a common characteristic among the many double agents that populate the novel. Burlyaev, the head of the Moscow Department of Security, entertains an entire network of spies – "и бывшие нигилисты, и всякие темные личности" (SS 24) – and explains his recruitment strategies as follows: "Стол у Ларионова хорош, наш секретный фонд оплачивает. Берем болтунов на заметочку, заводим на каждого папочку. Как попадаетея на чем серьезном – у нас уж на голубчика полная бухгалтерия" (SS 64). Fandorin's reaction to this piece of news is one of indignation: "Но ведь это провокация! [...] Вы сами плодите нигилистов, а потом сами же их арестовываете" (ibid.). By turning the narrative on its head like this, Fandorin also questions the causal relationship between government oppression and terrorist activity in the country.

In a subsequent conversation with Larionov, Fandorin rejects the latter's offer to hand him additional information with the words: "Я услугами тайных осведомителей не пользуюсь, [...] По-моему, шпионить на своих товарищey м-мерзко" (SS 73). Thus prompted to explain the reason why he turned informer, Larionov reveals that he "тоже о социальной справедливости мечтал" (SS 74). However, having engaged in revolutionary activities as a student, he was arrested for distributing leaflets that called for liberal changes to the government. Larionov was subsequently coerced into working for the police to avoid being sent to exile or prison, which would have left his ailing mother to fend for herself. He was provided with an apartment, a good job and an additional salary for his services, but adds that he has been living in a permanent state of fear of detection ever since: "В общем, всем жизнь хороша. Только вот совсем не сплю по ночам. [...] Забудусь на минуту и вздрагиваю – слышу стук. Думаю, а вот и за мной пришли. То ли те, то ли эти. Так и дергаюсь всю ночь. Стук-стук. Стук-стук" (SS 75). As if to give credence to

this quasi-Gothic sense of inescapable doom, Larionov's words are followed by an actual knock on his door. The visitor turns out to be a member of the Combat Group, sent to kill the informer.

Running counter to popular depictions of spies in crime fiction, this is not the portrayal of a glamorous character full of clever deceit and cunning, but of a human being reduced to animal-like fear and terror. Larionov's sense of persecution highlights the interchangeability of the two reigns of terror that co-exist in the Russian Empire: both the revolutionaries and the government elicit identical reactions of fear on the part of the populace. At the same time, the recognisable parallel between revolutionary terror and Empire also echoes a later situation under the Stalin purges, which doubled up with an omnipresent culture of denunciation and secrecy. The resulting impression is one of a lasting legacy of paranoia and mistrust, both of which date back to the era of authoritarian rule and Empire.

Police officials are likewise no longer exempt from observation by their peers in Akunin's Imperial Russia. Fandorin is spied upon by his colleague, the Collegiate Assessor Myl'nikov (cf. SS 77), whereas Dolgorukoi is routinely informed of Fandorin's whereabouts without the latter's knowledge. Nonetheless, Akunin's protagonist comments less fervently on the Empire's regression into a surveillance state than he did during the events set a fictional decade ago, which indicates that the routine violation of personal freedoms has since become a common and commonly accepted state of affairs: "Осведомленность князя о частной жизни своих ближайших помощников Фандорина ничуть не удивила – успел привыкнуть за годы совместной службы" (SS 139). In the end, all of these different forms of surveillance are born out of the state's fear of losing power: "Когда власти страшно, она никого не жалеет. Надо на всех страху нагнать, и особенно на своих. Чтоб в оба смотрели и чтоб ее, власти, больше, чем убийц боялись" (SS 18). In engaging in this top-down transfer of anxiety into the very make-up of Russian society, the Empire not only produces the ruthless battle strategies of the revolutionaries, but ultimately even exceeds them.

The question about permissible transgressions of the law is raised multiple times in *The State Counsellor*. Unlike the other high-ranking police officials in the novel, Fandorin insists on observing the letter of the law in his fight against terrorism, but is

met with varying degrees of cooperativeness on the part of his colleagues. When Myl'nikov attempts to carry out an arrest despite a lack of evidence, announcing that “Нет времени слежку разворачивать. Результат нужен” (SS 65), Fandorin steps in and declares that he will not allow any such arrest to be made. In Fandorin's interpretation of duty, it is not permissible to fill quotas without sufficient evidence – a practice which was not only widespread in Imperial times, but which continues to influence Russia's contemporary system of justice. In 1997, for instance, foreign observers and Amnesty International raised alarms about “the state's continuing keenness to lock up supposed malefactors without due process”<sup>449</sup>. Because of this continued malpractice, Myl'nikov's stance may not strike Russian readers as particularly unusual or even objectionable, but it does make Fandorin's unrelenting conviction to the opposite appear markedly foreign:

- Господин подполковник, воля ваша, а я бы с этой сволочью по-свойски поговорил. Вы только все испортите своим либерализмом. Дайте мне их на полчаса – соловьями запоют, честное благородное слово.

[...]

- Стойте, господин Мыльников, - поднял палец статский советник. – Никого увозить я не п-позволю.

[...]

- Это неслыханно! – прорвел Петр Иванов, цветом лица напоминающий уже не свеклу, а баклажан. – Да на чьей вы стороне!?

- Я на стороне з-закона. А вы? (SS 68-71)

By forcing Fandorin to spell out his allegiance, Myl'nikov puts his finger on one of the central hiccups of the Imperial justice system: the volatility of its interpretation by Russian officials, along with the way in which ‘law’ and ‘order’ are by no means synonymous terms.

#### *Law and Order vs. West and East*

Fandorin's perception of the law as inviolable is contrasted not only by Myl'nikov, but also by Prince Pozharsky. The latter's arrival broadens the existing discussion into a wider analysis of Russia's self-positioning between East and West, as Pozharsky's Saint Petersburg origins mark him as the novel's token representative of Western, democratic values – at least following the Russian literary tradition of positing Saint Petersburg as Moscow's European double. According to the same paradigm, Fandorin, as the born Muscovite, ought to defend the Asiatic position of established rules and

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<sup>449</sup> “Lawless: Russia. (Criminal Justice System),” *The Economist* (US) 342, no. 8013 (1997): 52.

authority. Yet both their true allegiances are a matter of complex debate, which the reader gets to know via a quasi-Aristotelian dialectic – a “[спор] двух умных людей, каждый из которых грамотно и доказательно излагает свою позицию [...] дело читателя – чью позицию выбрать”<sup>450</sup>.

One of the issues Fandorin and Pozharsky continually clash over is the use of illegal combat strategies in the fight against terrorism. When Pozharsky suggests an ambush on the revolutionaries, Fandorin points out the unlawfulness of such an act:

- Надо бить без предупреждения, залпами. Перестрелять, как бешеных псов. Иначе своих людей потеряем.
- У наших людей такая служба – рисковать жизнью, - упрямо заявил статский советник. – А без предложения сложить оружие операцию проводить п-противозаконно. (SS 232)

This is a continuation of a previous discussion, during which Fandorin argued that “и на войне есть правила. А за шпионаж с использованием вероломства на войне принято вешать” (SS 148). Pozharsky’s reply to Fandorin’s admonition teems with inflated stereotypes about Europe and Asia, ignoring the authority of the common code of law in favour of irrational fearmongering:

- Это не та война, в которой применимы правила [...] Воюют не две европейские державы. [...] Идет дикая, исконная война порядка с хаосом, Запада с Востоком, христианского рыцарства с мамоевой ордой. [...] Здесь воюют по всей безжалостной азиатской науке с заливанием раскаленного свинца в плотку, сдиранием кожи и избивением младенцев. (SS 148)

In this scene, Pozharsky positions himself as the last chivalrous defender of Western values in the fight against chaos, using staple images of populist mythmaking in his references to the Mongol horde, the slaughter of children and the use of torture as outgrowths of Asian degeneracy. The topic of torture is particularly relevant to him, as Pozharsky also rejects its use during an earlier interrogation scene, during which he states: “Какие пытки? Мы ведь в России, а не в Китае. Велите развязать, Петр Иванович. Что за азиатчина, право” (SS 105).

However, by arguing for a suspension of all martial laws in the fight against terrorism, Pozharsky takes a stance not so very different from the revolutionaries themselves. To make matters more complicated, the same stereotype of Asiatic barbarity is also voiced by the young revolutionary Esfir, a provocative socialite and

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<sup>450</sup> A. N. Iarko, “Akunin-Chkhartishvili-Brusnikin-Borisova: Chetyre avtora ili smert’ avtora?,” *Voprosy russkoi literatury* 31, no. 1 (2015): 146-161, 149.

prototypical ‘new woman’ who makes textbook use of her liberal attitudes to criticise the barbarity of Russia’s existing system of rule. Esfir frames her anti-Imperial allegations within the historic context of the ‘oprichnina’ (SS 73, 84), recalling Ivan the Terrible’s reign of terror as a suitable comparison for her own era and mocking Fandorin for receiving an invitation to dinner at Prince Dolgorukoi’s house with the words: “Грозный царь зовет? Собачью голову к седлу и на службу – головы рубить?” (SS 139).<sup>451</sup> Thus, whereas Pozharsky sees Asiatic degeneracy in the revolutionaries, Esfir levels her negative illumination of Russia’s Asian heritage at the Empire itself. In her view, historical continuity is not a sign of stability, but failure.

As a result, it appears that the “Asiatic character of Russia’s despotism [was indeed] a commonplace of the nineteenth-century democratic intelligentsia”<sup>452</sup>. However, as both sides of the political divide connect to the same inflated stereotype in their accusations of each other, the problem of Asia also increasingly appears as the expression of an identity conflict that has more to do with Russia itself than with any real concept of the East. Pozharsky’s earlier use of the word ‘aziatchina’ (‘азиатчина’) is highly apt in this context, as it is an inherently ambivalent term meaning “the almost unlimited capacity among Russians to identify themselves with Asia while showing their contempt for the Asian peoples and civilizations as utterly barbaric”<sup>453</sup>. The same highly conflicting parallel process of self-identification and othering is also expressed in Pozharsky’s talk of the ‘two powers’ at war (‘не две европейские державы’), which splits Russian society into a European and non-European entity.

In an essay titled ‘What is Asia to Us’, Dostoevsky explored this very idea in 1881. Discussing the parallel existence of two Russias, he decreed that “вообще вся наша русская Азия, включая и Сибирь, для России все еще как будто существуют в виде какого-то привеска, которым как бы вовсе даже и не хочет европейская наша Россия интересоваться”<sup>454</sup>. Dostoevsky’s choice of words in this quote is interesting in the context of the final encounter between the revolutionaries and the

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<sup>451</sup> Although Akunin is not the only post-Soviet author to recycle the image of the *oprichnina*, he might have been the first to do so. In 2006, Vladimir Sorokin published *Day of the Oprichnik* (*День опричника*), a dystopian novel about the return of an authoritarian Russian state loosely modelled after the Holy Rus’ and its most notorious medieval ruler.

<sup>452</sup> Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 369.

<sup>453</sup> Milan Hauner, *What Is Asia to Us?: Russia’s Asian Heartland Yesterday and Today* (London: Routledge, 1992), 2.

<sup>454</sup> F. M. Dostoevsky, *Dnevnik Pisatelia Za 1877 God* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1952), 603.

policemen in *The State Counsellor*, as the revolutionary leader notices – somewhat randomly, in the midst of the combat action – a shop sign with the inscription “Мебиус и сыновья Колониальные товары” (SS 240). Not only is there a certain linguistic similarity between the Russian words for appendage (‘привеска’) and attached sign (‘вывеска’), but the sign’s inscription also recalls the Russian Empire’s colonial past in the context of the Moebius strip. Dostoevsky’s differentiation between a Russian Asia and a European Russia corresponds to this visualisation, placing the Russian Empire in the simultaneous role of coloniser and colonised.

This doubling is made even more explicit by the fact that both corresponding parts of Russia in Dostoevsky’s essay are called ‘ours’ – an attitude clearly shared by Pozharsky. Akunin thus returns to the topic of Russia’s process of self-colonisation through Pozharsky’s inconsistent rhetorical rejection of the concept of Asia, which is accompanied by the concomitant failure to transform this renunciation into a practical denial of despotism and autocracy. Instead, Pozharsky even justifies the need for quasi-despotic leadership. When Smol’yaninov echoes Fandorin’s concerns about the moral implications of recruiting double agents, saying that “защитникам государства не пристало действовать нечестными методами [...] Мы должны справедливость и чистоту блюсти, а мы еще больше, чем нигилисты, общество растлеваем” (SS 110), Pozharsky responds:

- С чего вы взяли, юноша, что государство – это справедливость и чистота? [...] Наше государство несправедливо и нечисто. Но лучше такое, чем бунт, кровь и хаос. Медленно, неохотно общество становится чуть-чуть чище, чуть-чуть презентабельней. [...] А революция отшвырнет его назад, к Ивану Грозному. Справедливости все равно не будет [...]. (SS 110-11)

Rather than criticise a status quo where injustice and corruption prevail, Pozharsky argues to uphold this very system of rule as the only way to achieve long-lasting control. More importantly, he considers justice an empty phrase, non-achievable under either system – and threatens with the return of a medieval system of rule which, according to Esfir, has already found its way back into Russia.

Pozharsky’s mockingly selective attitude towards Westernism is made further apparent when he responds to Fandorin’s accusations of corruption by asking: “Обратишься на газеты? Не напечатают. У нас, слава Богу, не Европа” (SS 269). Freedom of speech or lack of censorship are rendered as exotic, foreign elements in Pozharsky’s view, which lose their applicability once transplanted onto Russian soil.

Likewise, Pozharsky criticises the idea of an approachable leader, announcing Dolgorukoi's dismissal from the post of Governor-General of Moscow by voicing the hope that “[в]ласть в городе устанавливается настоящая, крепкая, безо всякой ‘легкодоступности’” (SS 255). The latter comment in particular demonstrates the lasting legacy of Russia's self-colonisation process, as Pozharsky inadvertently lends voice to the country's obsession “with complexes of its own powerlessness and inferiority [...] how you wish to be seen is how you wish to be in reality. This mix of aggressiveness and impotence is the *last and strongest thread connecting today's Russia with its history* [original emphasis]”<sup>455</sup>.

Pozharsky's desire to appear strong and distant demonstrates an underlying fear of inherent weakness, which stems from the fragmentation of the Imperial national identity narrative itself – exposing its unsuitability as a reference frame for a rediscovery of political and societal stability. Pozharsky's view of the West as something he can invent in order to accommodate his own ideological needs for a fixed Russian identity mirrors Orlando Figes's hypothesis that the “idea of ‘Russia’ could not exist without ‘the West’ (just as ‘the West’ could not exist without ‘the Orient’)”<sup>456</sup>. Yet Akunin also broadens this concept, showing that ‘the idea of Russia’ can likewise not exist without Asia – an important contribution to the largely Western-centric identity discourse of the Russian 1990s.<sup>457</sup> In the end, both the West and Asia appear as two sides of the same coin, making the inconsequent rejection of one into an equally hypocritical embrace of the other.

The complexity of this situation elevates Pozharsky's character into a highly recognisable mirror image for the contemporary post-Soviet reader. Pozharsky's perverted sense of pride in his own lawlessness not only resonates with the *bespredel'* atmosphere of the Russian ‘wild nineties’ – which is also hinted at by Fandorin's use of the term ‘bandit’ in an earlier scene – but also corresponds to the subsequent development of a ‘sovereign democracy’ under the Putin regime.<sup>458</sup> As pointed out by

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<sup>455</sup> Dobrenko, “Utopias of Return,” 161.

<sup>456</sup> Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, 66.

<sup>457</sup> Cf. Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation*, 69-132.

<sup>458</sup> During the illicit arrest scene featuring Esfir, Fandorin provides her with a subterfuge to escape the law's clasp: “- Вы ведь могли принять господина Бурляева за б-бандита? – спросил Эраст Петрович барышню, смотревшую на него с весьма странным выражением. - А разве он не бандит? – немедленно откликнулась Эсфирь Литвинова, изобразив крайнее удивление” (SS 71). During the 1990s, the term ‘bandit’ was applied copiously to Russia's legal and financial system; Boris

Svetlana Tishchenko, Pozharsky's attitude carries "popular appeal in the 'new Russia' of Putin and Medvedev: it embodies a gung-ho attitude of the political leaders"<sup>459</sup> that is not only perceived as a sign of strength, but also as a long-overdue rebuke to the allegedly weak transparency of democratic ideals.

Akunin incorporated an explicit link to the political situation of the late 1990s into *The State Counsellor*. In referring to the fictional Dolgorukoi's amiability ('легкодоступности'), he makes Moscow's Governor General appear closer in character to Yeltsin than to the previously constructed alter ego of Moscow mayor Luzhkov. This similarity is expanded upon through the mention of a not altogether sincere newspaper announcement, which commemorates Dolgorukoi's "глубокое значение для ясного сознания всего народа" (SS 255) in a way that could easily be read as a reference to Yeltsin's failed national identity project of the mid-1990s. Lastly, just as Yeltsin's era was clearly coming to an end when Akunin was writing *The State Counsellor*, so did his fictional Dolgorukoi have to face the end of his own era as Moscow's Governor General.

Pozharsky is not incidentally placed in the midst of this historical parallel. His historical double, Dmitry Pozharsky, acted as a figurehead of the Time of Troubles and paved the way for Romanov rule to take over from the Rurikid dynasty – one of whose members was Yuri Dolgoruky. In Akunin's novel, Pozharsky fulfils the same role, as his superior and successor to Dolgorukoi's post is none other than the Romanov Grand Duke 'Simeon' Aleksandrovich Romanov. Akunin conflates the historical and fictional timelines in order to link the 1990s to the Time of Troubles – thus seemingly catering to the trauma narrative that dominated much of the cultural and the political discourse in post-perestroika Russia, while also addressing the

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Nemtsov's entry into Moscow politics, for instance, was labelled 'New Man in Bandit Country' (cf. Chrystia Freeland, "New Man in Bandit Country [Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov]," *The Financial Times*, May 27, 1997) by Western reporters. Since then, the popularity of attaching the epithets 'lawless' or 'bandit' to post-Soviet Russia has continued unabated – and has entered the public consciousness to a degree where it is not only left unchallenged, but readily accepted.<sup>459</sup> Svetlana Tishchenko, "My Hero Is a Villain: The Relationship Between the Hero and the Villains in Boris Akunin's *Turkish Gambit* and *State Counsellor*," *Transcultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2010): 187-99, 193.

symbolic capital that both the Putin regime and the neo-Eurasianists drew out of the events of 1612.<sup>460</sup>

Akunin acknowledges the importance of the Time of Troubles in the construction of narratives about Imperial greatness and stability, but subverts their nostalgic power by highlighting Pozharsky's duplicitous role in the novel. Instead of ushering in a new era of strength, Pozharsky betrays both the Russian Empire and the Russian nation – ridding his offer of identification of all promises of stability and glory. Pozharsky's ultimate complicity in the end of Empire is implied in his inability to express his own Imperial identity, which results in his use of diversified concepts of othering instead. Clowes noticed the continued topicality of this problem for post-Soviet Russia when she argued that “expressions of identity under the Putin regime have turned resolutely in the direction of [...] drawing thick ideological borders between itself and all the ‘others’ out there – Chechens, Jews, new, politically engaged Russian entrepreneurs, artists, freemasons, freethinkers”<sup>461</sup>. Marsh noted the same problem, documenting a “heightened awareness of the presence (often the malign influence) of ‘the Other’ (whether in the form of Westerner, Jew or ‘person of Caucasian nationality’)”<sup>462</sup> in post-Soviet public discourse.

### *The Jewish Other in Imperial Russia*

In the context of the Fandorin project, these lists of prominent others find their echoes across several of the novels – *The State Counsellor* among them. Whereas Akunin included an antagonist of Chechen origins in *The Death of Achilles*, the revolutionary circle in *The State Counsellor* features several characters of Jewish origin. By once again placing a peripheral Other in the stereotypical role of troublemaker and incendiary, Akunin subverts, rather than solidifies, the stereotypes that pertain to this group and opens up a historical dimension for the discussion of anti-Semitic tendencies in the post-Soviet space. Owing, in part, to the fact that Jews “constituted the largest

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<sup>460</sup> Neo-Eurasianism's ‘high priest’ Aleksandr Dugin, for instance, glorifies the Time of Troubles as the beginning of Russia's *sonderweg* in global history, cf. Dmitry Shlapentokh, “The Time of Troubles in Alexander Dugin's Narrative,” *European Review* 27, no. 1 (2019): 143-57.

<sup>461</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 199.

<sup>462</sup> Marsh, “The Nature of Russia's Identity,” 571.

non-Slavic as well as the largest non-Christian ethnic group”<sup>463</sup> in the Russian Empire, the so-called ‘Jewish Question’ was one of the leading issues in late Imperial nationality politics.

The two most prominent Jewish characters in *The State Counsellor* are the antagonist Grin and the revolutionary Esfir. In line with Esfir’s supporting role in the novel overall, descriptions of her experiences with anti-Semitism are sparse. Nonetheless, her character creates the impression of widespread anti-Jewish sentiments across various strata of late Imperial Russian society, such as when Burlyaev exclaims “Хоть самого Ротшильда!” (SS 70) after Esfir fires a shot at him and is then recognised as a well-known banker’s daughter. Apart from raising the ugly spectre of the stereotypically greedy, money-hoarding Jew, Burlyaev’s follow-on comment expresses a further disregard for Jewish customs and traditions: “[на каторге] тебя жидовскими кошерями кормить не станут” (ibid.). Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the description of Esfir’s family’s reception in society: “Литвинова принимали и в самых лучших московских домах, но при этом, бывало, говорили шепотом другим гостям, как бы оправдываясь: ‘Жид крещеный что вор прощенный’” (SS 155). Regardless of her family’s contribution to society, Esfir will always remain the Other in terms of her ethnicity. She tries to change this narrative by aggressively embracing and expanding it through her outspoken defence of women’s rights, her liberal sexuality, and her activity in the revolutionary circle; yet in doing so, she inevitably also caters to the stereotype of the seductive and dangerous female Other that is predicted by her Russian peers.

Grin’s development from a culture-loving, hard-working student into the novel’s revolutionary ‘man of steel’ is also contextualised as a Jewish experience early on in *The State Counsellor*. One of Grin’s earliest memories is the relocation of his family to a small town within the Pale of Settlement – an area historically situated in today’s Ukraine and Poland – following an Imperial crackdown on the Empire’s Jewish populations.<sup>464</sup> The event reinforces the young man’s awareness of his institutionally enforced otherness, as it stands in clear contradiction to Grin’s previous self-perception

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<sup>463</sup> Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*. (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>464</sup> In a remark not wholly unfounded, Clowes also draws comparisons between the original Pale of Settlement for Jewish citizens of the Empire and the way the Chechen situation was handled by the Putin regime, cf. Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 152.

as a Russian citizen: “толком не понимает их чудовищного говора, потому что дома всегда разговаривали по-русски” (SS 44). Grin’s coldness of character is in part explained by the need to confront this kind of hostility from an early age; speaking about his school days, Grin reminisces that “его не травили, не дразнили ‘жидом’, потому что чувствовали в будущем стальном человеке [...] тихую, несуетливую силу, но друзей у него не было и не могло быть” (SS 39). The small town that Grin’s family must relocate to is never mentioned by name, drawing attention to its symbolic, stand-in meaning in the wider context of the Russian Empire.

Akunin pays close attention to the Empire’s chronological timeline in his depiction of the ‘Jewish Question’. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 is described as the event that galvanized a pogrom and thus Grin’s career as a revolutionary. Historiographic studies confirm the link between news about the tsaricide and a nationwide outbreak of pogroms between 1881 and 1884;<sup>465</sup> Grin’s relocation to the Pale of Settlement nearby Kiev also matches this description from a geopolitical point of view, as the “commonly accepted geographic and chronological [area] of pogroms [is] usually assumed to be in the Ukrainian lands of the tsarist empire”<sup>466</sup>. Moreover, Simon Sebag Montefiore summarises that “[e]ven though scarcely any of Alexander II’s assassins were Jews, rumours spread that Jews had killed God’s tsar”<sup>467</sup>. The same explanation is given in *The State Counsellor*: “Кабатчик Митрий Кузмич, отряженный обществом в Белоцерковск, приехал с подтверждением, что слух был верный: царя-императора убили жида. Значит, абрашек можно бить, и ничего за это не будет” (SS 42).

According to Jonathan Dekel-Chen, alternative voices to this discourse did exist, but these were primarily “represented in the international press [which] accused the reactionary tsarist government of instigating the violence”<sup>468</sup>. Incidentally, when Fandorin questions Pozharsky’s readiness to use illegal, or at least immoral, tactics in his investigation, the latter responds with the question: “А что, прикажете капитулировать? Чтобы взбесившиеся толпы жгли дома и поднимали на вилы лучших людей России? Чтобы доморощенные Робеспьеры залили города

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<sup>465</sup> Cf. Jonathan L. Dekel-Chen, *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2011).

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>467</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, *The Romanovs: 1613-1918* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016), 463.

<sup>468</sup> Dekel-Chen, *Anti-Jewish Violence*, 10.

кровью? Чтобы наша держава стала пугалом для человечества и откатилась на триста лет назад?” (SS 148). Ironically, or perhaps quite tellingly, this reply reads more like a description of the actual pogroms than of the terrorist deeds, thus once again calling into question the exact relationship between revolutionary terror and state brutality.

Akunin’s portrayal of the pogrom, subjective in view as it is through its retelling by Grin, gives sufficient room to the ambivalence of this historiographic discourse and manages to incorporate multiple perspectives as to the ‘true’ course of the historical events. Both Dekel-Chen’s assertion that the pogroms were “unrivaled episodes of ethnic violence and tended toward increasing levels of destruction with each new outburst”<sup>469</sup> and his follow-up statement that the “early pogroms [...] caused greater loss of property (shops, warehouses, and homes) than deaths”<sup>470</sup> are reflected in Grin’s account:

Все вышло, как положено: пожгли синагогу, пошарили по хатам, кому ребра намяли, кого за пейсы оттаскали, а к вечеру, когда в шинкарском погребе отыскивались припрятанные бочки с вином, кое-кто из парней и до жидовских девок добрался. [...] Родители уцелели, отсиделись в каменном подвале, но дома было мерзко: погромщики разломали больше, чем взяли [...] Утром в слободе ударил колокол, и с майдана к мосту двинулась густая толпа, многолюднее, чем накануне. (SS 43-4)

Rather than turn his depiction of the pogrom into unreflective, pro-liberal, anti-governmental propaganda, Akunin attempts to keep the historical complexity of the events intact. The mob, for instance, is not portrayed as caught up in a raging bloodlust from the start, but is shown to move through a slow, and because of its hesitancy all the more senseless, momentum that corresponds to historians’ assessments of the pogroms as spontaneous and unorchestrated outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence: “Примерялись долго – не хватало толчка, чтоб растворилась душа” (SS 43). Grin’s account of the pogrom also features a tsarist official who rides off to gather reinforcements in support of the Jewish inhabitants – although he does so only in return for payment. The official does not manage a return until after Grin has stopped the pogrom and killed one townsman in the process, but no suspicion of foul play or embezzlement of the money is raised: “В сумерки прибыл [...] с взводом конной полиции и увидел, что в городке все спокойно. Удивился, поговорил с евреями

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid, 4.

и увез аптекарева сына в тюрьму” (SS 44-5). Nor is the policeman’s cooperation glorified or subjugated to criticism. Instead, it is relayed in a neutral observer’s voice – leaving only the question as to why Grin has to suffer the consequences of his crime, whereas the killings that accompanied the pogrom go unpunished.

According to Dekel-Chen, this discrepancy is historically plausible insofar as “many officials [...] had sympathy for the perpetrators, and agreed to legal discrimination against the victims”<sup>471</sup>. Sebag Montefiore also states that anti-Jewish sentiments were widespread in Alexander III’s court, while the Tsar himself was said to have “encouraged an almost fetishistic anti-semitism among his entourage”<sup>472</sup>. Akunin refers to the existence of anti-Semitic tendencies on the highest levels of Empire in the character of Grand Duke Simeon Aleksandrovich Romanov, who appears closely modelled after Sergei Aleksandrovich Romanov – Governor General of Moscow from 1891 and the person generally held accountable for the Khodynka tragedy of 1896, which Akunin turned into a plot event in the subsequent Fandorin novel *The Coronation* (*Коронация*, 2000). The unusually high number of parallels between Akunin’s fictional Romanov and his historical prototype presage a dark future for the Empire’s Jewish population: one of the first official acts of the real Grand Duke, who was well-known for his anti-Jewish stance, was to issue a decree ordering the expulsion of all Jews from Moscow and Saint Petersburg. According to Sebag Montefiore, the Tsar – in compliance with Sergei’s wishes – signed a

series of laws allowing Sergei to deport whole categories – ‘Jewish artisans, distillers, brewers, general craftsmen and workmen’ and even ‘discharged Jewish soldiers’. In Moscow, Sergei closed the Great Synagogue, sent Cossacks to raid Jewish homes and allowed Jewish women to remain only if they were registered as prostitutes. Twenty thousand Jews were expelled.<sup>473</sup>

This *ukaz* not only caused serious damage to both cities’ economies, but was also accompanied by a high level of police brutality, which was once again commented upon in the international press of the time – and largely barred from the Imperial discourse.<sup>474</sup>

On a contemporary parallel, Akunin’s confrontation of his readership with late Imperial anti-Semitism and the controversial aspects of the Grand Duke’s rule also

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>472</sup> Sebag Montefiore, *The Romanovs*, 463.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid, 472.

<sup>474</sup> Cf. “Enforcing the Anti-Jewish Laws,” *The Washington Post* (1877-1922), May 2, 1891.

provides an important counterweight to post-Soviet, state-sponsored views of Romanov glory. The topicality of this approach has not been diminished since *The State Counsellor*'s publication: in 2017, Putin attended the unveiling of a statue commemorating Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich at the site of his assassination in 1905. In his speech, not a single reference to the controversial aspects of the Romanov's rule was made. Instead, Putin stressed the significance of the statue for Russia's national identity, claiming that it "восстанавливается единство российской истории, в которой нам дорога каждая страница, какой бы трудной она ни была"<sup>475</sup>. In the light of the unilateral nationalist rhetoric and one-sided mythologisation of heroes that accompanies the Putin regime's politics, this cannot be read as anything but a mockery of historical memory.

At the same time, the problem of renewed anti-Semitism in post-Soviet Russia is not just limited to official channels – nor is it portrayed as such by Akunin. Marina Aptekman noted that an "odd mixture of reactionary Orthodox and reactionary Communist ideologies, combined with a very strong anti-liberalism and anti-Semitism [...] originated around 1992"<sup>476</sup>, providing several examples for anti-Semitic poetry that were written in the decade after perestroika. In 1995, Marsh surmised that "[e]xtreme Russian nationalists have deliberately fostered [...] nostalgia [for pre-revolutionary Russia], suggesting that the 'Jewish-Masonic conspiracy' was responsible for toppling the Russian monarchy and destroying the Russian state"<sup>477</sup>. Akunin already included a side note on this development in *The Death of Achilles*, where Fandorin voices a damning verdict on conspiracy theories of the kind:

- Евгений Осипович, [...] что же это за таинственная сила в-вертит судьбами России? По какому праву? И что эта сила удумает завтра?
- На масонов намекаете?
- [...]
- Какие там масоны, - досадливо сморщил гладкий лоб Фандорин. – Про них все знают. Тут же просматривается настоящий комплот, не опереточный. (SMA 201-2)

Worried about the developments in the state, Fandorin refuses to shift the responsibility for the Empire's instability to an artificially inflated Other. By calling

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<sup>475</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Otkrytie Pamiatnika Velikomu Kniasiu Sergeiu Aleksandrovichu," *Kremlin.ru*, May 4, 2017, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54447>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>476</sup> Marina Aptekman, "Kabbalah, Judeo-Masonic Myth, and Post-Soviet Literary Discourse: From Political Tool to Virtual Parody," *Russian Review* 65, no. 4 (2006): 657-81, 664-7.

<sup>477</sup> Marsh, *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia*, 174.

theories about a Jewish-Masonic conspiracy the ‘operetta kind’, he not only flat-out rejects their applicability to Russian history, but also emphasizes their narrative construction in a way that hints at an underlying possibility to change them.<sup>478</sup>

In post-Soviet Russia, the spread of a theatricalised narrative about Russian historical grandeur and the Jewish complicity in the downfall of Empire has developed along conflicting lines since the end of the 1990s. In 2001, Stella Rock stated that although anti-Semitic texts had not yet gained a dominant cultural currency on the post-Soviet Russian book market, “[w]ith racist history books, including [Oleg] Platonov’s, finding their way into schools and Dom Knigi selling Jewish-Masonic plots as authentic history, antisemitic historical ‘revisionism’ is in danger of becoming part of mainstream Russian historiography”<sup>479</sup>. A year later, Akunin’s own work was subjected to an anti-Semitic re-telling, as the 2002 TV version of the Fandorin novel *The Winter Queen* “largely omitted the interesting section of the novel set in an authentically re-created Victorian London, and introduced references to a ‘Jewish-Masonic conspiracy’ – an interpretation that is specifically rejected in the novel as ‘anti-Semitic ravings’”<sup>480</sup>.

At the same time, state-sponsored anti-Semitism and the number of anti-Semitic attacks appear to be on the decline under the Putin regime.<sup>481</sup> While this is “not for want of effort among certain segments of the Russian elite”<sup>482</sup>, Putin himself is increasingly seen as “the only leader in modern Russian history who seems to have no apparent problem with Jews being Jews and Russians simultaneously”<sup>483</sup>. However,

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<sup>478</sup> Again, there is a historical precedent for this, as Marina Aptekman noted that “original Russian works on the subject of Judeo-Masonry” (Aptekman, “Kabbalah, Judeo-Masonic Myth, and Post-Soviet Literary Discourse,” 600) appeared as early as the 1880s.

<sup>479</sup> Stella Rock, “Russian Revisionism: Holocaust Denial and the New Nationalist Historiography,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 35, no. 4 (2001): 64-76, 76. Rock’s pessimistic outlook finds its confirmation in the works of authors and fake historians such as Prokhanov, Dugin, and Mironov, along with the continued literary activity of the abovementioned Platonov. The latter not only continues to publish works that engage in Holocaust denial, but also founded a think-tank called the ‘Institute for Russian Civilization’ in 1993 – self-proclaimedly aiming to strengthen the ideological narrative of Russian historic greatness and Orthodox heritage in its fight against the forces of ‘worldwide Russophobia’, cf. “Institut Russkoi Tsvivilizatsii,” *Institut Russkoi Tsvivilizatsii*, <rusinst.ru/> [accessed 20 June 2019].

<sup>480</sup> Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity*, 526.

<sup>481</sup> Cf. Zvi Gitelman, *Jewish Identities in Postcommunist Russia and Ukraine: An Uncertain Ethnicity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).

<sup>482</sup> James L. Gibson and Marc Morj Howard, “Russian Anti-Semitism and the Scapegoating of Jews,” *British Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 2 (2007): 193-223, 217.

<sup>483</sup> Konstanty Gebert, “Putin’s Jews,” *Momentmag.com*, November 5, 2015, <<https://momentmag.com/putins-jews/>> [accessed 12 February 2020]

anti-Semitic rhetoric against Ukraine increased noticeably in the context of the annexation of Crimea, and some scholars, such as Masha Gessen, argue that public faith in the seeming acceptance of Jewish culture is minimal – in part because anti-Jewish sentiments are frequently masked as expressions of anti-intellectualism.<sup>484</sup> Aptekman noticed a similar phenomenon in the mid-2000s when she described how post-Soviet fears about a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy often carry a predominantly “allegorical and even metaphysical [nature] [...] which actually and ultimately means ‘a member of the liberal intelligentsia’”<sup>485</sup>.

By engaging with the irrational fears of a ‘Jewish-Masonic conspiracy’, Akunin not only utilises the genre of detective fiction to add to the historical narrative about the Empire’s Jewish population, but also directly addresses the contemporary transformations of these anti-Jewish sentiments. In this sense, one emotionally laden and historically evocative Other is conflated with another, resulting in a telling insight into both Imperial and post-Soviet identitary fears. From a post-Soviet perspective, this process simultaneously lays bare anxieties about the prolonged impotence of the intelligentsia – along with its failure to make its own, meaningful contribution to the contemporary national identity debate.

### 3.2.2. *Writing Nation: The Disenchantment of the Positive Hero*

Fandorin’s in-between position as an intelligentsia member and state servant once again marks the exception to the above rule and creates a bridge that connects Akunin’s detective rediscovery of Empire with his attempt to offer a narrative of ‘writing Nation’. In *The State Counsellor*, this process resumes its focus on the critical discussion of a select number of national hero narratives and their grounding in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary thought. Akunin adopts three different angles in his exploration of this theme: Pozharsky’s role as a representative of Empire, Grin’s function as the voice of revolutionary counteractivity, and Fandorin’s unique position as a double to both.

As discussed previously, Pozharsky appears as an advocate of Empire and a post-Soviet voice of discontent with the democratic experiment. His world consists of either a repressive totalitarian state or the revolution, alleged order or presumed chaos – a

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<sup>484</sup> Cf. Masha Gessen, *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (London: Granta, 2013).

<sup>485</sup> Aptekman, “Kabbalah, Judeo-Masonic Myth, and Post-Soviet Literary Discourse,” 667.

binary world of mutual aggression and exploitation in which everybody is everybody's enemy, and where Russia is at war with itself.

*Pozharsky as Puppeteer*

In an attitude reminiscent of Kalinin's theory about the sacrosanct status of historical authority, Pozharsky is convinced of being the bearer of a historical mission: "Я себя от России не отделяю. В конце концов, Россия создана тысячу лет назад одним из моих предков, а другой триста лет назад помог ей возродиться" (SS 269). Talking about his ancestors, Pozharsky not only lists the saints Gleb Muromsky and Georgii Pobedonostsev, otherwise known as Saint George, as his family's adopted patrons (cf. SS 104), but also bases his delusions of historical grandeur on his kinship to Dmitry Pozharsky. Immortalised on the Red Square, Pozharsky is a familiar figure to all Russian readers and joins the list of historical prototypes whose authority Akunin challenges in the Fandorin project.

In *The State Counsellor*, Pozharsky refers to the Red Square statue himself, albeit in critical tones. Condemning the seated stance his ancestor is shown to take, he reads this passivity as emblematic for his family's political inactivity since 1612. In a bout of aristocratic existential dread, Pozharsky warns Fandorin (in whom he suspects a like-minded compatriot) not to follow in his family's footsteps:

я хочу вас с места сдвинуть, чтобы вы вон тому каменному сидню не уподоблялись. Мы с вами, Эраст Петрович, столбовые дворяне, на таких столбах вся Российская империя держится. Я веду род от варягов, вы – потомок крестоносцев. В наших жилах течет древняя разбойничья кровь, от веков она стала терпкой, как старое вино. (SS 192)

Considering how Fandorin never told Pozharsky about his family history, it stands to reason that the latter did a little reconnaissance himself. However, there is little evidence to back up his claim about the detective's genealogy. Pozharsky's blood and birth rhetoric not only carries aspects of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century social Darwinism and the racism that served various Imperial powers in their colonising efforts, but it also mirrors the rhetoric found amid contemporary nationalist revivals such as the neo-Eurasian movement. In 2009, then-president Medvedev used a similar phrase when he talked about WWII veterans during an address to the Federal Assembly: "Мы одной

крови с теми, кто победил, стало быть, все мы – наследники победителей”<sup>486</sup>. By embodying such clearly ideologized ideas, Pozharsky functions as an early mouthpiece for the kind of nationalist rhetoric that openly flirts with grand historical narratives and mythological invocations of an unbroken line of patriotic fervour. All the more ironic, then, that neither of the allegedly ur-Russian ancestors that Pozharsky invokes – the crusaders and the Varangians – were of ethnic Russian origin.

In his discussion of the Red Square statue, Pozharsky also expresses an anti-capitalist standpoint that propagates a conservative, aristocracy-focussed world-view: “[Разбойничья кровь] погуще, чем жидкая киноварь купчишек и приказных. Наши зубы, кулаки и когти должны быть крепче, чем у Мининых, иначе уплывет империя у нас меж пальцев, такое уж подходит время” (SS 192). Being both a reactionary and an aristocrat intent on keeping Russia’s parallel societies apart, Pozharsky inscribes the nobility with the right to bend the rules to their will and whim. However, just as in previous instances in the novel – such as when Fandorin provided a counternarrative to Pozharsky’s glorification of banditry, and Esfir condemned Fandorin’s love of autocracy as a source of chaos – Pozharsky’s point of view about the role of merchants is also presented with an essential counterview.

The character who voices this difference is the factory owner Lobastov, who supports the revolutionaries financially. As an embodiment of the class of socially responsible entrepreneurs that was beginning to develop in Russia and elsewhere at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Lobastov’s work ethic and management style effectively belie Pozharsky’s verdict of a useless merchant class that bears no social relevance whatsoever. When Grin visits Lobastov’s factory, he is surprised to realise that “Если б все капиталисты были как Лобастов, незачем стало бы и *пожар зажигать* [...] Глупая мысль, потому что на всю Россию Лобастов имелся только один [my emphasis]” (SS 88) – a statement that includes a potentially deliberate word-play on Pozharsky’s name and the proverbial sparking of a flame to bring about change in society.

Despite offering the revolutionaries financial support, Lobastov refuses to be placed on either side of the terrorist divide. In fact, he is affronted by the idea that he

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<sup>486</sup> Dmitry Medvedev, “Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” *Kremlin.ru*, November 12, 2009, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/5979>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

could be taken for a convinced revolutionary and explains his support of the Combat Group with the passivity of the government, which sparked his desire to scare the ruling elite into action:

Вы думаете, я вам деньги из страха даю? Или индульгенцию на случай вашей победы покупаю? [...] Не приведи Господь, если вы победите! Да и не будет у вас никакой победы. [...] наших дураков надутых пугать надо, чтоб не ставили палки в колеса, чтоб не мешали умным людям страну из болота тащить. Учить их, ослов, надобно. [...] Пусть до их чугунных голов дойдет, что России либо со мной, Лобастовым, идти, либо с вами, в тартарары катиться. Третьего не дано. (SS 90)

Lobastov correctly predicts the end of Empire in his diatribe, and although his reductionist view of the possible paths for Russia's future is not reflective of the actual historical complexity at play, the idea that a change in business culture could have prevented a revolution is in itself an important addition to the historical narrative.

A similar thought is also expressed by another supporting character, the senior operations officer Zubtsov. Unlike Lobastov, Zubtsov reasons that the best way to rectify the current situation in the Empire is to secure the cooperation of the autocracy itself: "Тот, кому сносно живется, на баррикады не пойдет [...] Слава богу, у нас самодержавная монархия. Самым богатым и умным разъяснить, чтоб поняли свою выгоду, а потом закон провести. Сверху" (SS 178). In designing this character, Akunin once more took inspiration from Russian history itself: Zubtsov's opinions strongly echo those of Sergei Zubatov, "brilliant secret policeman [...] [and] chief of the Moscow Okhrana, who was sponsoring and guiding his own unions in the new labour movement – so-called 'police socialism'"<sup>487</sup>. Although a convinced socialist, Zubatov still "advocated paternalistic governance over the working masses"<sup>488</sup> and devised a successful system of turning revolutionaries into informers, thus infiltrating much of the Leftist movement up until and during the First World War. The complexity of this historical prototype thus only appears in sketches in Akunin's novel, but it, too, offers an alternative to Pozharsky's *sonderweg* rhetoric of supposedly Russian exceptionalism.

Ultimately, both Lobastov and Zubtsov-Zubatov appear as positive business figures in *The State Counsellor* – a daring feat in the cutthroat capitalist atmosphere of

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<sup>487</sup> Sebag Montefiore, *The Romanovs*, 509.

<sup>488</sup> Laurent Murawiec and Clifford Gaddy, "The Higher Police: Vladimir Putin and His Predecessors," *The National Interest*, no. 67 (2002): 29-36, 32. As the paper title suggests, Murawiec and Gaddy draw parallels between his and Putin's approach to politics.

the 1990s, when consumers were wavering between self-loathing and jokes about Russia's nouveaux riches. Thus, although Akunin's contextualisation of business involvement in revolutionary activities to ward off state backwardness evokes stereotypical reader reactions about the prototypical character type of the soulless, Westernised businessman, it also subverts this character portrayal. As a result, both Lobastov and Zubtsov form important contributions to the multi-layered historical world-building at play in the Fandorin project. This fact is also expressed in the chapter heading "Глава девятая, в которой много говорят о судьбах России [my emphasis]" (SS 173): instead of reverting to a simple black-and-white explanation for revolutionary intent that would support a Pozharsky-ian reading of Russian history, a plethora of reasons for engagement in political dissent – or support – is expressed by Akunin's character ensemble instead.<sup>489</sup>

Pozharsky's offer of a questionable national identity narrative is further made manifest in the context of his political machinations. As the events of *The State Counsellor* progress, Pozharsky's eagerness to leave his mark on the history of the Russian body politic is framed as a wish to play the role of puppeteer in the lives of his fellow citizens. Just like Achimas in *The Death of Achilles*, Pozharsky aspires to become a writer of other people's fates; his self-insertion into the history of the Russian state is framed in a correspondent literary context. When Pozharsky first appears in *The State Counsellor*, he enters the room with the words "Приехавший по именному повелению из Петербурга чиновник требует вас сей же час к себе" (SS 104). This is a quotation taken directly from Gogol's *Revizor* (*Ревизор*, 1836), a play that features a band of corrupt provincial officials sent into a panic by the arrival of a fake government inspector. The play refers to various cases of corruption, embezzlement and venality, yet Pozharsky's quote itself has no bearing on actual events in *The State*

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<sup>489</sup> The English translation renders the chapter title in the singular, saying 'Chapter 9 in which a lot is said about the destiny of Russia' (SC 184). Without laying claim to any translation expertise, I would want to insist on the plural for this phrase, as it appears to be a deliberate choice by Akunin. It would, in any case, be considerably more common to use 'о судьбе' in the original Russian. This view is corroborated by the fact that Akunin keeps introducing the topic of underrepresented historical perspectives into the Fandorin novels; in *The Jade Rosary Beads* (*Нефритовые четки*, 2007), for example, one of the short stories about the death of a business magnate (*Из жизни щепок*) ends with the plot twist that his death was just collateral damage, used to draw attention away from the murder of an individual of considerably lesser social standing. The aha-effect that this produces among the characters in the story is mirrored by the reader realisation that most historical narratives only ever focus on a select group of players, rather than taking into account the views and perspectives of minorities or disadvantaged groups.

*Counsellor*. It is also immediately rephrased into a request for coffee, signalling that its insertion serves no other purpose than to call Gogol's play to mind – both for the characters in the novel and for Akunin's readership. By repeating the General Inspector's words verbatim, Pozharsky places a humorous claim on the role of defender of law and order, whilst at the same time hinting at his own masquerade and double-identity. It is a hint that he knows will fall flat and remain undetected, which allows him to simultaneously mock the gullibility of his colleagues and revel in his mastery over the surrounding world.

Pozharsky continues his re-writing of reality according to literary modes during the recruitment of the double agent Rahmet. Rahmet's interrogation proves futile until the appearance of Pozharsky, who coerces him into cooperation by threatening the release of incriminating pictures, taken during one of Rahmet's regular visits to a local child prostitute: “Вы, Селезнев, получите не героический процесс, на котором в вас будут влюбляться дамочки из зала. В вас плюнут ваши же товарищи как в предателя и подонка, запятнавшего светлый лик революции” (SS 107). Rahmet relents; when it is Pozharsky's turn to choose a codename for the new recruit, he settles for “Гвидон [...] будете летать с вашего острова Буяна ко мне, в царство славного Салтана, то комаром, то мухой, то шмелем” (SS 108). It is at this point that Fandorin realises “что вербовка уже состоялась [...] невидимый рубеж перейден” (ibid.).

The literary reference to Pushkin's fairy tale with the (somewhat cumbersome) title *The Tale of Tsar Saltan, of His Son the Renowned and Mighty Bogatyr Prince Gvidon Saltanovich, and of the Beautiful Princess-Swan* (*Сказка о царе Салтане, о сыне его славном и могучем богатыре князе Гвидоне Салтановиче и о прекрасной царевне Лебеди*, 1831) construes an interesting relationship between Pozharsky and Rahmet. In the fairy tale, Tsar Saltan is betrayed by his wife's sisters, leading him to exile her while he is away at war. Unbeknownst to Saltan, the queen gives birth to a baby boy, who reaches adulthood within days instead of years and helps her flee to a foreign island. On this island, the boy Gvidon saves a swan from certain death, whereupon the grateful bird lends him its magical powers and enables him to visit the kingdom of his father in disguise – first in the shape of a mosquito, then that of a fly, and finally in the form of a bumblebee. Every time Gvidon visits his father, he asks travelling merchants to relay an invitation to Tsar Saltan from King

Gvidon's tsardom, hoping he might observe his father's reaction. The queen's jealous sisters interfere each time the Tsar comes close to the decision to visit, but thanks to the information Gvidon gathers during his visits and the swan's magical powers, he eventually manages to reunite with his father and bring about a happy family ending.

The relation this construes between Rahmet and Pozharsky offers an essential clue as to their relationship in the novel. On the one hand, Rahmet clearly takes on Gvidon's role as spy, gathering information while hiding in plain sight – just like the near invisible insects that his literary role model turns into. Likewise, Pozharsky exhibits early megalomaniacal traits otherwise characteristic of totalitarian rulers and openly covets the role of Tsar, causing him to appropriate a popular Russian proverb about the powers of Tsar and God: “Мол, хоть я и не в столице, но высоко сажу и далеко гляжу” (SS 275).<sup>490</sup> Pozharsky also aims to achieve “почетное место в истории российской государственности и, что для меня еще более существенно, завидное место в российском государстве” (SS 191) and eventually proclaims himself “человек, который может спасти Россию. Потому что я умен, смел и лишен сантиментов” (SS 268).

On the other hand, unlike his fairy-tale prototype, Akunin's Gvidon does not act on his own behalf. Neither is the kingdom he infiltrates at peace, and the information gathered is not meant to be used for its defence. These differences acquire significance in the context of yet another discrepancy: in the fairy tale, Tsar Saltan is Gvidon's next of kin, not his enemy. It is this particular relation invoked in the Saltan-Gvidon-dynamic that suggests an alternative reading to Akunin's relationship between Rahmet and Pozharsky, in which Rahmet is not a new recruit, but a long-standing informer. The hidden father-son dynamic is revealed through the literary reference in Pozharsky's choice of codename – a link that is once again too obscure for the surrounding characters to decipher, although Fandorin's impression that the recruitment went uncommonly smoothly steers him in the right direction.<sup>491</sup>

Consequently, it becomes clear that Rahmet's entire recruitment is staged – followed by the novel's final revelation that Pozharsky acted as a double agent himself,

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<sup>490</sup> The Russian proverb I am referring to is ‘До Бога высоко, до Царя далеко’.

<sup>491</sup> Rahmet's own confession to Grin after being caught red-handed confirms the suggestion of a long-standing collaboration between Pozharsky and him: “Давно? – Да считай, с самого начала! Меня давно тошнит от вас, скучнорылых” (SS 127).

committing “двойное предательство, то есть дергать за ниточки обе куклы, полицейскую и революционную” (SS 109). During the showdown, Pozharsky reveals that he is the anonymous source that fed state secrets to the Combat Group, enabling Grin’s circle of revolutionaries to carry out their recent string of successful assassinations. Additionally, he also acted as a puppeteer of Grand Duke Romanov, whose views Pozharsky manipulated and whom he cunningly implemented as a ruler too weak to withstand advisorial whispers.

In thus perceiving others as puppets, Pozharsky is shown to view life as a play to be written or directed at will. Both this duplicity and Pozharsky’s repeated self-stylization as a bandit and trickster figure liken him to Akunin’s writerly persona of the equally mischievous ‘evil man’. However, unlike Akunin, Pozharsky does not toy with historical what-ifs in an attempt to awaken Russian society from its self-induced slumber or to parody the officially sanctioned amnesia it so willingly engages in. Instead, he dons the costume of an unpredictable rebel for entirely reactionary reasons. The success he has in doing so acts as a reminder about the revolution’s flaws and the brittleness of political reality, but it also serves as a warning sign about the compelling persuasiveness of totalitarian discourses. In the end, anybody bold enough to do so can play with the historical narrative – for better or for worse.

#### *Grin as National Hero*

In *The State Counsellor*, mastery over Russia’s historic hero narrative is also fought over by the revolutionary circle around Grin. As Pozharsky and Grin share the same destructive approach to fashioning Russia’s future, they also share several other similarities. Thus, both refer to the battle of Borodino as a simile for their fight with each other – exposing their respective self-perception as noble and heroic freedom fighters. As one of the decisive battles in the Napoleonic War, Borodino conjures up the image of the Russian nation’s valiant, self-sacrificing nature. The battle occupies an important place in the construction and manipulation of identity narratives in Russia and has not only been immortalised in various works of 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (*Война и мир*, 1869) and Lermontov’s poem *Borodino*

(*Бородино*, 1837) among them, but has also given birth to the literary trope of the Napoleon figure as “a sinful yet heroic rebel”<sup>492</sup>.

Borodino also plays a recurrent part in political representations of national unity and heroism in Russia – which neither Grin nor Pozharsky focus on in their references to the battle.<sup>493</sup> Instead, Grin singles out the grand-scale bloodshed of the Borodino battlefield, using it to stylise Russian officials as ruthless executioners and worse enemies than the French: “Вот все Бородино, Бородино. [...] Там ведь стреляли, не думали, в хорошего или в плохого. Француз – значит, пали. [...] А тут враги похуже, чем просто французы” (SS 169). Meanwhile, Pozharsky draws attention to the sheer levels of destruction that accompanied the battle, which heralded the razing of Moscow: “Их там семь человек, вооружены до зубов. Такое Бородино устроят, что после снова Москву отстраивать придется” (SS 231). Thus, both characters invoke the battle of Borodino as a warning sign, not as a call-to-arms – dissolving not only the boundary between government and revolutionaries, but also pointing towards an important shift in frontier: unlike in the Napoleonic War, the enemy now comes from within.<sup>494</sup>

Grin’s revolutionary Combat Group is the quintessential embodiment of such a threat from within. While it is not the first revolutionary group to be referenced in the Fandorin series, it is the one most closely modelled after a historical forebear, i.e. the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Narodnaia volia*, the group responsible for Alexander II’s assassination in 1881.<sup>495</sup> A revolutionary undercurrent did, however, feature in the Fandorin series from the very start; in *The Winter Queen*, set in 1876, Fandorin received a warning that “[н]аши российские революционеры на грани раскола. [...] То, что было до сих пор – цветочки. Террор против правящего класса может стать массовым. [...]

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<sup>492</sup> Robert L. Jackson, “Napoleon in Russian Literature,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 26 (1960): 106-18, 107.

<sup>493</sup> Putin marked the 200-year-anniversary of the battle with a visit to the original battle site, invoking parallels to the Great Patriotic War in his speech. Cf. Vladimir Putin, “Torzhestva po sluchaiu 200-letiiia Borodinskogo srazheniia,” *Kremlin.ru*, September 2, 2012, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16346>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>494</sup> The theme of state and revolutionaries as doubles has also been explored in works of other Russian writers, for example Bely’s novel *Peterburg*, cf. Platt, “Historical Novel,” 81.

<sup>495</sup> The group’s newspaper is said to be the ‘нелегальная цюрихская ‘Воля народа’ (SS 5), which could also be a reference to Lenin’s time hiding out in Switzerland.

судьба России на карту поставлена”<sup>496</sup>, whereas in *The Death of Achilles*, Russia is described as having reached the “эпоху политического терроризма” (SMA 194).

In *The State Counsellor*, Grin’s circle of revolutionary fellows-in-arms is small, but diverse, and represents a microcosm of a proto-democratic society based on equality and the rejection of a hierarchy of ranks. This is, among other things, expressed in the fact that “[в] группе все были на ‘ты’, вне зависимости от возраста и революционных заслуг” (SS 46). While Grin’s revolutionaries are ready to sacrifice themselves and others in the name of the greater good, they do not intend to create a reign of terror or fear for the greater public; instead, they are portrayed as striving for freedom of expression and equal comradeship. The revolutionaries’ standard activities are described as “[п]оругать власти, попеть недозволенные песни и, конечно, выпить-закусить” (SS 64) – which further strengthens the impression of the communal nature upon which their established social rites hinge.

The group also includes female members, among which are the prostitute-turned-madame Julie and the aristocrat’s daughter Needle.<sup>497</sup> However, most of the revolutionary members hail from a socially disadvantaged background or the fringes of society, such as Grin’s closest comrades Emelya and Bullfinch. Whereas Emelya is described as “хороший боевик. Крепкий, несуетливый, без интеллигентских фанаберий” (SS 47), Bullfinch is introduced as “сын повешенного царевубийцы и народоволки, умершей в каземате от протестной голодовки [...] Первый свободный человек будущей свободной России. Без мусора в голове, без мути в душе” (SS 52).

Whereas gender and social distinctions do not matter in Grin’s choice of comrades, the ability for self-reflection and moderation do. Although the revolutionaries do not in any way qualify as role models for socially responsible behaviour, they do showcase moral qualms in a way not a single government official

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<sup>496</sup> Boris Akunin, *Azazel* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2009), 76. All further quotations will be referring to this edition, abbreviated as (AZ).

<sup>497</sup> Although the actual plot presence of female characters in the Fandorin novels is often lamentably limited, most of Akunin’s women are endowed with a glittering array of proto-feminist thoughts and forward-thinking opinions. In *The State Counsellor*, women are at the centre of all crucial plot developments. Julie, for instance, acts as a double agent and betrays both Pozharsky and Grin; she is also responsible for gathering both men in Needle’s family home for the novel’s showdown. Needle herself is the person who not only builds and delivers bombs, but also does reconnaissance work and, ultimately, lights the bomb that kills both Pozharsky, Grin, and herself.

in *The State Counsellor*, with the exception of Fandorin and Smol'yaninov, does. During a planned operation at a railway station, for instance, Bullfinch decides not to give the agreed signal to throw a bomb after spotting a mother and child in the crowd;<sup>498</sup> likewise, Grin condemns Rahmet's unauthorised acid attack on a politician with the words: “[с] той поры на Рахмета [он] смотреть без отвращения не мог” (SS 49).

Although the revolutionaries do collaborate with members of the intelligentsia – such as the private lecturer Aronson, who is said to be “скорее либерал, чем революционер, и террористических методов не одобряет” (SS 50) – the overall revolutionary circle's attitude towards the intelligentsia can best be described as sceptical. As a self-proclaimed man of deeds, Grin has little sympathy for people like Aronson, who talk but do not say anything (cf. SC 54). Still, both Grin and his comrade Emelya are well-read and far from uneducated. In his youth, Grin “декламировал Некрасова и Лермонтова” (SS 39), whereas Emelya's process of reading *The Count of Monte Cristo* accompanies the events of *The State Counsellor* – leading to his frustrated proclamation: “Гнида какая этот Вильфор! – пробормотал Емеля, переворачивая страницу. – Чисто наши судейские” (SS 187). The result is an interesting layering of fictionality: a late 19<sup>th</sup>-century fictional criminal is portrayed as reading an early 19<sup>th</sup>-century crime story, during which an early 21<sup>st</sup>-century crime fiction reader observes him. Becoming a part of this literary and historical palimpsest draws Akunin's reader's attention to crime fiction's long-established function as a socio-politically engaged genre, but it also highlights its involvement in the portrayal of unstable realities across various cultural contexts.

Akunin's contextualisation of the national hero narrative within classical literature is made even more apparent in Grin's own character profile. Figures from within the revolutionary circle twice make Grin's hero status explicit in their greetings, saying “Вы знаете, что вы теперь самый главный герой?” (SS 118) and “Вы самый настоящий герой, - произнесла она очень серьезным и спокойным тоном, будто констатировала доказанный наукой факт” (SS 189). Esfir, without personally

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<sup>498</sup> This scene could potentially also be read as another reference to Grand Duke Sergei Aleksandrovich, whose assassination in 1905 is said to have been delayed several times because of the presence of his wife and young niece and nephew, cf. I. C. Wakerley, “The ‘Delicate Murder’ of the Grand Duke Sergei of Russia (1905),” *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 47 (1976): 1-9 and Sebag Montefiore, *The Romanovs*, 522.

knowing Grin, also issues the more general statement of “все или почти все революционеры – люди благородные и героические” (SS 176).

Akunin does not stop there. The literary intertext used in the creation of Grin actively plays with Russia’s heritage of ambiguous (anti-)heroes and provides a rich palimpsest of intertextual sources. Thus, one of the first obvious prototypes for Grin is Raskol’nikov, the quintessential man of ideas in Russian literature, whose influence on Grin as a character is indirectly referenced in the use of one of his signature phrases:

Без тираноборства революций не бывает – *это аксиома*. Листовками и просветительскими кружками царизм не своротить. Террор был нужен как воздух [...] [my emphasis] (SS 54)

Гм... да... все в руках человека, и все-то он мимо носу пронесит, единственно от одной трусости... *это уж аксиома*... Любопытно, чего люди больше всего боятся? Нового шага, нового собственного слова они всего больше боятся... [my emphasis]<sup>499</sup>

Grin and Raskol’nikov share the kind of cold-blooded rationalism that allows them to talk about murder as if it was a mathematical equation. A lot of Grin’s habits also involve physical deprivation and pseudo-scientific rigour, further adding a Raskol’nikov-an scientific discipline to his story; when Grin is described as counting his heartbeats in his sleep, for instance, this activity is relayed with the words: “эта арифметика не была лишена смысл, потому что [...] закаляла выдержку и волю” (SS 37). Moreover, Grin is described as a character who dreams of becoming a ‘match’ in the course of world history; in a similar way, Raskol’nikov hopes to take a step in life that no-one has dared take before him. Lastly, Grin’s aforementioned reference to the battle of Borodino reconnects him to Raskolnikov’s aim at becoming a ‘new Napoleon’.

The chapter that features these descriptions is subtitled “Отдых стального человека”, which introduces several other intertexts for a reading of Grin as a contender for the role of national hero. The first of these is Chernyshevsky’s novel *What is to be Done?* (*Что делать*, 1863), occasionally labelled the ‘revolutionary’s bible’. In his analysis of *The State Counsellor*, Kevin Platt stated that *What is to be Done?* is “such an obvious source text for a novel dealing with revolutionary terrorism that Akunin simply delegates the citation function to one of his characters”<sup>500</sup>. Despite

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<sup>499</sup> F. M. Dostoevsky, *Prestuplenie i Nakazanie* (Berlin: Izdatel’stvo I. P. Ladyzhnikova, 1919), 6.

<sup>500</sup> Platt, “Historical Novel,” 79. Alternatively, Tishchenko suggests Dostoevsky’s novel *The Adolescent* (*Подросток*, 1875) as the main source material for the character of Grin, cf. Tishchenko, “My Hero Is a Villain,” 194.

the similarity in name to the novel's protagonist Rakhmetov, however, it is not Rahmet who resembles Chernyshevsky's revolutionary ideal the most, but Grin. Like Chernyshevsky's Rakhmetov, Grin develops the habit of lying on hard surfaces (cf. SC 37), practices gymnastics for physical strength, and generally lives an ascetic lifestyle that neither allows for luxurious foods nor sexual pleasures. Grin's Spartan outlook on life is also reflected in his clipped manner of speech, which is mirrored in the laconic subtitles given by Akunin to the chapters that focus on his point of view.

The link between Grin and Rakhmetov is further reinforced through Grin's fervent commitment to the revolutionary ideal. He sees Russia's only hope for a better future

в периодическом взбалтывании, имя которому революция. Передовые нации – те, которые прошли через эту болезненную, но необходимую операцию, и чем раньше, тем лучше. Класс, слишком долго находящийся наверху, мертвеет [...] от этого поры страны хакупориваются, и в обществе нарастает удушье, производящее бессмысленность и произвол. Государство ветшает, как давно не отремонтированный дом, и если процесс разрушения зашел слишком далеко, подпирать и латать гнилую постройку нецелесообразно. Нужно ее спалить, и на пепелище выстроить новый дом, крепкий и светлый. (SS 40)

It is worthwhile quoting this passage in full, as it construes an important parallel to post-Soviet reality through the use of the metaphor of the 'common European house', which was one of Gorbachev's preferred figures of speech and a cornerstone of the public perestroika discourse. Its invocation in this passage provides a contemporary level of meaning for Grin's opinion and suggests that a 'novostroika', rather than a 'perestroika', would have been the advisable course of action. This is particularly relevant for Akunin's readership in the context of the inadequate government reforms that took place during the 1990s, and which allowed numerous members of the old Soviet *nomenklatura* to retain their places or move on to occupy similar ones.

The problems that arose from this insufficient 'perestroika' are now being linked to Russia's swift return to a authoritarian system of rule. In 1996, Olga Kryshantovskaya and Stephen White concluded that already under Yeltsin's rule, the "Soviet tradition of 'selection and allocation of cadres' was in effect revived, and with it the 'table of ranks'"<sup>501</sup>. While summarising their findings, they also stated that during "the post-communist years [...] three-quarters of the presidential administration and nearly three-quarters of the Russian government were former *nomenklatura*

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<sup>501</sup> Olga Kryshantovskaya and Stephen White, "From Soviet Nomenklatura to Russian Élite," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 5 (1996): 711-33, 722. This table of ranks is present for readers of the Fandorin project as well, as Fandorin rises steadily on the associated career ladder.

members, and among the regional leadership over 80% had similar origins”<sup>502</sup>. Rostislav Turovskii carried out a similar analysis in 2010, which led him to surmise that “rotation within the nomenklatura [has been retained], which brings to power in the regions new groups from the state bureaucracy [...] The elite reproduces itself”<sup>503</sup>. Vasily Gatov, Elisabeth Schimpfössl and Ilya Yablokov traced the persistence of *nomenklaturnost*, as they call it, across various post-Soviet Russian media institutions, only to arrive at similar findings to those of the previous authors.<sup>504</sup> Read in this context, Grin’s statement contains a judgment that is equally applicable to late Imperial as it is to post-Soviet Russia – and which contains a comment on the failure of the Yeltsin regime and the liberal ruling elite to seize the opportunities that the perestroika presented.

A second intertext used in Grin’s character construction is hinted at in the epithet ‘steel man’ (‘стальной человек’). Mulcahy, in his study of the film adaptation of *The State Counsellor*, recognised a connection between Chernyshevsky’s and Akunin’s novels, but also pointed out that Grin “[augurs] the new Soviet man of the 1920s [...] through rigid self-discipline and vigorous exercise”<sup>505</sup>. Strangely enough, Mulcahy did not refer to Nikolay Ostrovsky’s novel *How the Steel was Tempered* (*Как закалялась сталь*, 1934) in this analysis; however, the repeated descriptions of Grin as a man of steel invite a comparison between Chernyshevsky’s novel and the later tenets of Socialist Realism just as much as they present Grin as an ambiguous, and therefore sufficiently Akunian, continuation of the positive hero tradition in Ostrovsky’s vein.

Although originally a term coined in the Soviet era, the ‘positive hero’ has a long history in Russian literature. Marcia Morris links its rise to the literary blueprint of the early ascetic hero, who played a key part in a number of religious texts that predated the rise of the realistic novel in Russian literature by several centuries. Talking about both Chernyshevsky’s *What is to be Done?* and Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel was Tempered*, Morris argues that a degeneration process of the ascetic hero ideal took

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<sup>502</sup> Ibid, 727-8.

<sup>503</sup> Rostislav F. Turovskii, “How Russian Governors Are Appointed,” *Russian Politics & Law* 48, no. 1 (2010): 58-79, 74.

<sup>504</sup> Cf. Vasily Gatov, Elisabeth Schimpfössl, and Ilya Yablokov, “From Soviet to Russian Media Managers,” *Russian Politics* 2, no. 1 (2017): 7-31.

<sup>505</sup> Mulcahy, “A Not-so-thrilling Thriller,” 328.

place following its secularisation under the Soviet regime.<sup>506</sup> Instead of fulfilling the role of spiritual role model, the Sovietized hero figure became a hollow echo of Socialist ideals that turned the original separation of body and soul – which was meant to enable a search for higher truths – into a farce. Although it was sold as a positive role model, the figure acquired the meaning of a negative hero instead.

In a convincing extension of this view, Rufus Mathewson reformulated the positive hero tradition by tracing its origins to “the earliest moments of the realist epoch”<sup>507</sup> – claiming, in the process, that it inspired the Soviet search for a new literary ideal because of its obvious connection points to Socialist Realism. Mathewson not only states that Chernyshevsky was “an enormously important figure in Lenin’s life”<sup>508</sup>, but also that the literary creation Rakhmetov “[i]n all his character traits [...] is a nearly perfect early model of the Bolshevik [...] a member of a tiny elite which aspires to change the world”<sup>509</sup>. As a result, the positive heroes of Russian literature ought to be seen as “emblematically virtuous images of political men”<sup>510</sup>.

It is this political capacity of Russia’s positive hero tradition that Akunin arguably transfers to the post-Soviet detective novel, prompting a search for potential catalysts of a new societal rupture. True to form, Akunin parodies the obvious disconnect between the positive hero’s official title and his unofficial negative reception, spurning Soviet detective fiction’s tendency to be “ideologically tendentious and populated by squeaky-clean ‘positive heroes’”<sup>511</sup> in the process. Just as Morris calls Ostrovsky’s work the “Triumph of Cliché”<sup>512</sup>, Grin is an embodiment of the culminated clichés of both realist and Soviet literature’s search for a positive hero – made manifest in Rahmet’s semi-spiteful description of his character as “Франкенштейн из английского романа, получеловек-полумашина” (SS 109).

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<sup>506</sup> Cf. Marcia A. Morris, *Saints and Revolutionaries: The Ascetic Hero in Russian Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 107-27.

<sup>507</sup> Rufus Wellington Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1975), 14.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. Perhaps not coincidentally, Akunin’s Grin is said to have fled from a penal colony via China, Japan, and America, only to end up in Switzerland, a country Lenin also spent some time in exile in (cf. SS 52).

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>511</sup> Theimer Nepomnyashchy, “Markets, Mirrors, and Mayhem,” 166.

<sup>512</sup> Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 173.

Although Rahmet erroneously calls the monster, not the Doctor, Frankenstein, his comparison correctly points out the patchwork of clichés that went into Grin’s literary creation. If we collect all the intertextual references previously mentioned, then Grin appears as a receptacle for Lermontov’s disillusioned demons, Nekrasov’s rebels, Chernyshevsky’s revolutionaries, and, finally, Ostrovsky’s man of steel.<sup>513</sup> At the same time, Grin’s success as a positive hero is about as convincing as that of his Soviet prototypes – it barely exists. This parodic quality is also hinted at through another literary intertext, once again provided by Rahmet. During an early scene in the novel, he greets Grin with a couple of self-composed verses:

Жил на свете Грин *железный*,  
Он имел талант *полезный* –  
Спал на досках *славный* Грин,  
Обходился без перин.

- Есть и другой вариант. Рахмет остановил жестом пыснувшего Снегиря и продолжил:

Жил на свете *рыцарь* бедный  
По прозванию *Храбрый* Грин.  
Он имел талант *невредный* –  
Обходился без перин. (SS 48)

As his comrades burst into laughter, Grin realises that “это он из Пушкина переиначил. Наверно, смешно” (SS 48). Given Rahmet’s duplicitous role in the novel, the poem’s rephrasing is almost certainly meant to be mocking – not least because it reminds readers of Pushkin’s own literary heritage as one of Russia’s great masters of irony and satire. The obvious banality of Grin’s accomplishments in the poem – such as making do without feather duvets – is delivered in the same, highly stylised mode that Pushkin was known for, making Rahmet’s verses equally reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual satire and the conceptually empty hero rhetoric of Soviet times.

The choice of a poem about knights in reference to Grin is not entirely coincidental either. Grin’s own mantra of life reflects his self-perception as a national hero figure, summarised in the trinity “стальная воля, богатырская сила, безупречная чистота” (SS 40). Unfortunately, the English translation loses one of the most important aspects

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<sup>513</sup> Apart from this, *Frankenstein* has been called both “a novel of racial panic” (Adriana Craciun, “Frankenstein’s Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, ed. Andrew Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016): 84–98, 88) and “a kaleidoscopic political imaginary” (ibid, 84) of its times – labels that could just as easily be applied to *The State Counsellor*.

of this triad, i.e. the link to the Russian *byliny*: in these epic tales, the *bogatyri* appear as “patriotic warriors [...] endowed with superhuman strength and moral goodness. Typically, these warriors [...] serve a mythical prince Vladimir Krasnoye Solnyshko [...] and protect the Russian soil from evil-meaning antagonists”<sup>514</sup>. This summary is worthwhile discussing for two reasons: first of all, Grin’s self-stylisation as a *bogatyr* invokes a very particular set of reader expectations as to his role, all of which are almost immediately renounced by Grin’s actual function in the novel.<sup>515</sup>

Although Grin did train himself to become a warrior-like figure of extreme physical and mental strength, he fails to pursue a path of moral goodness that would actually liken him to fairy-tale-esque heroism. Only at the end of *The State Counsellor* does Grin perceive the wrongness of his self-established narrative, which is when he realises that people cannot be reduced to fit black-and-white patterns of allegiance. This realisation finds expression in Grin’s meditations on the unsuitability of uniform colours as signposts of otherness – a topic he had previously lectured his comrades on:

- Понять нужно. Это война. Мы воюем. Там, на той стороне, всякие люди есть. Бывает, что добрые, хорошие, честные. Но на них другой мундир, и значит, они враги. [...] Жалеть нельзя. То есть можно и даже нужно, но не сейчас. Потом. Сначала победить, потом жалеть. (SS 169)

In admitting that this stance was a misconception, Grin simultaneously realises that few other grounds allow for such a dehumanisation of the enemy. The inefficacy of the coat-comparison is satirised further in the context of the novel’s final street battle between revolutionaries and government forces, where the Combat Group members – following a hint anonymously provided by Pozharsky – appear in disguise, wearing official military coats to blend in with the representatives of the government.

The second problem in Grin’s self-comparison to a *bogatyr* is also connected to this scene, as it revolves around the traditional *bogatyr*’s link to Prince Krasnoye Solnyshko. In *The Death of Achilles*, this name was given to Prince Dolgorukoi, who – in both *The Death of Achilles* and *The State Counsellor* – was presented as a stand-in figure for paternal figures of authority. Yet unlike a classical *bogatyr* figure, Grin is not loyal to figures of state, but to the idea of the state itself. At the same time, none

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<sup>514</sup> Natalija Majsova, “The Hazy Gaze of the Bogatyrs of the Russian Byliny,” *Teorija in Praksa* 53, no. 4 (2016): 906-19, 912.

<sup>515</sup> Grin’s revolutionary comrades appear aware of his ambiguity, as they greet him with the words “Гриньч, как Змей Горыныч” (SS 46), referring to the recurring ‘evil’ figure Zmei Gorinych in Russian fairy tales and *byliny*.

of Grin's moves are truly autonomous, as he indirectly carries out Pozharsky's will. The twisted, convoluted net of obligations this produces points at Grin's quite literal split into a force of good and evil in *The State Counsellor*, along with his failure to convincingly embody the face of revolutionary heroism.

Just as the Combat Group's fake coats place them visually on the same side as the state forces, so are all of Grin's successes in the end nothing but chapters in Pozharsky's masternarrative aimed at preserving the Empire. Grin is not spared the realisation of this failure at the end of the novel; instead, Pozharsky reveals his true identity to Grin shortly before his death, making the revolutionary's world view crumble:

Даже во время еврейского погрома Грин не чувствовал себя таким несчастным, как в эти минуты, перечеркнувшие весь смысл трудной, изобиловавшей жертвами борьбы. Как жить дальше – вот над чем теперь следовало думать, и он знал, что найти ответ будет непросто. (SS 276)

Not only has the positive hero ideal as incarnated by Grin failed to fulfil its purpose, it has also turned the revolutionaries themselves into guileless pawns of the government.<sup>516</sup>

More than just a literary sleight of hand, *The State Counsellor's* problematic and complex doubling process between government representatives and revolutionaries correctly mirrors the historical situation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As noted by historians, the Great Reforms of 1864 – which, as formerly described, played a paramount role in the development of the Russian detective novel – created a situation in which “the government intervened in the judicial process at precisely those junctures where, by law, the court should have interacted openly with the public. Thereby, the government [...] eventually produced and publicized the specter of terrorism”<sup>517</sup>. Part of this search for a “paradigmatic way of becoming a modern political subject”<sup>518</sup> was a shift in political self-awareness, which encapsulated the move from a disregard for the faces of autocracy towards a wish to abolish autocracy itself.

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<sup>516</sup> If this simile were to be extended, then both Pozharsky and Grin would appear as pawns in the grand narrative of Akunin – revisiting the theme of the author as ‘evil-meaning antagonist’.

<sup>517</sup> Claudia Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov: Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009), 10.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

Not all the characters in Akunin's novel recognise the newly systemic nature of the revolutionaries' fight for what it is – indicating, to an extent, the novelty of the phenomenon and its historical roots in Russian soil. Smol'yaninov provides some comic relief by proposing a particularly absurd theory about how to tackle the terrorist problem in the country: he proposes the decimation of revolutionaries through duels, using government officials as proverbial cannon fodder until the last of the terrorists are eradicated. Describing the logic behind his plan, Smol'yaninov states:

я бы [...] напечатал в газете: 'Хватит охотиться на нас, слугу престола. Хватит стрелять в нас из-за угла и бросать бомбы, от которых гибнут невинные люди. Я от вас не прячусь. Если вы, милостивый государь, действительно, верите в свою правду и хотите пожертвовать собой ради блага человечества, то давайте сойдемся в честном поединке, ибо я тоже свято верю в свою правоту и для России не пожалею жизни. Так перестанем же проливать русскую кровь. (SS 200)

The humour that this scene evokes simultaneously lays bare the fundamental change in jurisdiction that occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the political changes that made institutions of power, not individuals, into objects and perpetrators of violence alike.

#### *Fandorin as National Hero*

The topic of violence is an important connecting thread between the hero ideals promoted by Grin and those embodied by Fandorin. Faced with the violent behaviour that his colleagues display during Rahmet's interrogation, Fandorin feels

[мучительное ощущение] нечистоты [...] отчето во всяком деле, связанном с политикой, непременно есть привкус тухлости и грязи? Вроде бы расследование как расследование, да еще поважнее любого другого. И цель достойная – защита общественного спокойствия и интересов государства. Откуда же чувство запачканности? [...] Имея дело с жестокими убийцами, бессовестными мошенниками, кровожадными выродками, Эраст Петрович никогда не испытывал такой брезгливости, как сегодня. (SS 82-3)<sup>519</sup>

Just as Fandorin's impression of defilement mirrors Grin's final disillusionment before his death, *The State Counsellor* features multiple other doubling processes between the two characters that Akunin is careful not to let slip past even the most inattentive of readers.

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<sup>519</sup> The first line of the quote recalls a 1931 poem by Mandel'shtam, which begins with the words 'Сохрани мою речь навсегда за привкус несчастья и дыма'. This poem was written in anticipation of his arrest under the Stalin terror regime.

Thus, the novel starts, quite literally, with Grin masquerading as Fandorin in order to successfully carry out his assassination contract. Grin meticulously copies not just the detective's grey whiskers and his aloof comportment, but also his stutter; the juxtaposition of the two characters is subsequently heightened to humorous-historical proportions when Grin is referred to as “лже-[Фандорин]” (SS 21) – a phrase easily identifiable to Russian readers as a reference to the throng of false Dmitrys that peppered Russian history between 1606 and 1612.<sup>520</sup> Moreover, both characters have developed somewhat stiff, distant personalities following tragic events in their adolescent lives; at one point in the novel, Fandorin is also said to issue a reply “в голос металла” (SS 63), followed by Count Dolgorukoi's description of him as “неживой какой-то, будто инеем прихваченный. Или пеплом присыпанный. Не отогреешь ты его, не оживишь” (SS 249). At the same time, both Grin and Fandorin share a certain flair for theatricality, along with an awareness of the extraordinariness of some of their skills. They also ultimately share a common goal: to change Russia for the better.

The crucial difference between Grin and Fandorin is the latter's condemnation of all forms of violence, terror, or power abuse on either divide of the political spectrum. Fandorin is against the idea of chaos, but remains opposed to a rule of arbitrary despotism at the same time. It is for this reason that I cannot agree with Tishchenko's assessment that “with the course of the history of Russia, the polarity between Fandorin and Green would change, bringing Green into the side of ‘good’ and ‘ours’ and sending Fandorin to the side of ‘bad’ and ‘enemies’”<sup>521</sup>. The very end of *The State Counsellor* spells out Fandorin's refusal to act as an accomplice to a corrupt Empire or any other violent political force – such as the Whites, who might be the enemy that Tishchenko is referring to in her quote. Grin and Fandorin are doubles in the closeness of their beliefs, but they are – and will remain – divided by an insuperable moral abyss.

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<sup>520</sup> The name also once more conjures up the Time of Troubles as the backdrop of an uncertain, chaotic political climate.

<sup>521</sup> Tishchenko, “My Hero Is a Villain,” 198. Tishchenko follows Andrew Bromfield in her transliteration of Grin's name, which I find misleading. It is explicitly stated in the novel that Grin's full surname is Grinberg, and that his codename refers to the historical terrorist Ignacy Hryniewiecki. As Russian lacks a letter ‘h’, the latter's name is rendered Grinevitsky. There is no association in *The State Counsellor* that would suggest a link to the colour green or the English language at all. Alternatively, the name could also be read as a nod to Alexander Grin, an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century writer of fantastic literature.

Through Esfir's character, the reader is provided with valuable additional insights into Fandorin's political beliefs. When the detective, exasperated by the news of civilian casualties after a terrorist attack on a Saint Petersburg railway station, proclaims "Мерзость и злодейство, вот что такое т-твоя революция" (SS 174), Esfir responds with the words: "Ах, революция – мерзость? [...] А твоя империя не мерзость?" (SS 175). In the way these questions are phrased, Fandorin and Esfir are framed as representatives of Empire and revolution respectively. A neutral ground between these two polarities is not provided, nor can the individual be absolved from the crimes of the movement or state he or she represents. When Fandorin accuses Esfir of using "д-дешевая риторика" (SS 175), she retaliates by reading out a number of newspaper articles, all of which are approved by official censorship and feature a similarly pathetic tone.

Apart from highlighting the similarity of the two discourses, this comparison also sheds light on several juridical shortcomings in the way the rule of law worked in the Russian Empire. Fandorin is forced to admit that "Да, мерзавцев и дураков в государстве много [...] Вечная беда России. Все в ней перепутано. Добро защищают дураки и мерзавцы, злу служат мученики и г-герои [my emphasis]" (SS 176). Despite appearing like a concession at first, this statement illuminates Fandorin's stalwart political views: by using the identical phrase 'idiots and crooks' ('дураки и мерзавцы') to denote government representatives and defenders of the Good alike, Fandorin outright rejects the idea of a revolution as a force of positive change. It is not the concept of the state itself that Fandorin excoriates, but its contemporaneous, far from ideal, form.

Fandorin's otherness within the existing national hero narratives therefore primarily revolves around the question of moral integrity and an aversion to chaos. Yet Fandorin's adherence to order fails to perceive the profound split that exists between *zakon i spravedlivost'* in Imperial Russia. Esfir is not wrong when she compares Fandorin to a jinn, enslaved by the will of Dolgorukoi – and, by extension, other patriarchal figures of authority:

- А-а, тот самый Фандорин! [...] Гарун аль-Рашид! Раб лампы!
- Какой еще лампы? – удивился Эраст Петрович.
- Ну как же. Могучий джинн, охраняющий старого султана Долгорукого. [...] Не знала, господин джинн, что вы и политическим сыском не гнушаетесь. (SS 73)

Through her use of this comparison, Esfir verbalises Russia's problems of subservience towards "the idea of a state-dependent patriarchal society"<sup>522</sup>, once again linking this cultural heritage to Asia. Her criticism of Fandorin is justified in many ways: his return to state service in *The Death of Achilles* was indicative of a belief that a higher power of justice still exists. Moreover, when Fandorin realises that the strict adherence to his own moral code will likely cost him his career in *The State Counsellor*, he muses:

Из персоны первой величины [...], Эраст Петрович превратился в фигуру необязательную и даже несколько комичную. Собственно, кто он теперь такой? [...] И ведь устранился от расследования тоже было нельзя. Это означало бы, пойдя на поводу у гордости, предать добрейшего Владимира Андреевича, ожидавшего от своего помощника содействия и даже спасения. (SS 113)<sup>523</sup>

Fandorin's desire to perform the role of saviour to Dolgorukoi is not only emblematic of a more general submission to Tsar-like father figures, but also of his assumption that these paternal figures are worth saving. Pozharsky likewise stylised himself as a saviour to Russia, but chose to pursue his goal in a much more confrontational way. In his subservience to authorities, Fandorin expresses a slave-like belief in the existence of a just ruler – but he also embodies the late Imperial intelligentsia attitude of quiescence that came to be its main stumbling block on the road to survival.

Despite this character flaw, Fandorin cannot be said to suffer from the same mental passivity that the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia was often accused of. His internal attempts to follow a strict moral path only remain largely invisible to the outside world, prompting Diana – a police informer – to question the actual possibility of a new type of government official altogether. When Fandorin interferes in Burlyayev's botched arrest attempt, Diana reacts with the accusation:

[...] раскололо моих революционных друзей на два лагеря. Одни усматривают в вас государственного чиновника нового типа, провозвестника грядущих либеральных перемен. А другие...  
- Что д-другие?  
- А другие говорят, что вас нужно уничтожить, потому что вы хитрее и опаснее тупых ищеек из Охранки. (my emphasis, SS 141)

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<sup>522</sup> Khapaeva, "Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators," 69.

<sup>523</sup> Interestingly, in this scene Fandorin is guilty of the same naïve servility as Smol'yaninov in the scene quoted before; in his case, however, this servility is founded on an actual personal relationship and acquaintance with Dolgorukoi.

To split the revolutionary camp into two so as to weaken it would, of course, be just what a loyal government official would strive to do. Fandorin's desire to carve out a new way of behaviour is less believable than a government representative's criminal intents.

As the final events of *The State Counsellor* show, Diana's doubts are not unfounded. After Fandorin writes up a full report on Pozharsky's involvement in the terrorist movement, he is granted an audience with Grand Duke Simeon Aleksandrovich. The latter acknowledges the truth in everything that Fandorin says, but refuses to act on the intelligence:

Сделал приписку: 'Полнейший бред и к тому же опасный'. [...] Конечно, все так и было. [...] Только вот рапорт писать не следовало. [...] я его разорвал и предал забвению. Ничего этого не было. Престиж власти важнее всего, в том числе и истины. (SS 281)

Faced with direct evidence for the collapse of a value system in whose inviolability Fandorin had believed for years, he rejects the proffered promotion to the post of chief of police at the Grand Duke's side and quits state service instead – walking out on the Tsar's brother without even waiting to take his leave.

As a result, Akunin's new version of the positive hero figure in Russian literature comprises not only the ability for critical reflection, but also the courage to act on the outcomes. Paradoxically, the initiative that this demands simultaneously spells out Fandorin's exit from the political stage – and thus the concomitant failure of Akunin's idea for a new type of intelligentsia hero. *The State Counsellor* is arguably the most important novel in the Fandorin series because it marks a fundamental turning point in the design of Akunin's overall project: a caesura at which Fandorin's "previously unseen positioning of an intelligentsia character [which] marked a [...] new period in the two-century-long 'romance' between the Russian intelligentsia and the Russian state"<sup>524</sup> collapses in on itself.

### 3.2.3. Conclusion

If we see the inception of the Fandorin project as an experiment with the idea of uniting Empire and Nation into a new type of national idea for Russia, then *The State Counsellor* marks the moment this hope died: while Fandorin's retreat into the private

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<sup>524</sup> Dobrenko and Lipovetsky, "The Burden of Freedom," 5.

realm still fulfils a novel function for the detective figure in Russian crime fiction, it also signals the failure of Akunin's original project idea, which was to unite the divergent narratives of Empire and Nation under the umbrella of a new intelligentsia mission.

Written on the eve of Putin's rise to power, *The State Counsellor* provides an intriguing reading of revolutionary and reactionary sentiments in late Imperial and post-Soviet Russia alike. In contrast to *The Death of Achilles*, the novel renders the instability of Empire not through an exploration of geopolitical categories, but a portrayal of Moscow as a microcosm of (neo-)Imperial rule. The city's peripherality finds its expression in an overarching atmosphere of panoptic paranoia, mistrust, and the internal fragmentation of government structures that seemingly transcends history. Continuing the trend that was started in *The Death of Achilles*, Akunin increasingly challenges institutionalised narratives of nostalgic remembering, turning towards a wider, more all-encompassing political subtext that simultaneously allows for more overt parallels between late Imperial and post-Soviet Russia to be drawn.

As a result, *The State Counsellor* features a noticeably higher number of easily identifiable historical prototypes than previous Fandorin novels, which range from marginal roles such as Zubtsov-Zubatov and Grand Duke Simeon-Sergei Aleksandrovich Romanov to the largescale fictional insertion of Dmitry-Gleb Pozharsky. Through these characters, Akunin engages in a fictionalised interrogation of key points about late Imperial Russia that are being used as cornerstones in today's distorted nostalgic remembering of the era. The resulting impression is one of disillusionment and a loss of credibility for the officially constructed narratives of Imperial grandeur, geopolitical strength and national unity.

Despite being set in the late Imperial era, much of *The State Counsellor* reflects on contemporary, post-Soviet issues. Akunin contextualises the renewed obstruction of the formation of a Nation through the

resurgence of Russian nationalism by the mid-1990s[, which] allowed anti-western sentiments to surface in some mainstream Russian films on historical topics, in which foreigners or Russians subject to alien western influences were presented either as capitalist exploiters, political enemies, or purveyors of decadent western culture.<sup>525</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Marsh, "The Nature of Russia's Identity," 561.

Instead of catering to this narrative, Akunin relocates all three of these categories back onto Russian soil, thus not only actively questioning their myths of origin, but also rephrasing their root causes into something homegrown and internal. Marsh's addendum that post-Soviet anti-Western sentiments "have been predominantly anti-American or anti-Semitic rather than anti-Western in general"<sup>526</sup> also finds expression in *The State Counsellor*, as Akunin exposes historically traceable links between the 'Jewish Question' and Imperial misrule. As a result, Russia's underlying inferiority complex towards the West is revealed as a legacy of the Imperial process of self-colonisation.

Akunin also offers an important realignment of this Imperial identity narrative by reintroducing Asia into the discussion, providing readers with a reading of Empire that is rarely found in contemporary Russian literature. This is particularly true for the late 1990s, when Russian national identity was being discussed, but with an almost exclusive focus on the West as Russia's only constitutive Other. In *The State Counsellor*, stereotypes about Asia as the home of despotism, barbarity and backwardness are voiced by characters across the social spectrum and the revolutionary divide, thus construing a counternarrative to contemporary, neo-Eurasianist distortions of Russian *sonderweg* thinking. Running counter to Noordenbos's description of post-Soviet depictions of Empire "as a shorthand for fantasies about the coherence of Russian space and history, and for ideas about Russian culture's fundamental deviations from the liberal traditions of 'the West'"<sup>527</sup>, Akunin's fictional Empire instead conveys an atmosphere of deep identitary confusion about East and West alike.

Pozharsky also acts as a minuscule copy of the late-1990s statesman who responds with satire and ridicule to the failed democratic experiment. Throughout *The State Counsellor*, Pozharsky's *sonderweg* rhetoric, reminiscent of its equivalent post-Soviet discourses, boils down to an openly criminal way of life that favours a survival of the fittest. The parallels between this attitude and a post-Soviet embrace of the bandit rhetoric are sufficiently obvious, particularly in the context of the 1999 terrorist attacks and the nationwide resurgence of nationalist tendencies, which marked a shift in

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<sup>526</sup> Ibid, 567.

<sup>527</sup> Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, 5.

Russia's political climate that continues to affect Russian politics to this day. Akunin allegedly even included a comment on Putin's infamous August 1999 press statement about 'wasting [Chechen insurgents] in the outhouse' by having Pozharsky describe the secret police's dirty work in the novel as "[ч]истим отхожие места, чтобы дерьмо на улицу не хлынуло" (SS 111).<sup>528</sup>

While deconstructing the appeal of Empire, Akunin once again also directs an equally critical eye to the legacy of Russian culture and literature. However, in contrast to *The Death of Achilles*, the lustre of the literary heroes invoked in *The State Counsellor* has noticeably dimmed. Pozharsky's heroism, along with his narrative of century-old ethnic Russian exceptionalism, is discredited, if not by his deeds, then by his death at the end of the novel. Having assumed the role of puppet-master of late Imperial history, Pozharsky becomes a victim of his own narrative and is consumed by the revolutionary spark he helped set loose. His revolutionary counterparts do not fare much differently: built out of various positive hero figures from canonical Russian literary works, Grin fails to present a future path for Russia in a similar way Pozharsky does. Posited in the role of a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century update to the literary tradition of the *bogatyr*, Grin acts as a cautionary tale for zealous patriotism and the hollow political message it sends. Akunin skilfully creates a situation in which neither the supposed glamour of the revolution nor the glory of a lost Empire can be upheld; by doing so, he wrests control over the medieval Russian hero image from the nationalist, conservative camp, and starts readers on a journey of readerly detection for an alternative hero paradigm instead.

This alternative paradigm is, once again, embodied in the figure of Fandorin. Having dissected the tradition of the positive hero in Russian literature through the character of Grin, Akunin begins rewriting it in the form of his protagonist. As the need for an intellectual figure capable of self-reflection and the moral integrity not to blindly follow orders grows, Fandorin is faced with the task of renouncing the Empire he so diligently tries to preserve. By consciously placing an intelligentsia member with a modern understanding of patriotism in the midst of this Imperial conundrum, Akunin playfully explores the notion of a 'better past' while laying bare the topicality of the neo-Imperial discourse for contemporary Russia.

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<sup>528</sup> Cf. Mulcahy, "A Not-so-thrilling Thriller," 327.

What if state and intelligentsia had, indeed, found a common ground to collaborate on? The posing of this question places Akunin firmly within the post-Soviet nostalgia debate and adds his voice to other literary explorations of the theme. Yet the end of *The State Counsellor* reveals Akunin's doubts about the plausibility of his own hero paradigm, arguably indicating a contemporaneous disillusionment with its basic premise. By remaining a patriot, Fandorin is forced to adopt a position outwith the state. Akunin – committed as he was to the search for a niche that would allow protagonists of integrity and moral fibre to prevail in a Russian setting – succumbed to the Anglophone dictum of the amateur detective and private protagonist for lack of better alternatives, not as part of a prior design.

Unlike the bourgeois home of the Western detective, which served as a thinly veiled symbol for the wholeness of government and state, Akunin's Imperial Russia is not a place of safety or stability. Instead, it augurs Fandorin's future role as a *persona non grata* and sets off a period of prolonged exile for him – a decision not only reminiscent of large swathes of the intelligentsia after 1917, but also oddly prophetic in relation to Akunin's own exile after 2014. Did Akunin, just like his protagonist, realise the futility of attempting to work with, rather than against the state? While it may be argued that the novel's message of resignation and disappointment is covert enough to leave room for interpretation, a reading of *The State Counsellor* that does not take into account the country's political changes around 1999 will likely fail to provide a believable answer.

It is for this reason that the 2005 film adaptation of *The State Counsellor* poses such a problem in the discussion of the novel. The most costly and most widely advertised cinematic adaptation of any of the Fandorin novels to date, Filip Yankovsky's version of *The State Counsellor* garnered a considerable amount of critical attention and academic interest from among both the Russian literary and film critic scene.<sup>529</sup> Its dubious fame was in part due to its alternative ending: in Yankovsky's film, Fandorin does not resign from his post, but continues to serve under

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<sup>529</sup> Previous films, produced by different directors and featuring a different cast each, were *Azazel'* in 2003 and *Turetskii Gambit*, also in 2005. There were rumours in 2015 that a British channel had acquired the film rights for the series, but those rumours seem to have died, cf. Alexandra Guzeva, "Russian Sherlock Holmes' to Come to British TV Screens," *Russia Beyond*, May 05, 2015, <[http://www.rbth.com/arts/2015/05/05/russian\\_sherlock\\_holmes\\_to\\_come\\_to\\_british\\_tv\\_screens\\_45735.html](http://www.rbth.com/arts/2015/05/05/russian_sherlock_holmes_to_come_to_british_tv_screens_45735.html)> [accessed 17 December 2019]

the state – despite his knowledge about the Empire’s all-encompassing corruption. Other differences between novel and film include the elision of Grin’s backstory and a rebranding of Pozharsky as a fiery patriot.<sup>530</sup> In a nod to Putin’s personality cult, Pozharsky’s iron fist and strong character also make him the only politician capable of dealing competently with the terrorist question, whereas the remaining defenders of law and order – Fandorin among them – appear incompetent and weak.<sup>531</sup>

Pozharsky’s changed image was also commented upon by Nina Khrushcheva, who views Yankovsky’s *The State Counsellor* as the expression of a Russia “stuck [...] in the gray matter of Putinism”<sup>532</sup>. Mulcahy arrived at a similar conclusion, stating that “the film sanctions policies that envision an authoritarian state with the power to maintain internal order, silence its enemies and ruthlessly protect Russian interests”<sup>533</sup>. According to Mulcahy, *The State Counsellor* should be classified as a blockbuster that follows in the footsteps of other successful Russian films of the late 1990s and 2000s, such as *The Barber of Siberia* (*Сибирский цирюльник*, 1999), *Night Watch* (*Ночной дозор*, 2004) and *Day Watch* (*Дневной дозор*, 2006) – all of which aim to “[include] a hyperbolically positive image of the country, a manufactured past that is shaped to depict present issues, impassioned nationalism employed to stir patriotic sentiment and a heavy dose of emotionalism”<sup>534</sup>. In changing the novel’s ending, Yankovsky’s film propagates, in a best-case scenario, a passive, resigned attitude towards newly authoritarian politics and, in the worst case, outright support for Putinism.

How are we to judge Akunin’s acceptance of these changes? Whereas Latysheva commented on Akunin’s unwillingness to discuss the film in public, her colleague Liubov Arkus successfully interviewed Akunin in 2005.<sup>535</sup> In this interview, Akunin states that he tried to change Yankovsky’s mind, but that his attempts ultimately proved futile. By way of an explanation, Akunin adds that he is “не на сто процентов уверен в правильности поступка книжного Фандорина”<sup>536</sup>, despite feeling

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<sup>530</sup> Marina Latysheva, “Spetsluzhb Goes to the Movies,” *Russian Life* 49, no. 6 (2006): 46-51, 48.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>532</sup> Nina Khrushcheva, “Tsar of the Intelligentsia,” *Newsweek International* 160, no. 17 (2012), <[http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/ps/i.do?&id=GALE|A305331019&v=2.1&u=ed\\_itw&it=r&p=ITOF&sw=w#>](http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/ps/i.do?&id=GALE|A305331019&v=2.1&u=ed_itw&it=r&p=ITOF&sw=w#>) [accessed 17 December 2019]

<sup>533</sup> Mulcahy, “A Not-so-thrilling Thriller,” 311.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>535</sup> Cf. Latysheva, “Spetsluzhb Goes to the Movies,” 49.

<sup>536</sup> Lyubov Arkus, “Podberite sebe Fandorina po vkusu,” *Seans № 23/24*, <<http://seance.ru/n/23-24/strelyayte-v-pianista-akunin/podberite-sebe-fandorina-po-vkusu/>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

personally closer to the book ending than the film version's. He also wondered: "можно ли осуждать человека, который жертвует своей integrity (прошу прощения, но у нас и слова-то такого нет) ради того, что ему представляется общественным благом?"<sup>537</sup>. Far from agreeing with Yankovsky's view that it is the responsibility of the intelligentsia to sacrifice their moral integrity for the sake of 'rescuing' the state (although it remains unclear whether the state is salvageable at all), Akunin does leave room for an open discussion, confronting his readers – and viewers – with a storyline that challenges his own alternative historical universe. It is a bold move, but it also expresses Akunin's commitment to the counteracting of binary reductions of historical matters in the public cultural discourse – even if they do run counter to his authorial intentions. Quite fittingly, Akunin ended his interview with Arkus with the statement that "для того и делаю своего героя и ситуации, в которых он оказывается, немонохромными, чтобы у читателя была возможность что-то домыслить и достроить самому"<sup>538</sup>.

Ultimately, Fandorin's hero potential remains based on this carving out of a new position between Empire and Nation, where he reclaims his right to political self-determinacy and opposes the master narrative prepared for him by the state. Inherent in Fandorin's renouncement of state duty is "Akunin's transparent hope [...] for a post-Soviet Russia defined not by the corruption of the past, but by principled behavior in the present"<sup>539</sup>. Yet Fandorin's banishment from Russia and transformation into a *persona non grata* in exile do not so much make him into "a true original' [...] [and] a 'moral citizen' for a new and troubled age"<sup>540</sup> as it turns him into a painful historical reminder of the limitations of intelligentsia agency. As subsequent instalments of the Fandorin series would show, Akunin's indecisiveness about Fandorin's – and, by extension, Russia's – future path would only grow in proportion in the years to come.

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid.

<sup>539</sup> Platt, "Historical Novel," 83.

<sup>540</sup> Mulcahy, "A Not-so-thrilling Thriller," 312.

### 3.3. *The Black City (2012)*

[...] от книжки в голова ветер дует. Кто книжки много читает, начальство не уважает, хочет все другое сделать. Рэволюция хочет.<sup>541</sup>

*The Black City* is the thirteenth instalment in the *Fandorin* series and was published in late 2012. Akunin wrote the first chapter in 2008, following a call for literary works by the French newspaper *Le Figaro* that prompted authors from around the world to compose a story based on the first sentence of Book Fourteen of Homer's *Odyssey*. Akunin's contribution was subsequently published in a volume of Russian short stories titled *Книга, ради которой объединились писатели, объединить которых невозможно* (2009); a few years later, Akunin used his blog to describe how the story's open ending, which had been meant to tease his readers, returned to haunt him instead. Eventually, the short story's antagonist sparked the idea for another *Fandorin* novel: "Однако чертов Одиссей засел у меня в голове, начал плести хитроумную интригу, да еще и Фандорин не на шутку разозлился [...] И стал вырисовываться роман"<sup>542</sup>.

*The Black City*'s events begin in Yalta in 1914 and unfold in Baku, the capital of modern-day Azerbaijan. *Fandorin* follows the trace of an elusive terrorist by the name of Odysseus, who succeeds in assassinating Spiridonov, the head of the Tsar's security, in the latter's private garden. *Fandorin* himself becomes the target of several assassination attempts from the moment he sets foot in Baku, and ends up embroiling himself in the budding oil capital's parallel societies in order to uncover Odysseus's plan to spark a nationwide revolution. His investigation leads him to accept the help of Hasim, a local Azerbaijani crime lord, and brings *Fandorin* into closer contact with the multi-faceted ethnic and religious patchwork society of the Caucasus. It also sets him the challenge to face his estranged wife, a theatre actress whom *Fandorin* married at the end of the previous *Fandorin* novel, *All the World is a Stage* (*Весь мир театр*, 2009).

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<sup>541</sup> Boris Akunin, *Chernyi Gorod* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2012), 142. All further quotations will be referring to this edition, abbreviated as (CHG).

<sup>542</sup> Boris Akunin, "Baikhua iundun!," *LiveJournal* (blog), November 21, 2012, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/83054.html>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

Set against the backdrop of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and the looming shadow of the First World War, *The Black City* is not only a political thriller, but also an exploration of questions concerning the survival and longevity of Empires at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novel ends with Fandorin's success in arresting Odysseus, followed by the order to travel to Vienna and act as a mediator between the European Empires – a daring, if characteristic, play at alternative history. However, Fandorin never gets to fulfil this task, as he is shot in the head by Hasim, who acted as Odysseus's accomplice and henchman from the start and releases the criminal back into the world.

Akunin's process of writing *The Black City* coincided with a period of intense political turmoil in Russia. In autumn 2011, Putin announced his intention to run for a third presidential candidacy, which sparked a nationwide protest movement that culminated in mass demonstrations against the fraudulent elections carried out in March 2012. As part of the protest movement, so-called 'strolls with writers' ('прогулки с писателями') were organised in Moscow. Akunin became one of the leading faces of this movement, participating on several occasions alongside other well-known writers such as Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Dmitri Bykov, and Sergei Gandlevski. Once Akunin decided to participate in the protests, he stopped working on his book projects, *The Black City* among them, and relocated from France to Russia in December 2011. In response to a user question on his blog in March 2012, Akunin stated that his work on the novel had temporarily stalled and that its further plot design would likely change in response to the political events of 2012:

Весь декабрь и почти весь январь я был в творческом оцепенении. [...] Фандоринский роман я отложил, потому что радикально сменилось настроение. [...] скоро буду готов продолжить фандоринскую книгу. Только она, видимо, станет несколько иной по цветовой гамме.<sup>543</sup>

Akunin actively used his blog as a platform for political agitation as well as a tool for gauging and discussing the political views of his readership during those months. He was forced to concede that his previously unseen involvement in political events had adverse effects on his public perception as a writer:

Впервые за свою писательскую карьеру я обзавелся внушительным антирейтингом. Если раньше люди относились ко мне либо безразлично, либо одобрительно,

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<sup>543</sup> Boris Akunin, "Prosnulas' sovest'," *LiveJournal* (blog), March 29, 2012, <<http://snob.ru/profile/5232/print/47514>> [accessed 20 December 2019] The original LJ entry is no longer publically accessible.

а пропорция недоброжелателей была минимальной, то своей общественной активностью я снискал неприязнь, с одной стороны, пламенных путинистов (за ‘раскачивание лодки’), с другой – пламенных революционеров (за робость и соглашательство).<sup>544</sup>

In October 2011, a lawsuit was filed against Akunin’s publisher Zakharov for publishing *All the World’s a Stage*, in which the author was accused of including extremist statements in his novel. True to the unruly nature of his literary persona, Akunin quipped “[н]у все, моей преступной деятельности, кажется, наступает конец”<sup>545</sup>. He also did not fail to point out subsequent, rather blatant official attempts at covering up the incident.<sup>546</sup>

Not surprisingly perhaps, *The Black City* was met with strongly contrasting reactions amid both Western and Russian critics. Whereas Western reviewers considered the novel “prime Akunin — ingenious, twisty, at times digressive, exotic”<sup>547</sup> and “a novel to sharpen the wits [...] the journey is amazing”<sup>548</sup>, Russian voices alternated between sceptical and outright negative, if not to say scathing. Historian and literary critic Lev Lur’e called the novel “[о]дин из худших романов Акунина”<sup>549</sup>, whereas Konstantin Matrosov initially criticised the feeling of déjà vu and lack of novelty in the plot construction, only to go on to say that “стиль изложения и та виртуозная ловкость, с которой Акунин обращается с сюжетом и персонажами, с лихвой искупает тяжеловесность”<sup>550</sup>.

Other Russian critics were not quite so easily appeased and voiced their displeasure about Akunin’s political involvement through hostile reactions to his literary work *in toto*. Whereas Matrosov did not comment on Akunin’s newly acquired status as an opposition figure other than to note that “[у]же не герой, а автор вступил

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<sup>544</sup> Boris Akunin, “Kto s vami, mastera kul’tury?,” *Echo Moskvy* (blog), March 22, 2012, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b\\_akunin/871074-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b_akunin/871074-echo/)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>545</sup> Boris Akunin, “Ekstremizm ne proidet!,” *Echo Moskvy* (blog), October 27, 2011, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b\\_akunin/824595-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b_akunin/824595-echo/)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>546</sup> Cf. Boris Akunin, “Eto byl samozvanets! Lovite ego!,” *Echo Moskvy* (blog), December 23, 2011, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b\\_akunin/842084-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b_akunin/842084-echo/)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>547</sup> Elizabeth Buchan, “Historical: Black City by Boris Akunin,” *Mail Online*, November 8, 2018, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-6368811/historical.html>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>548</sup> Marina Vaizey, “Boris Akunin: Black City Review – A Novel to Sharpen the Wits,” *TheArtsDesk.com*, December 16, 2018, <<http://theartsdesk.com/books/boris-akunin-black-city-review-novel-sharpen-wits>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>549</sup> Lev Lur’e, “Novyi roman Borisa Akunina ‘Chernyi gorod’,” *DP.ru*, February 10, 2013, <[http://www.dp.ru/a/2013/02/08/Fandorin\\_v\\_zhanre\\_komiksa](http://www.dp.ru/a/2013/02/08/Fandorin_v_zhanre_komiksa)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>550</sup> Konstantin Matrosov, “S bol’iu v Baku,” *Gazeta.ru*, November 22, 2012, <[http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2012/11/22/a\\_4863041.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/culture/2012/11/22/a_4863041.shtml)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

в период стремительных изменений, добровольно и вполне осознанно стал частью нового сюжета”<sup>551</sup>, Geidar Dzhemal’ surmised: “[т]о ли Григорий Шалвович устал от Эраста Петровича, то ли оппозиция вредно влияет”<sup>552</sup>. Pointing out several alleged incongruences in the plot construction, Dzhemal’ takes particular issue with Akunin’s representation of Muslim characters in *The Black City*, questioning the author’s integrity because of Akunin’s Georgian roots and finishing with the suggestion that “Видимо, [...] он [...] воспринимает себя в разных ампула [...] -- хомяки и белоленточники!”<sup>553</sup>. As will be recognisable for Russian readers, the term ‘white ribbon-ists’ (‘белоленточники’) is a denigrating neologism aimed at the bearers of white ribbons, which were the protest symbol of the 2010/11 public strolls.

The comment section for Dzhemal’s article featured several further denigrating comments aimed at Akunin’s person, including a wordplay based on Akunin’s Georgian surname and the Russian word for the devil, “чертишвили”<sup>554</sup>, and a description of Akunin’s “омерзительная личина врага России”<sup>555</sup>. A similar statement of questionable political libel was made in 2012 by Putin, in which the President linked Akunin’s ethnicity to his anti-Russian sentiments.<sup>556</sup> Akunin was well aware of these allegations and included a response to them in *The Black City*, using Fandorin’s new habit of keeping a Japanese-style diary to reminisce about the weaknesses of the Russian national character: “Где еще такое напишешь? Только в собственном Никки, где [...] никто не прочтет. Не то прослывешь русофобом, и все истинно русские люди оскорбятся, отвернутся, да еще скажут, что такую гадость мог написать лишь человек с нерусской фамилией ‘Фандорин’” (CHG 296). By making the recommendably private explicitly public, Akunin subverted the

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<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Geidar Dzhemal’, “BAKUnin.az. Reaktsiia na ‘Chernyi gorod’ В. Akunina,” *Odnako.org*, December 24, 2012, <<http://www.odnako.org/blogs/bakuninaz-reakciya-na-chyorniy-gorod-b-akunina/>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>553</sup> Ibid.

<sup>554</sup> Z.H.L.O.B., comment on “BAKUnin.az. Reaktsiia na ‘Chernyi gorod’ В. Akunina,” *Odnako.org*, December 24, 2012, 2:44 p.m., <<http://www.odnako.org/blogs/bakuninaz-reakciya-na-chyorniy-gorod-b-akunina/comments/>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>555</sup> uliss, comment on “BAKUnin.az. Reaktsiia na ‘Chernyi gorod’ В. Akunina,” *Odnako.org*, December 24, 2012, 11:50 p.m., <<http://www.odnako.org/blogs/bakuninaz-reakciya-na-chyorniy-gorod-b-akunina/comments/>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>556</sup> Cf. “Putin na vstreche so SMI govorit o natsional'nosti Akunina, upotrebliaet slova ‘ponos’, ‘bydlo,’” *Gazeta.ru*, January 18, 2012, <[http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/01/18/n\\_2170829.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/01/18/n_2170829.shtml)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

notion of self-censorship and lent a deliberate overttness to his literary contribution to Russia’s soul-searching mission.

Baku is a telling choice of setting for *The Black City* from precisely this point of view of artistic license and censorship. Unlike other cities in the Empire, Baku and its newspapers “reported on political assassinations and revolution in neighboring Iran and Turkey, pogroms in Russia, and strikes and riots in Baku”<sup>557</sup> – in short, all the undesirable proof of Imperial instability that was usually carefully kept out of public sight. Akunin capitalised on this in *The Black City* by peppering various of the novel’s chapters with authentic newspaper clippings from pre-revolutionary Baku, including:

- К забастовке присоединились Балаханы!
- На двести двадцать пятой забил фонтан!
- В Мардакянах кровник застрелил Гаджи-Раджаба-Зарбали-оглы!
- В Сараеве убит наследник австрийского престола! (CHG 48)

Photographs of the original newspaper articles can be accessed in the interactive eBook edition of *The Black City*, encouraging an active comparison of these historical source texts and their representation in Akunin’s work.<sup>558</sup> They also invite a reflection on the historical power of the written word in disempowering state censorship and normalising citizens’ access to free media coverage. Akunin’s inclusion of Baku’s liberal media landscape in his novel not only points out the media’s role as a separate form of political protest, but also highlights the Fandorin project’s subversive return of historical fact to mainstream culture through the anti-nostalgic use of popular fiction.



Figure 4 Original Newspaper Captions  
(Boris Akunin, “Baikhua iundun!”)

<sup>557</sup> Audrey Altstadt-Mirhadi, “Baku: Transformation of a Muslim Town,” in *The City in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Michael F. Hamm (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 283-319, 303.

<sup>558</sup> Cf. Boris Akunin, “Baikhua iundun!”. For the first time in the series, Akunin also used the help of a historical consultant, who is mentioned on the page containing general editorial information.

As in previous discussions, my following analysis will begin with a focus on Akunin's response to precisely this nostalgic portrayal of Empire in post-Soviet discourse. As *The Black City* is the only novel in the series that is set in the Russian Empire, but does not feature any scenes in either Saint Petersburg or Moscow, Akunin's discussion of the actual borderlands of Empire invites a closer analysis. How did the changed locale of the Caucasus impact Akunin's portrayal of Russia's process of self-colonisation, and what are the differences between the 'internal Orient' previously portrayed in *The Death of Achilles* and *The State Counsellor* and the 'lived Orient' of *The Black City*'s protagonists? Fandorin's journey to the Imperial borderlands acquires an important psychological function within this contrast, as it allows him and the other Russian characters in the novel to posit themselves against the more visibly Other of the periphery. I will correspondingly analyse how Akunin incorporates the Empire's failure to integrate its peripheries into his portrayal of Imperial identity and governance – asking, along the way, which role Baku's oil boom played in the portrayal of political parallels between Imperial and post-Soviet Russia.

The second part of this chapter will offer a continuation of my previous discussion points for the narrative thread of writing Nation, i.e. the national hero theme and the rediscovery of Russia's cultural heritage through literary source texts. Linking back to Fandorin's own conflicted position as an Imperial subject and intelligentsia detective, Akunin explores two literary leitmotifs in the development of his national hero paradigm in *The Black City*: Chekhoviana and Dostoevskiana. Both intertextual strands will be discussed in corresponding detail in my analysis. How does Fandorin's turn away from his original intelligentsia hero position move him closer to a Chekhovian ideal, and in which ways does Odysseus fulfil the traditional role of Fandorin's double by becoming a Dostoevskian mouthpiece? The discussion will be rounded off by a look at the national characteristics that Akunin links to these two pillars of Russian cultural heritage, along with the respective successes and failures he sees within their corresponding national hero narratives. Lastly, I will interpret these findings with a view to Akunin's final message for the post-Soviet intelligentsia and the fate of his hero ideal.

### 3.3.1. Re-Writing Empire: Elephant on Edge

In *The Black City*, Akunin's process of re-writing Empire is heavily influenced by the locale he chose for the novel. Just like Simon – an old acquaintance of Fandorin's, who now acts as a director on the film set that lured Fandorin's wife to Baku – Akunin capitalises on the mythical image of the 'real East' in his search for a gripping sujet and authentic setting: “Я собрал деньги, чтобы снимать ориентальную фильму в натуральном милье – не в павильоне и не в Крыму, а на самом настоящем Востоке” (CHG 59-60). Simon is joined in this endeavour by Fandorin, whose desire to perceive Baku as an exotic Other guides his detective work from the very opening pages of the novel – turning his view of the city and the Caucasus into an overt source of both reader entertainment and self-scrutiny.

Throughout *The Black City*, Fandorin's engagement with cliched notions about the East is paired with a much less romanticizable reality.<sup>559</sup> Thus, when the detective travels from the train station to his hotel, the 'New Europe', he finds little to set the local boulevard apart from its European and Russian counterparts.<sup>560</sup>

Фаэтон подпрыгивал по бульжнику идеально прямого, совершенно европейского проспекта. [...] Будто на Петровке или Неглинной. Публика тоже малоинтересная – как в центральной части Тифлиса. То есть попадались прохожие в восточном наряде, но они составляли незначительное меньшинство. (CHG 50)

Even the name of Fandorin's chosen hotel contradicts his paradoxical quest to experience the Other. Yet he goes on to compare his disappointment in the insufficient exoticism of his surroundings with his memories of Japan, where he encountered a similar feeling of disenchantment – creating an analogy that places Baku in a distinctly Asian framework of reception:

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<sup>559</sup> This is not the first time Fandorin uses an Orientalist gaze in the series. In *The Death of Achilles*, he describes Wanda, a German national, with the words: “В этом ракурсе она выглядела соблазнительно беззащитной, словно восточная рабыня у ног падишаха” (SMA 52). Instead of viewing her as the German national citizen that he knows she is, Fandorin feels the need to apply an orientalist attribute to the demimondaine in order to be able to mentally place her in a victim's role, as if her Westernness automatically precluded her from being disadvantaged or helpless in his books. The male gaze overriding her individuality in this scene is placed in an Asian context, but the only thing it purveys is the Western construction of this alleged Asianness – a circumstance all the more disturbing as Fandorin is generally described as enjoying the company of strong-willed, independent women, of which there is no shortage in the *Fandorin* series.

<sup>560</sup> Just like in *The Death of Achilles*, Akunin references a real hotel here. The 'Yeni Avropa' or 'New Europe' hotel in Baku was built in 1913 and housed, among others, the poet Sergei Esenin and future Azerbaijani President Geidar Aliev. At the time of writing, it is the seat of the Baku branch of Russian oil company Lukoil.

Фандорин почувствовал некоторое разочарование, как в свое время от знакомства с Июкогамой, в облике которой оказалось так мало экзотики. Бесцеремонный паук-Запад все больше оплетает своей серой паутиной планету. (CHG 51)

Fandorin explains his mounting disappointment by criticising the uniformity that follows European influences across the world, referencing architecture, clothing and language as examples. This is an interesting statement to make, both from a historical and a contemporary point of view: whereas Fandorin perceives Europe as the synonym for an equalising, threadbare influence that extinguishes local specifics – not realising or not stopping to realise that the colonial influence of the Russian Empire has the same eradicating effect on the Caucasus – the contemporary Russian reader is accustomed to portrayals of Europe as the seat of diversity, multi-ethnicity and a quasi-threatening tolerance for otherness. Yet although the image of Europe has changed, what remains is the same existential angst expressed in Fandorin's thoughts: “ведь восточный город, принадлежащий русскому престолу, а улица будто в Ницце, половина вывесок – на французском и немецком” (CHG 52).

Fandorin's fears mirror not only those of a post-perestroika audience, but they are equally emblematic of the insecurities of his Imperial compatriots, who – unlike in *The State Counsellor*, where the characters struggled to identify with the East for its links with despotism and barbarity – are discomfited because Baku does not provide the desired level of otherness that they hoped to see. Europe itself is not the actual culprit in either scenario. Instead, it is Russia's distorted and shaky self-image that causes its gaze to wander ever outward in search for reliable markers of self-definition. Fandorin starts to perceive the clash between his search for authenticity and the colonial filter he imposes onto Baku during his discovery of the city:

Ведь это Российская империя, это двадцатый век, а словно дургой мир и другая эпоха. Возможно ли, чтобы Кузнецкий Мост и эта сказка Шахерезады существовали в пределах одного государства? И сам усмехнулся: что брать Кузнецкий Мост? Европа находилась гораздо ближе, в двухстах метрах отсюда – и ничего, как-то все это уживается вместе. (CHG 72)

Fandorin's identification of the Kusnetsky Bridge with Europe reveals Russia's underlying irresolution about its place between East and West, but it also highlights the general futility of trying to define a Russian identity along arbitrary benchmarks of geopolitical boundaries. As the conceptually blurry borders between a European and a

Russian identity begin to overlap, they also cease to pose an existential threat (‘как-то все это уживается вместе’).

As Baku’s otherness is not sufficiently fixated in its appearance, it is verbally inscribed onto the city by its inhabitants instead. Fandorin uses the phrase “Дикой Запад [...] Wild East” (CHG 40) in his diary, expressing his need to render the epistemological mystery of the Russian Imperial identity intelligible in a transfer of alphabets. By doing so, Fandorin also plays on a succinct historical parallel – one in which “Westernized Baku [...] held for contemporaries the same romance as did the American frontier for the eastern tenderfoot – and the same dangers”<sup>561</sup>. The use of Cyrillic indicates a closer kinship of Russia with the ‘Wild’ West than with its equally ‘wild’ Eastern counterpart; however, the phrase is also used by Saadat, a Muslim woman and oil entrepreneur, who argues: “East is East. Тут из любой ерунды устраивают тайны. Может, в этом и заключается главное очарование Востока” (CHG 180).

Saadat’s own use of the Latinised phrase reveals a simultaneous othering process that occurs from within the local population – an impression heightened by the fact that only a few moments earlier, she had initially stated that it is “[с]мешно, как действует на европейцев ориентальный колорит в сочетании с ароматом тайны. Они прямо цепенеют” (CHG 178). As a result, the use of opposite alphabets ultimately only serves to collapse the border between East and West. As the one side creates and the other side manipulates the imported narrative of the ‘mysterious East’, its supposed mysteriousness becomes nothing but a tool in the fight over control and power on both sides of the colonial divide.<sup>562</sup>

A more apparent marker of Baku’s externally inscribed otherness is the phrase ‘это Баку’, which is intoned with almost religious predictability by all of the novel’s Russian characters. The inflationary use of this expression in *The Black City* is imbued with a clear othering function that reveals its own constructedness:

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<sup>561</sup> Altstadt-Mirhadi, “Baku,” 284.

<sup>562</sup> Saadat and Fandorin are juxtaposed in a similar way in their perception of each other. Whereas Fandorin thinks that “госпожа Валидбекова превратилась в Царевну-Лебедь с известного полотна Врубеля” (CHG 219), Saadat considers the Russian detective as “похож на принца Гоштаспа из ‘Шахнаме’” (CHG 284) – a comparison that serves to show that each character views the other through the cultural paradigms of their source culture, while ultimately expressing the same thought. Moreover, the connection wrought through the two comparable narratives proves art’s capacity to transgress cultural borders and to highlight the interchangeable charm inherent to other cultures.

Все-таки поразительная наглость! Шайка бандитов живет, можно сказать, на виду у всего города и ничего не боится! Значит, абсолютно уверены в безнаказанности. Как тут говорят: ‘Это Баку...’ (CHG 156)

‘This is Baku’ serves as an obvious shorthand for the many illegalities committed in the city’s day-to-day life, which are being exoticized in order to make them appear un-Russian and usable. Yet the more frequently the phrase is invoked as an explanation for Baku’s love affair with illegality, the more impatient Fandorin grows with it – mirroring the reader’s simultaneous exasperation with the notion:

[...] у меня нет ни одного сотрудника, в ком я был бы стопроцентно уверен. У каждого бакинского полицейского имеется какой-нибудь маленький гешефт. Боюсь, не вышло бы утечки. Один черт разберет, кто где прикармливается. – Он развел руками. – Чего вы хотите? Это Баку.  
- Да-да, - кивнул Фандорин ... – Я знаю. (CHG 205)

Incidentally, almost all of the utterances of ‘this is Baku’ are made by Shubin, a corrupt government official who wields considerable power in the city and who is described as a cunning strategist. Shubin expresses a laissez-faire attitude about tackling the local corruption problem by jokingly telling his aptly named subordinate Altynov to defer plans for eradicating bribery for yet another month (indicating that this will likely grow into an interminable process of procrastination – a case of Chekhovian irresolution turned on its head).<sup>563</sup> Thereafter, Shubin is twice portrayed to engage in manipulated roulette games at the local casino and freely admits to taking bribes both times he is confronted about it by Fandorin: “я знаю, что в казино мне везет только по средам. Только у этого стола. И в пределах определенной суммы. Это Баку” (CHG 265, cf. 106).

Shubin is also one of the characters in *The Black City* who fails to acknowledge his own otherness within the specific context of the Caucasus. Propagating a view of Baku as a place of softness, warmth and welcome that starkly opposes the supposedly law-abiding, rigid and soulless West, he instead carries a distinct similarity to Goncharov’s literary hero Oblomov – all that is lacking is that Shubin should put on a khalat and lounge on his divan, contemplating whether or not to put on his slippers:

На Востоке все расслабленное, благодушное, жирное – даже противозаконная деятельность. Потому что законы здесь – категория условная. У нас на Руси закон все-таки вроде дышла: хоть и поворачивается, куда вышло, но как-никак прямой и твердый. На Востоке закон вроде вьюнка – обвивает всякую крепкую палку и ластиться к ней. [...] С тех пор как я научился правильно пользоваться Востоком, моя жизнь сделалась сытна, приятна,

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<sup>563</sup> The altyn is a historical Russian currency formerly used by Tatars.

нехлопотна. [...] Но наш начальник жандармского управления – человек европейский, квадратно-треугольный. (CHG 104)<sup>564</sup>

In this quote, Shubin frames Europe as a harsh and unforgiving frontier whose natural opposite is the East and whose emblem is Baku, with its pliancy of the local law and its sedate attitude towards vigilante justice. Shubin's use of the historical and emotionally charged term Rus' creates the impression of a temporal and spatial split of Imperial core and periphery: the historical Rus' appears as the geographical heartland of Empire, but fails to fulfil the function of ideological homeland because of its progressing Europeanisation. In its place, Baku emerges as the peripheral Eastern locale for Mother Russia's mythological future.<sup>565</sup>

Shubin is not the only Russian official in the novel to utilise the methods of orientalist myth-making. Pestrukhin, the head of a gendarmerie division, offers an outright colonial narrative of life in Baku – succumbing to stereotypes of the opposite kind to Shubin's:

[...] в этих изобильных и темных джунглях водится множество зубастых хищников, рвущих друг у друга добычу. Нефтяные бароны грызутся между собой из-за барышей; тюрки и армяне враждуют; очень развит обычай кровной мести; повсюду шныряют иностранные агенты; революционеры всех оттенков занимаются экспроприациями и вымогательством, а кроме того, город кишит обыкновенными уголовниками. (CHG 40)<sup>566</sup>

Pestrukhin not only transfers the 'Imperial jungle' back onto its traditional locale in the Empire's borderlands, but also dehumanises Baku's entire population in the process, highlighting the manifold divisions that exist within its society. For a post-

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<sup>564</sup> Saadat's plans for her son Tural's future provide a counter-argument to Shubin's view of the East as soft, relaxed and malleable: having employed an Austrian tutor for Tural, she envisions that he will be taught gymnastics, German, good manners and "самой важной науке: быть мужчиной" (CHG 175). In this case, neither the image of the barbaric nor of the exotic East uphold. Overall, Saadat is the character who pays the least attention to national stereotypes and alleged national characteristics; this is not only mirrored in her desire to emigrate to Nice, but also in her parting appeal to Fandorin to ignore all of these pointless differences and focus on their emotional bond instead.

<sup>565</sup> As noted by Clowes, a similar impression arises in the work of Lyudmila Ulitskaya, who tends to locate "authenticity [...] with the older cultures of the peripheral area, and much less so with the center" (cf. Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 137).

<sup>566</sup> Incidentally, Fandorin is described as having missed the Governor General of the Caucasus Viceroyalty, Count Vorontsov-Dashkov, for this particular audience; his name is only mentioned in passing, but Fandorin would likely have received a highly contrasting narrative from this individual, whose liberal tendencies are well recorded (cf. Altstadt-Mirhadi, "Baku," 300f.) and who "showed a proclivity for tolerant nationalities policies" (Stephen Badalyan Riegg, "Neotraditionalist Rule to the Rescue of the Empire? Viceroy I. Vorontsov-Dashkov amid Crises in the Caucasus, 1905–1915," *Ab Imperio* 2018, no. 3 (2018): 115–39, 123). It seems only fitting that Akunin felt the need to relegate the Count – an example for a workable version of Imperial rule in the Caucasus, whose attempts failed to create a lasting legacy – to the sidelines of the official historical narrative.

Soviet reader, the mention of ‘foreign agents’ (‘иностранные агенты’) is particularly evocative, as it recalls the Foreign Agent Law that was signed by Putin in the summer of 2012. Requiring non-profit organisations to register as ‘foreign agents’ should they engage in political activities whilst receiving funding from abroad, the law has affected a number of NGOs working to create a civil society in Russia, *Memorial* and *Golos* among them, and has been criticised as a human rights violation both from within Russia and from abroad. The law officially commenced on the same date as *The Black City* was published.

Ultimately, all of the moral and legal transgressions committed under the auspice of ‘this is Baku’ in *The Black City* have one thing in common: their perpetrators are ethnic Russian characters. As a result, the phrase becomes less of a descriptor of otherness and more of an expression of Russia’s process of self-colonisation. Having exoticized criminality in an attempt to justify it, the Russian ruling elite reclaims it for itself – thus turning its members into a separate periphery and failing to escape the original othering process that was at work in the Imperial heartland. As Akunin renders this process visible in the specific locale of Baku, he also establishes a connection to Russia’s literary legacy of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when writers such as Lermontov and Pushkin “converted the Caucasian tribes into gratifying meanings about their own undeniable cultural and intellectual retardation vis-a-vis the West”<sup>567</sup>. Akunin reveals Russia’s authorship of this particular narrative whilst drawing attention to the desires and insecurities that informed it – exposing, along the way, the historical longevity of the problems surrounding Russia’s national identity formation.

#### *Megalomania and misrule*

Akunin continues his discussion of Russia’s problematic self-positioning between East and West through a focus on the imperfect Imperial system of rule in the Caucasus. The beneficial impact of Russia’s reign on both heartland and periphery is routinely questioned in *The Black City*, made symptomatically obvious in the status of Russian as a language of crime and corruption, rather than that of a linguistic bridge of stable

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<sup>567</sup> Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 288.

governance and peace: “[и] армяне, и мусульмане, и кто угодно [...] часто берут в посредники русских – чтоб не наводить на след” (CHG 183).

Shubin takes a central role in this portrayal, as it soon becomes clear that despite his claims to the contrary, he has by no means learnt how to control the Empire’s periphery. What Shubin frames as positive lawlessness for the higher-ups conversely translates into an abject lack of rights for the local people, which Akunin highlights by repeatedly referring to the complete and utter distrust that the locals harbour towards the Russian police. Reminiscent of the breakdown of the social contract in *The State Counsellor*, Baku’s citizens perceive Russian rule as an arbitrary and foreign system of oppression that they cannot rely on. Hasim strictly refuses to collaborate with the police while helping Fandorin, advising the detective not to even try to seek official help in the persecution of his would-be assassins because “[п]олиция не дурак бесплатно Хачатур ловит” (CHG 149). For Saadat, “[ж]аловаться в русскую полицию еще худший срам, чем решать тяжбу в русском суде [...] эта полиция только и умеет, чтоб брать бакшиш” (CHG 185). Leon, a Bakinian actor who starts an affair with Fandorin’s wife, responds with confusion – rather than outrage – to the detective’s suggestion of involving the police following her abduction: “Помилуйте, я бакинец! Какая полиция? И что она может?” (CHG 290).

Fandorin’s own investigations are hindered by the inefficacy and incompetence of the police from the start of *The Black City*. The detective’s physical distance to his superiors impedes a successful communication even more than usual, leading Fandorin to distrust everyone around him: “в наличии одни подозрения” (CHG 256). Just as the Empire appears to be following a ‘divide-and-conquer’-strategy in the Caucasus, its own institutions of power are once again warring between one another, continuing to secure the absolute power of the Tsar as a result of their internal quibbles: “первые, самые драгоценные часы ушли на унижительные и бесполезные объяснения с дворцовой полицией, Охранным отделением, жандармами, придворным ведомством и прочими инстанциями” (CHG 17). As the events of *The Black City* draw to a close, Fandorin adopts the locals’ attitude, conceding the uselessness of Russian law enforcement as a system of structure and order: “Звать на помощь полицейских Фандорину и в голову не пришло” (CHG 336).

The Russian failure to successfully police Baku is indicative of a wider failure to govern the Caucasus as a whole. Akunin skilfully weaves hints as to the longevity of this problem into his narrative, the most evocative of which is Hasim's answer to Fandorin's question about the source of hatred between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Hasim's outspoken dislike of Armenians is a source of constant consternation for Fandorin, who nonetheless does not intervene when Hasim rewards a young boy for his help in guiding Fandorin to a secret meeting place by promising: "можно слушать, как мы будем армяне убивать. Смотреть нельзя, слушать можно. Такой награда" (CHG 156). Hasim describes the ethnic tensions in Baku as an age-old problem, yet links the latest outbreak of violence to the failures of Governor Nakashidze, the Imperial Governor of Baku. In Hasim's report, Nakashidze instigated violence between Armenians and Azerbaijanis by letting his anti-Armenian resentments dictate his style of governance:

Накашидзе-губернатор вместе с Охранка захотел армяне напугать. Чтобы забыли революция. Охранка сказала глупые и жадные люди (у нас такие тоже есть): можно армяне немножко грабить и резать. Когда начальство разрешает резать, это легко. Стали резать, грабить. 'Немножко' не получилось, потому что немножко резать никогда не получается. Начальство говорит: хватит, а люди еще хотят. Тогда солдаты стрелять стали. А на Кавказ стрелять начнешь – стрельба несоро кончится. [...] Все, теперь сто лет стрелять будем. Это Кавказ. Мы не любим армяне, армяне не любят нас, все вместе не любим русские. Раньше в Баку все рядом жили. (CHG 142)

Nakashidze is portrayed as having engaged in a misguided attempt at securing and bolstering his own role as a would-be mediator between the ethnic factions – an underestimation of the tense situation in the city that eventually cost him his life.

From a historical point of view, the situation was – needless to say – slightly more complex than just an "[о]бычная история на тему 'разделяй и властвуй'" (CHG 142). Akunin's Nakashidze is closely modelled after the historical prototype of Mikhail Nakashidze, whose surname Akunin did not even attempt to alter. The catastrophic effects of Nakashidze's rule in Baku are moderately well documented: Stefan Wiese's analysis of the events of February 1905, for instance, portrays Nakashidze as a newcomer to the region who was paralysed by events and pushed into passivity by his own incompetence. Wiese's article attributes the failure to nip the interethnic violence in the bud not just to the (lack of) interference on the part of the Imperial government, but also to the unreliability of the local police apparatus and its

loyalty to different criminal gangs in the city.<sup>568</sup> Nevertheless, Wiese also confirms that anti-Armenian moods were widespread among the local administration, corroborating the fact that Imperial rule consolidated a Russian enemy image among the Armenian community.<sup>569</sup> Wiese also backs up the idea that there were ethnically mixed districts in Baku prior to 1904/5.<sup>570</sup> The fact that Hasim purports a less forgiving view of this chain of events is a result of his ethnic affiliation, yet the end result is the same: the central cause for the Caucasus's prolonged instability is attributed to the incompetence of Russian Imperial governance in the region.

In the character of Shubin, Akunin places a successor to Nakashidze's system of rule in the midst of his own novel. Much like Nakashidze, Shubin believes that he can control the spark of violence he is in the process of igniting; rather than quench the flames of ethnic strife in the city, Shubin fans it: “[с]амый влиятельный из местных начальников, фактически хозяин города, которому полагалось бы охранять порядок, делает нечто противоположное: разжигает пламя” (CHG 253). In behaving this way, Shubin lives up to Etkind's verdict that the “re-enchantment of the world by the enlightened colonizers for the sake of ‘the idea’ ignites violence and is impossible without it”<sup>571</sup>. However, just like Nakashidze, Shubin is destined to fail in his endeavours, and does indeed get killed at the end of the novel. Shubin's megalomaniacal designs for his professional future are reminiscent of Pozharsky's in *The State Counsellor*, as he, too, pursues a political path that ultimately only serves to bolster his personal station, not stabilise the Empire he serves: “Я давно уже доклад заготовил на высочайшее имя: как делать бурное Закавказье тихим и спокойным. [...] когда я родину спасу, верну империи нефть [...] Истинным хозяином Кавказа стану я!” (CHG 268).

In a complementary view to the issue of Imperial misgovernance, Akunin also focusses on the consolidation of the late Imperial opposition movement as an embodiment of the breakdown of the regnant social contract. As Fandorin records his impressions of Baku in his diary, he notes that his knowledge about the city “день ото

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<sup>568</sup> Cf. Stefan Wiese, “Lalaevs Haus Brennt. Das Februarpogrom Von 1905 in Baku – Paralyzierter Staat Und Massengewalt Im Russischen Reich,” *Journal of Modern European History* 10, no. 1 (2012): 117-38, 133-5.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid, 119-35.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>571</sup> Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 216.

дня обогащался сведениями о бакинских революционных организациях: большевиках, меньшевиках, анархистах, эсерах, мусаватистах, дашнаках, панисламистах” (CHG 189-90). Odysseus’s success in creating a united revolutionary front that crosses both ethno-religious and class lines – securing the cooperation of Georgian railway workers, social democrats, Mensheviks, social revolutionaries and the Caspian flotilla – is contextualised in the Empire’s concomitant failure to provide the people with an integrative identity narrative of its own. Baku’s particular potential as a hotbed for political activity is rendered as the result of this heightened conflict potential between a colonised people, a corrupt police force, and an ineffectual leadership:

Идеальный плацдарм – не Тифлис, а Баку [...] тут неисчерпаемый источник революционных кадров: горячие турки, пламенные армяне, боевитый пролетариат. Плюс немаловажный фактор – раскормленная, покладистая полиция. (CHG 85)

Odysseus also refers to the sluggish, inept Imperial machine of the Russian Empire as an ‘Elephant’, i.e. a colossus of cumbersome heaviness – representative of a system of rule that can be hunted and brought down.

Throughout *The Black City*, the disintegration of this Imperial ‘Elephant’ is shown to be far more advanced than its official representatives suppose. General Lombadze, a high-ranking Tsarist official, professes an astounding amount of naïveté when it comes to the allegiances of the people, made apparent in his refusal to refer to the agent provocateur Afina as such; instead, he calls her “[д]остойнейшая дама, которая сотрудничает с нами из патриотизма” (CHG 7). In freely combining the terms Bolshevist, patriot and collaborator, Lombadze proves his inability to realistically assess the current situation, which is a discrepancy made even more surprising given his high rank within the Imperial surveillance state. On the very opening pages of *The Black City*, Lombadze proudly proclaims: “Ага! Мне докладывают обо всех приезжих!” (CHG 6). However, the Empire’s failure to inspire loyalty and integrity among its servants also means that the unshackled liberty to (mis)use information in the pursuit of individual gain spawns an endless cycle of corruption, turning the tools of surveillance into yet another source of instability instead.

In contrast, Odysseus commands an effective and loyal informer network that spans from the periphery all the way to the capital of the Empire: “Между Питером и Баку летали шифрограммы. А я их читал. Есть у меня на спецтелеграфе

человечек...” (CHG 340). Odysseus also leaves a note at the site of Spiridonov’s murder that is signed with his official codename; as Fandorin correctly deduces, this suggests a contact “внутри какого-то из розыскных ведомств” (CHG 18), i.e. the higher government circles. Although the identity of Odysseus’s informer is never revealed in *The Black City*, other members of the state machinery are shown to harbour similar views to those of the revolutionaries – Pestrukhin, for instance. A captain by rank, he says: “Законность, откровенно говоря, и повсюду-то у нас в России плохо соблюдаемая, в Баку отсутствует вовсе [...] бравирюя либерализмом, что у жандармских офицеров почиталось особенным шиком” (CHG 40). The apparent spread of liberalism as an en-vogue attitude among higher-ups on the table of ranks is a notable change from previous Fandorin novels and indicates the shaky legs upon which the Imperial Elephant totters.

Another feature of the Imperial surveillance state that Akunin addresses is the existence of a far-reaching prison network. As a microcosm of panoptic despotism, the Empire’s complex penitentiary system wields unifying powers that are praised by Odysseus, who states: “ваш коронованный остолоп нам даром не нужен. Он наш главный союзник в борьбе с царизмом” (CHG 14). Incidentally, the panoptic surveillance structure of prisons also lies at the heart of Odysseus’s and Hasim’s partnership: as Hasim’s radicalisation occurred under Odysseus’s tutelage in prison, it not only points towards the self-made problems of Empire, but also towards the overall revolutionary success in recruiting a wide diversity of followers: “в тюрьма меня посадили не армяне – русские. В тюрьма армяне тоже были, много, но драка не было, и ругань не было. В тюрьма один враг – начальство” (CHG 143). Hasim’s memory of his time in prison reads like a thinly veiled metaphor for life in the Russian Empire as a whole.

Lastly, there is a third reason for the instability of Imperial rule in the Caucasus. Not only have dissatisfaction with the system eroded the last traces of loyalty and a lack of moral guidance made collaboration with the criminal fringes of society more attractive than the pursuit of a non-violent change of power, but Russia’s presence in Baku for the economic exploitation of its oil resources likewise led to a destabilisation of Imperial rule in *The Black City*. As summarised by Etkind, most of Russia’s colonisation expeditions were driven by economic enterprises such as the fur trade and

the oil industry. As the upkeep and security of these new markets grew in importance for the Empire, the provision of liberty to the people proportionally decreased. Etkind characterises the resulting situation as “a double monopoly that could be best compared to a Mobius [sic] strip”<sup>572</sup> – imbuing this latter symbol with an additional meaning to those previously provided in the Fandorin project. Since the Empire’s wealth had to be protected at all cost, the colonial attitudes that accompanied the conquest of various peripheries helped to implement more restrictive policies based on artificial othering narratives.

### *Fuelling the Revolution*

In *The Black City*, Akunin provides a multi-focal portrayal of Baku’s oil industry, aptly capturing its complexity within Russia’s narrative of Empire. On the one hand, the Empire’s fears of foreign interference in Russian dominance over Baku’s oil reserves are given centre stage – coming to a tragic climax when Fandorin overreacts and kills an Austrian secret agent, thinking he has uncovered an international conspiracy to cut off Russia from its oil supplies to spark a regime change (cf. CHG 303f.). The fact that Baku’s oil fields were a highly contested locale on the international stage at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a well-researched piece of historical information, bolstered by the presence of a number of key historical players such as “молодой Роберт Нобель, брат владельца петербургского оружейного завода” (CHG 33), Rudolph Diesel (CHG 199) and Baron Rothschild (CHG 177). Shubin’s words summarise the martial character of Baku’s oil industry, as he links the entire oil world to the sphere of warfare and conflict: “в мире нефти война не прекращается никогда. Самая настоящая – с диверсиями, саботажем, убийствами” (CHG 198).

On the other hand, Akunin’s portrayal of the budding oil business in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Baku not only reveals fears about foreign interference in the trade, but also focusses on anxieties related to Empire’s inability to control its self-created internal Others – along with the way they may impede Russia’s survival as an Empire. Akunin’s description of Baku’s oil industry renders a fairly accurate picture of its complex ethno-religious composition of workforce; as Jonathan Sicotte’s analysis of survey results from 1909 indicates, “Baku, just before the First World War, had

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<sup>572</sup> Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 73.

absorbed [...] a reliable and diverse source of low-cost labour from across both the region and the Russian Empire”<sup>573</sup>. At the same time, Emil Souleimanov states that “it was primarily Russian, Armenian, and foreign capital that profited from the oil wealth of Baku”<sup>574</sup>. Audrey Altstadt-Mirhadi refers to Baku’s enormous and unprecedented increase in population following the city’s oil boom by stating that Baku’s number of inhabitants grew by over 700% between the 1870s and 1897, at which point “over one-third of Baku’s population was Russian”<sup>575</sup>.

Thus, faced with the problem of mass urbanisation and industrialisation – which, by nature, bring their very own social problems with them – Baku was also shouldered with the process of colonisation by the Russians. As Souleimanov points out, the Empire’s Russification campaign in the Caucasus in the 1870-1880s led to a deterioration of Russian relations with both the Armenian and the Azerbaijani populace and the rise of an attitude of “condescending accommodation”<sup>576</sup> among the colonisers – a statement easily applicable to Fandorin’s own behaviour towards Baku’s inhabitants.

The fact that there was rivalry between the Russian administration of the area and its local oil barons is also explored by Akunin in the character of Mesrop Artashesov – an Akunin-ian copy of Zeynalabdin Tagiev (unknown birth year-1924), to whom Altstadt-Mirhadi ascribes considerable socio-political significance. She mentions rumours that “council decisions were actually made in Tagiev’s parlor”<sup>577</sup> and calls him “a patron in Baku Muslim society”<sup>578</sup>, which suggests an appropriately intricate network of relations between Baku’s oil business, the city’s ethno-religious tensions, and Russian Imperial politics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is also reflected in Fandorin’s visit to Artashesov-Tagiev’s summer residence in Mardakan, which he compares in its splendour to Buckingham Palace (cf. CHG 92). At Mardakan’s dinner parties, Fandorin witnesses the planning of several oil deals and criminal undertakings.

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<sup>573</sup> Jonathan Sicotte, “Baku and Its Oil Industry through War and Revolution: 1914–1920,” *The Extractive Industries and Society* 5, no. 3 (2018): 384-92, 386.

<sup>574</sup> Emil Souleimanov, “Between Turkey, Persia and Russia: Perception of National Identity in Azerbaijan and Armenia at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Century,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2012): 74-85, 77.

<sup>575</sup> Altstadt-Mirhadi, “Baku,” 288.

<sup>576</sup> Souleimanov, “Between Turkey, Persia and Russia,” 81.

<sup>577</sup> Altstadt-Mirhadi, “Baku,” 300.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

Fandorin's own perception of the oil industry is a predominantly negative one. He perceives the substance as threatening and repellent, exclaiming, at one point: "Какая все-таки гадость эта нефть!" (CHG 342). From Fandorin's point of view, the wooden oil rigs in Baku's actual Black City create a spectacle which "напоминало не лес, а кладбище" (CHG 29); he also links it to a "паука, раскинувшего густую паутину" (CHG 90). His negative surprise at mistaking a drill zone for a forest mirrors the distressed gaze of the pre-industrial subject, but more than being confronted with existential fears brought about by modernity – an out-of-character reaction for Fandorin, who otherwise harbours a strong interest in technological progress and feats of engineering – Fandorin's shock at realising that the passenger train he is on is moved to a holding track to allow the oncoming "ротшильдовские, нобелевские и манташевские составы" (CHG 29) to pass reads as a literal manifestation of Hosking's theorem about Empire taking precedence over Nation.<sup>579</sup> In switching the established poles of meaning and connecting the train image to one of disruption, Akunin endows the associated image of the railway station with "a new sense of personal and social insecurity"<sup>580</sup>. The paramount significance of the train as the only means of establishing and securing communication, trade, and travel across the vast swathes of the Russian Empire is turned from a symbol for national cohesion into an emblem of Empire's impending downfall instead.

Fandorin's interrupted rail journey to Baku thus becomes indicative of a wider rupture in the Empire's stability, which is a metaphor that plays a central role throughout the Fandorin series. The majority of the novels' plotlines open at train stations, featuring events that disrupt the imagined cohesion and symbolic function of Russia's train network as the country's main artery: thus, in *The Death of Achilles*, Fandorin's arrival by train marks his return to Russia as an internal Other; in *The State Counsellor*, the opening train scene replaces Fandorin with a murderous double that assassinates a representative of Empire. In *The Black City*, Fandorin's arrival at Baku's central station culminates in the first attempt on his life, conveying yet another instance of threatening instability.

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<sup>579</sup> This occurrence is historically accurate, cf. Sicotte, "Baku and Its Oil Industry," 385.

<sup>580</sup> Frithjof Schenk, "Attacking the Empire's Achilles Heels: Railroads and Terrorism in Tsarist Russia," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 58, no. 2 (2010): 232-53, 234.

As a result, railway stations in the Fandorin series are turned into prime locales to “[challenge] the Tsarist regime [...] [turning] out to be a cage-like site of modern public space, sheltering an assassin and imprisoning his victim at the same time”<sup>581</sup>. This vulnerability also extends to the country’s oil network, placing Baku and its reliance on a functioning railway back in the role of the Empire’s weak spot. Historian Frithjof Schenk realised this when he called the railway Russia’s Achilles Heel, but so does Akunin’s antagonist Odysseus, who states: “самое главное было – найти ахиллесову пятау: точку, удар по которой сразит насмерть, казалось бы, непобедимого врага. Точка эта – Баку. Современные великие державы, сами того не заметив, стали топливыми наркоманами” (CHG 322).<sup>582</sup>

At this point in the novel, loyal readers of the Fandorin series will have identified Odysseus as the same anti-hero who was active during the events of the novel *The Diamond Chariot* (*Алмазная колесница*, 2002). In this novel, Odysseus’s attempts to sabotage the railway system were aimed at preventing the outbreak of the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. Odysseus’s revolutionary activity in *The Black City* bears a similar stamp, as he chides Fandorin for delaying the inevitable revolution and risking the outbreak of a world war instead:

Слон так или иначе сдохнет, - сказал он. – А вы, фокусник японский, только сделали хуже. Революция все равно грянет. Только сначала придется пройти через мировую войну. Вместо нефти на растопку пойдут миллионы жизней. И будет Тьма, а за нею – Свет. (CHG 343)

The logic behind fueling a revolution to prevent a war is further explained by Odysseus in a similar dichotomy of light vs. darkness:

Военно-промышленной клике придется забыть об империалистической войне – кинутся спасать собственную шкуру. Но не спасут. Слон самодержавия, трехсотлетний одряхлевший исполин, не устоит на своих тумбообразных ножищах. [...] Свет воссияет вновь, озаря бескрайнюю страну, наконец освободившуюся от рабства. (CHG 323)

The rhetoric that Odysseus employs in these quotations is important to note. For the revolutionaries, Baku’s oil and kerosene supplies function as a visual symbol of progress and enlightenment, as they dictate an acceptance of competition and the laws of the market as integral parts of a new social contract. This new societal make-up, in turn, enables the evolution of a society where the “объем добываемой нефти был

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid, 245-6.

<sup>582</sup> Cf. *ibid*.

чем-то вроде аристократического титула” (CHG 98) – thus making Baku into a modern and progressive counterpart to the Empire’s obdurate and soon-to-be-obsolete heartland. In the wake of this process, Baku is transformed from a peripheral backwater into a path for the future, albeit in a very different sense from the one previously envisioned by Shubin. The socio-economic power of oil in Baku effects societal changes from within, resulting in the fact that the Empire’s hunger for resources feeds its own demise. Consequently, the source of Imperial darkness is not oil itself, but the Empire that mismanages both its resources and its people.

Oil as a resource of Empire is also a central category of analysis for a discussion of post-Soviet nostalgia for Empire. As pointed out by Kalinin, the post-2000 years saw a rapid rise in literary productions concerned with the topic of ‘petropoetics’, which mirrored oil’s simultaneous elevation into a symbol of national cohesion and even national identity in a Russian context.<sup>583</sup> Kalinin notes a number of identical functioning modes in the way the political elite treat the extraction of cultural capital from the past and the drilling for oil, summarising that

oil acts as one of the central symbolic figures through which the post-Soviet unconscious finds a language – the unconscious that seeks in the bowels of the earth, the depths of memory, and the beginnings of history a resource for the articulation of utopian perspectives, the restoration of historical totality, and the revelation of a metaphysical source.<sup>584</sup>

Fandorin’s distaste for oil can thus also be read as a veiled comment at the neo-Imperial exploitation of the resource of history – along with the corruption it engenders.

The significance of the oil theme in *The Black City* for a post-Soviet readership is not limited to matters of nostalgia. The link between oil, Empire, and geopolitical instability likewise carries relevance within the greater context of post-Soviet foreign policy. Just as securing Baku’s Black City played a paramount role in prolonging the lifespan of the Romanov dynasty, so did Russia’s post-1999 oil boom help to consolidate Putin’s rule. John Lawton links the Russian interference in Georgia in 2008 to a question of dominance on the oil market, viewing oil and gas as “the Kremlin’s key tool for ensuring the success of its foreign policy initiatives as well as

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<sup>583</sup> Cf. Kalinin, “Petropoetics,” 122.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid, 143.

its national economic prosperity”<sup>585</sup>. Similarly, Stephen Blank labels Russia’s contemporary policy in the Caucasus as neo-Imperial, stating that

the conflicts that currently roil the Caucasus are either the result of Russia’s new neo-colonialism or [...] can [...] be characterized [...] as the wrecks of empire [...] the legacy, if not the current example of Russian governance, has contributed greatly to the overarching authoritarianism that characterizes the Caucasus, north and south.<sup>586</sup>

As Russia’s influence in the region has once again led to an increase in ethno-religious conflicts, it has also brought about a state of political instability that directly benefits Russian neo-Imperial designs and places Russia back in the role of the pseudo-mediator.

What remains is the question of how much better equipped contemporary politicians are in dealing with the unrest they set loose. Unlike historians’ accounts of the genuine incompetence of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Imperial governors of Baku and surroundings, Blank views Russia’s contemporary Caucasus policy as premeditated and deliberate – calling to mind Shubin’s callous willingness to plunge the region into chaos. Blank hypothesizes that Putin used the Chechen War to reintroduce the kind of power vertical that furthers “the return of a traditional internal colonialist pattern of rule that incited unrest when applied to a twenty-first-century problem”<sup>587</sup>, before summarily pointing out “Moscow’s unrelenting desire to recover some of its lost imperial heritage in the Caucasus”<sup>588</sup> – a desire effectively subverted by *The Black City*’s events, which undermine nostalgia for Imperial rule in the area by focussing on the concomitant wrecks of Empire and oil’s considerable conflict potential instead.

### 3.3.2. *Writing Nation: More of Chekhov, Less of Dostoevsky*

At the end of *The Black City*, Akunin’s inversion of the symbolic meaning of darkness and the colour black is carried over into the scene of Fandorin’s death. During his final moments, Fandorin muses:

Вдруг голос, очень знакомый, но уже не вспомнить чей, зашептал Фандорину на ухо сказку, под которую когда-то было так страшно засыпать: ‘В черном-черном городе, на черной-черной улице, в черном-черном доме...’ (CHG 362)

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<sup>585</sup> John Lawton, “The Great Game: Power Struggles in Asia,” *History Today* 59, no. 2 (2009): 39-41, 41.

<sup>586</sup> Stephen Blank, “Russia’s Caucasus Wars: The Wrecks of Empire and the Wars of Decolonization,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 34, no. 4 (2012): 182-93, 182.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

The repeated incantation of the word black creates an impression of claustrophobic terror and establishes a link to the novel's title. However, the format Akunin chose for Fandorin's final thoughts refers to a popular oral tradition of short horror stories for Russian children, so-called *strashilki*, which generally end on a sudden anti-climax by revealing a thoroughly banal source for the horror. Such a playful turnaround is not only hinted at throughout *The Black City* – following the first attempt on his life, Fandorin is forced to go undercover; as case proceedings make it necessary for him to announce his survival to the authorities, he plans: “Действовать будем так. В-первых, я воскресну” (CHG 195) – but it is also continued in Fandorin's resurrection in the novel *Not Saying Goodbye* (*He прощаюсь*, 2018).<sup>589</sup> Nevertheless, the fact that Akunin's hero is brought to the brink of death raises questions about the survival of his proposed hero paradigm – and, by extension, the post-Soviet intelligentsia *in toto*.

In *The Black City*, Akunin's traditional juxtaposition of literary national hero narratives largely rests on Fandorin and Odysseus, his antagonist and routinely explicit double. Fuelled by their desire to discover a stable homeland within the folds of the Russian Empire, Fandorin and Odysseus are condemned to an identical journey of *nostos* – a Greek term describing the homecoming of an epic hero in tales such as *The Odyssey* and the original source term for the word ‘nostalgia’.<sup>590</sup> Both Fandorin and Odysseus fulfil the function of wanderers in the physical and philosophical sense that *nostos* requires, but their search for a state of identity arrival is perpetually thwarted and deferred by the Empire it is linked to:

[...] А как только прищучу господина подполковника, жизнь сразу делается менее таинственной. (CHG 257)

[...] когда свершится великое общее Дело, можно будет заняться личным счастьем. [...] После того как издохнет Слон, все это станет возможно. (CHG 325)

As both characters entertain visions of a better future that will not only reintroduce safety and stability to Russia, but which will also enable them to move beyond their established hero roles, they likewise dream of a return to the status of private citizen.

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<sup>589</sup> Apart from the obvious parallel to Sherlock Holmes's resurrection by Conan Doyle, Golovacheva also sees a foreshadowing of Fandorin's status of ‘undeadness’ in a reference to Tolstoy's posthumously published play *The Living Corpse* (*Живой труп*, 1911). Cf. Golovacheva, “Dilogiia B. Akunina,” 130.

<sup>590</sup> Cf. Marigo Alexopoulou, *The Theme of Returning Home in Ancient Greek Literature: The Nostos of the Epic Heroes* (Lewiston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009).

However, the comfort of a contemplative refuge in the cosy tradition is neither envisaged nor achievable for either hero, who, despite being placed in the midst of both the Greek and the classical detective literature tradition, function as emblems of the rootless modern man and identitarily uprooted Imperial subject instead.<sup>591</sup>

By choosing Odysseus as the namesake for his antagonist, Akunin cunningly explores the parallel between Greek literary heroes and their detective counterparts – summed up by Brigid Brophy in their underlying purpose to “perform miracles [...] They rely on nothing but commonsense, which, however, the detective uses to an uncommon, heroic degree”<sup>592</sup>. However, Akunin also reconnects to the classical reception of the Odysseus character in ancient Greek literature as a trickster and rebel figure. Whereas the majority of readers are likely to associate the figure of Odysseus with positive images of a cunning and intricately developed hero, this very cunningness also allows for inverse interpretations of his character: Homer’s contemporaries and direct successors, for instance, treated Odysseus “[...] in *all* his significant appearances in extant tragedy except in *Ajax* [...] [as] a rogue [...] the main villain [...] the instigator of the mob [...] merciless opportunist and pragmatist, indifferent to human suffering [...] a thievish trickster [original emphasis]”<sup>593</sup>. According to Silvia Montiglio, Odysseus also embodied “a propensity coldly to defend the rule ‘the end justifies the means’ [...] [and] the figure of the demagogue”<sup>594</sup>.

It is difficult to ascertain whether Akunin was aware of and playing with this classical reputation of the Odysseus figure or not; however, his own criminal’s uncanny deviousness is expressed not just in his official codename – in General Lombadze’s words, “Четырнадцать лет в розыске! Невероятной изворотливости! Отсюда и кличка!” (CHG 7) – but also in the fact that he himself acknowledges his status as a bandit figure, contextualising his behaviour within the functioning modes of Empire: “Всей этой разбойничьей (какой же еще?) деятельности придавала

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<sup>591</sup> Whereas Fandorin changes his domicile in almost every novel, more often than not taking up residence in a hotel – the quintessential resting place of the traveller and home of several well-known flâneurs of world literature – Odysseus, as mentioned previously, is a recurring figure in the series whose revolutionary activities take him all across the country.

<sup>592</sup> Brigid Brophy, “Detective Fiction: A Modern Myth of Violence?,” *The Hudson Review* 18, no. 1 (1965): 11-30, 19.

<sup>593</sup> Silvia Montiglio, *From Villain to Hero: Odysseus in Ancient Thought* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 3-4.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-10.

смысл и оправдание только великая цель: завалить Слона. Без нее Дятел был бы просто вымогатель и шантажист” (CHG 84).

Odysseus and Fandorin also mirror one another in one additional shared character trait, which is their preparedness to engage in self-criticism. Throughout *The Black City*, both the detective and his counterpart repeatedly question their preconceived notions of truth and reality:

- Правильно я говорю?
- Не знаю. – Фандорин улыбнулся, поневоле залюбовавшись рассказчиком. – То есть я того же мнения, но не уверен, что п-прав. (CHG 130)

Всегда полезно подвергнуть свои взгляды и планы испытанию скепсисом. (CHG 83)

A similar desire to get to the bottom of things is also reflected in Odysseus’s choice of moniker for himself. As stated in his official secret police file, Odysseus has appeared under a range of nicknames in the past, all of which relate to bird species (cf. CHG 18). His nickname in *The Black City* is Diatel (Woodpecker), a bird which he links to “прекрасной, хоть малоизвестной поговорки ‘Дятел и дуб продабливает’” (CHG 83) – the proverbial oak, in this case, being the Russian Empire.

Apart from his role in the non-Fandorin novel *Bruderschaft with Death* (*Смерть на брудершафт*, 2007), Diatel also appeared in the Fandorin novel *The Diamond Chariot* under the name Drozd (thrush). In a Q&A hosted by BBC Russian on their Facebook page in 2015, Akunin seemingly confirmed this chronology of the character’s previous appearances:

- Azamat Ulbashev [...] 2) Встретимся ли мы еще с Дроздом-Грачем-Гвоздем-Дятлом-Одиссеем?
- 3) Были ли у вашего Дятла прообразы: Виктор Павлович Ногин, например?
- BBC News Russian: [...] 2) Обязательно. 3) Нет, это собирательный образ Сильного Большевика, как я представляю себе эту фигуру.<sup>595</sup>

The ‘collective’ nature of Diatel’s role as a Bolshevik is subsequently also expressed in the character’s supposed real name, which is given on file as “непримечательное

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<sup>595</sup> Boris Akunin and BBC News Russian, “Pisatel’ Boris Akunin, Gost’ Prokhodiashchego...” *Facebook*, April 10, 2015, <[www.facebook.com/bbcussian/photos/a.410032698324.185727.190992343324/10152827158173325/?type=1&comment\\_id=10152830311198325&reply\\_comment\\_id=10152835798048325&offset=0&total\\_comments=109&notif\\_t=photo\\_reply](http://www.facebook.com/bbcussian/photos/a.410032698324.185727.190992343324/10152827158173325/?type=1&comment_id=10152830311198325&reply_comment_id=10152835798048325&offset=0&total_comments=109&notif_t=photo_reply)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

[...] Иван Иванович Иванцов” (CHG 9) – i.e. a literal everyman’s name, devoid of any distinguishing aspects.<sup>596</sup>

### *Odysseus, Diatel and Dostoevskiana*

However, there is also an alternative way of interpreting Odysseus-Diatel’s supposedly ‘real name’. As all three chapters written from Diatel’s point of view in *The Black City* are captioned as ‘conversations with the devil’, an explicit literary reference to Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov in *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Братья Карамазовы*, 1880) is created: “В дьявола, как и в боженьку, человек, разумеется, не верил [...] Психически человек был абсолютно здоров, шизофренией не страдал, [...] к образу Ивана Карамазова и творчеству Федора Достоевского относился юмористически” (CHG 83). Akunin’s established trickster role in regard to literature and stylistic conventions makes this open renunciation of Dostoevsky’s novel into an equally overt postmodernist subterfuge, aimed at bringing the intertextual relationship between the two novels to the fore.

As Diatel’s ‘conversations with the devil’ take the shape of critical moments of self-reflection and soliloquies, Akunin places his own devil in a similar role to that of Ivan Karamazov’s critical interlocutor. By creating this link, Akunin resumes Dostoevsky’s search for the true nature of the devil: “И вот выдалась минутка поболтать с умным че... – чуть было не подумалось ‘человеком’” (CHG 83). The conflation of the Russian words for ‘man’ (‘человек’) and ‘devil’ (‘черт’) in this scene mirrors Ivan Karamazov’s own argument with the figure, in which he steadfastly proclaims that the devil is nothing but “воплощение меня самого, только одной, впрочем, моей стороны... моих мыслей и чувств, только самых гадких и глупых”<sup>597</sup>. The corresponding view of evil as man’s critical spirit lends *The Brothers Karamazov* the appearance of an anti-intelligentsia manifesto, written in support of a subservient national spirit.

Indeed, according to Vladimir Kantor, *The Brothers Karamazov* was generally read as “an explication of ‘the people’s truth’ and ‘the Russian path’ and as a

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<sup>596</sup> In *The Diamond Chariot*, the name ‘Lagin’ is mentioned once, but this, too, might be a pseudonym.

<sup>597</sup> F. M. Dostoevsky, *Brat’ia Karamazovy. Tom vtoroi* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1963), 347.

condemnation of the Russian intelligentsia”<sup>598</sup>. Katia Dianina, who argues that culture “lost currency at the end of the imperial period, when it was assailed on all fronts”<sup>599</sup>, also talked about Dostoevsky’s satirical views on the term and noted how he used ‘culture’ as a curse word.<sup>600</sup> Akunin offers his own view on the topic by using Fandorin as a mouthpiece: during one of his ruminations on Russia’s future, the detective demands “[п]оменьше бы нам Достоевско-розановского, побольше бы чеховского” (CHG 296).

The literary-cultural maxim created by Fandorin establishes an additional link between Dostoevsky and Rozanov, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century religious thinker and conservative writer who published a book on Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor in 1891. The Grand Inquisitor is a theological digression and story told by Ivan Karamazov to his brother Alyosha, and is often considered one of the most important parts of Dostoevsky’s novel overall. In this story, Christ returns to Earth during the time of the Inquisition, but is imprisoned and sentenced to death by the Church. A conversation between the Grand Inquisitor and Christ unfolds, in which the former criticises Christ for having encumbered humankind with the burden of freedom. Christ never responds to these allegations with words, but eventually kisses the Inquisitor on the lips and is released.

According to Simona Forti and Zakiya Hanafi, both Dostoevsky and Rozanov saw the essence of the tale about the Grand Inquisitor in the belief that “humanity should be saved from its own freedom – a freedom that is a crushing, tormenting burden”<sup>601</sup>. It is important to note that this belief is presented by Ivan, a member of the radical intelligentsia, who juxtaposes his own intellectual worldview with that of his spiritual brother’s. Ivan’s highly analytical worldview makes him doubt the existence of truly objective moral categories – an intellectual struggle that finally leads him to insanity, as it would also allow innocents to suffer. In despairing over the notion of morality, Ivan’s character simultaneously loses faith in the rightness of personal freedom, ultimately railing against God and life in one.

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<sup>598</sup> Vladimir Kantor, “Whom Did the Devil Tempt, and Why? Ivan Karamazov: The Enticements of the ‘Russian Path’,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 40, no. 4 (2004): 69-92, 70.

<sup>599</sup> Dianina, *When Art Makes News*, 37.

<sup>600</sup> Cf. *ibid*, 32-3.

<sup>601</sup> Simona Forti and Zakiya Hanafi, *The New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today* (Redwood City: Stanford UP, 2014), 187.

There is a clearly identifiable socio-political dimension to this conundrum, as Ivan's troubled rejection of freedom links to what Daniel Rancour-Laferriere called the Russian 'cult of suffering'<sup>602</sup>. According to Rancour-Laferriere, who analysed the work of Dostoevsky as part of his study on masochism in the Russian national character, Dostoevsky is "the master [of] depicting masochism in literature – Russian or otherwise"<sup>603</sup>. Authoritarianism clearly benefits from such a submissive mind-set, which is why it also tends to nourish the three pillars of "чудо, тайна и авторитет"<sup>604</sup> as supported by the Grand Inquisitor – all of which are threatened by the development of sceptical individualism and a desire to look beyond manipulative narratives of mystery and wonder. Both Ivan's teachings and his descent into sickness mark out the perils of the associated intellectual mind-set in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

In *The Black City*, Akunin not only reclaims the vector of 'тайна' for renewed interpretation through his use of detective fiction – once again drawing attention to his self-stylisation as an 'evil' trickster figure – but also responds to the way that "neo-religious thinkers perceived [The Brothers Karamazov] as a warning about the intelligentsia's negative role"<sup>605</sup>. Through the doubling of Odysseus-Diatel and Fandorin, Akunin investigates both the role and the conscience of the late Imperial intelligentsia from his own point of view – returning both characters to an overarching discussion of morality.

Diatel's critical intellect challenges him to reflect on his outsider status in society and future path of development: "Ты всю жизнь в подполье, в темноте. Сможешь ли ты жить на свету? Не ослепнешь?" (CHG 325). Although there is an obvious reference to Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (*Записки из подполья*, 1864) here – whose protagonist embodies an enthusiastically masochistic mind-set – Akunin's antagonist presents a different kind of underground man from Dostoevsky's original figure. Instead of finding happiness in kowtowing to a higher power, Diatel

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<sup>602</sup> Cf. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York UP, 1995).

<sup>603</sup> Ibid, 80. The propagation of this attitude is by no means an accepted fact among all Dostoevsky scholars, but I believe its use is intended in Akunin's references to his work.

<sup>604</sup> F. M. Dostoevsky, *Brat'ia Karamazovy. Tom pervyi* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1963), 320.

<sup>605</sup> Kantor, "Whom Did the Devil Tempt, and Why?," 74. Kantor draws special attention to Ivan's description of Europe as a cemetery and the way it presages, in some ways, post-Soviet Russia's subsequent disenchantment with the West.

receives pleasure from opposing it. This is because his own underground status is not a choice, but a sentence, reminiscent of the othered status of the liberal intelligentsia in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia – which, slowly but surely, branched out into an ever-greater opposition movement in response to the ‘авторитет’ imposed from above. Problematically, Diatel considers his own peripherality of thought exceptional to the point where he fails to identify as part of the society around him:

Один слюнявый поэт сказал: ‘Никто из людей не остров’. А Дятел думал про себя, что он именно остров. Причем большой. Такой большой, что может считаться материком. [...] Что такое остров? Это твердь, со всех сторон окруженная бессмысленной, жидкой, волнующейся массой. (CHG 83)

Contextualised here in a reference to John Donne’s *No Man is an Island* (1624), Diatel’s self-exultation is also reminiscent of Ivan Karamazov’s embittered dissociation from humankind. It is subsequently mocked by his own ‘devilish’ voice of reason: “Скажи мне, человек-остров, а не превратиться ли тебе в полуостров, когда закончится борьба?” (CHG 324).

Reminded about the underlying selfishness of his revolutionary endeavours, Diatel is forced to confront his lack of a workable offer of narrative for Russia’s future. However, he refuses to do so, envisioning, instead, a retreat into the private realm (‘можно будет заняться личным счастьем’, CHG 324). The inherent paradox in this stance marks Diatel as an unsuitable hero for imitation: expressing, on the one hand, a distaste for the masses (‘бессмысленной, жидкой, волнующейся массой’), he is still willing to leave the fate of Russia to their hands and act as a catalyst alone. The critical intelligentsia voice embodied in the devil reminds Diatel of his societal responsibility, but is silenced by his revolutionary gusto.

Consequently, although Diatel does mark an evolution from *The State Counsellor*’s Grin to a more Bolshevik version of the positive hero – reflected in Diatel’s description as possessing a “твердая рука, единая воля и железная организованность” (CHG 317) – he simultaneously showcases a notable lack of responsible leadership, which would later become emblematic of the functioning modes of Bolshevik rule. The fact that Russia’s path is set on a Bolshevik future is foreshadowed in various ways throughout *The Black City*, most notably through mentions of the Tiflis bank robbery in 1907, one of the biggest Bolshevik coups used to finance the movement (cf. CHG 84), and the repeated name-dropping in references

to Lenin (CHG 9), Kerenskii (CHG 8) and Koba, the later Stalin (CHG 9).<sup>606</sup> At some point in the novel, the Communist Manifesto also puts in a passing appearance (CHG 193), whereas the admonition that “болванов никто не любит” (CHG 15) sounds suspiciously like a well-known Soviet propaganda poster phrase.

Instead of listening to the devil’s reprimands, Diatel continues to pursue his more or less selfish course of actions. Fandorin’s retreat from the field of Russian politics following the events of *The State Counsellor* could be read in a similar vein, and indeed, the fact that Fandorin could have developed into the same kind of revolutionary activist as Diatel is stressed in the novel:

Лицо это Фандорину сильно не понравилось: умное, волевое, притом с чертовщинкой. Из таких юношей при определенном стечении жизненных обстоятельств получаются чрезвычайно опасные индивидуумы. Эраст Петрович знал это по собственному примеру. (CHG 9)

Hasim voices a similar sentiment, explaining his continued loyalty to Odysseus-Diatel as a result of mere bad timing, not a lack of leadership potential on Fandorin’s side: “Ты тоже мог бы быть мне как отец, если б я встретил тебя раньше. Но двух отцов не бывает” (CHG 359). However, in contrast to Diatel – who relegates his inner voice of critical reason and morality to the extraneous sidelines of his official identity, thus rejecting the freedom of critical thought in a Dostoevsky-Rozanovskian vein – Fandorin listens to his inner ‘akunin’ and follows a firm set of moral guidelines instead.

As part of this catalogue of moral virtues, Fandorin not only recalls Kant’s teachings – asking “Что скажет moralische Gesetz in mir?” (CHG 111) – but also criticises two widespread attitudes in the Russian national character, embodied in the sayings “Сойдет и так” (CHG 295) and “Полюбите меня черненьким, а беленьким меня кто угодно полюбит” (ibid).<sup>607</sup> Whereas the first functions as an expression of a careless indifference to life, as if “мы обитаем в своей стране временно и не

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<sup>606</sup> In a tragicomic aside, Akunin includes a little apostille in his novel, saying that Stalin was caught by Chechens who decided not to kill, but only beat him, “Чтобы показать: такую букашку даже убивать не стоит” (CHG 234).

<sup>607</sup> Instead of using a Russian translation, Akunin marks the idea of a superior moral ideal as foreign to Russian thought by inserting the original German. The parallel to Kant is overall a curious one, as the philosopher not only unexpectedly found himself a Russian subject after the occupation of Königsberg in 1756, but also experienced a profound writer’s block and mental paralysis until the city’s liberation from Russia, cf. Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 181. A. G. Golovacheva uses Fandorin’s invocation of Kant as the last in a long line of instances that posit him in a mirror role to Pierre Bezukhov in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, cf. Golovacheva, “Dilogiia B. Akunina”.

обязаны думать о тех, кто будет после нас [my emphasis]” (CHG 296), the latter – taken from Gogol’s unpublished second part to the novel *Dead Souls* (*Мертвые души*) – stresses a willingness to excuse, if not to embrace, criminal modes of behaviour, and to use them as “оправдание и расхлябанности, и этической нечистоплотности, и хамству, и воровству” (ibid). It is this “*idea* of nonresistance to evil [original emphasis]”<sup>608</sup>, traced by Rancour-Laferriere from religious writings of the early Rus’ to Dostoevsky and beyond, that Fandorin wishes to quell. In doing so, Fandorin embodies a literary heritage opposite to that of Dostoevsky and Rozanov – the literary heritage of Chekhov.

### *Fandorin, the Noble Man, and Chekhoviana*

To an extent, Akunin is a professional in the creative re-imagining of Chekhov’s literary heritage in his own work. In 2000, the author published a homonymous sequel to Chekhov’s play *The Seagull* (*Чайка*, 1896), which starts with Treplev’s ‘suicide’ and turns it into a murder mystery instead. Each one of the eight attending characters is given a motive for the crime, providing viewers with eight possible, but not a single conclusive solution to the case. The play also establishes a family relationship between the physician Dorn and Fandorin: “Мои предки, фон Дорны, переехали в Россию еще при Алексее Михайловиче, очень быстро обрусели и ужасно расплодились. Одни превратились в Фондорновых, другие в Фандориных, наша же ветвь усеклась просто до Дорнов”<sup>609</sup>.

Akunin’s *The Seagull* received mixed reactions from the Russian public, but has since been read as a successful parody on the detective genre by Lyudmila Parts. Focusing on the heightened postmodern metatextuality of the play, Parts argued that Akunin’s version works as both a “defense mechanism of cultural memory”<sup>610</sup> and “an ironic take on the postmodern rejection of the concept of truth”<sup>611</sup>. Through this playful transfer of *The Seagull* into the popular detective fiction genre, Akunin dethroned Chekhov from the pedestal of canonical grandeur, whilst at the same time returning

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<sup>608</sup> Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia*, 19.

<sup>609</sup> A. Chekhov and B. Akunin, *Chaika. Komediia i ee prodolzhenie* (Moscow: Mosty Kul’tury, 2000), 113.

<sup>610</sup> Parts, “Boris Akunin’s Postmodern Čajka,” 39.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid, 40.

the playwright's text to the attention of a contemporary readership – creating, in the process, a disrespectful homage to their literary (dis)interests.

Michael Katz goes one step further by describing Akunin's play as “an act of homage [...] perverse and subversive, and carnivalesque in its overturning of venerated authority”<sup>612</sup>. Katz's invocation of the carnivalesque lifts it out of its original, Bakhtinian sense and merges the idea of a subversion of political authority with the equally rebellious task of dethroning literary idols. Akunin indirectly refers to Bakhtin's work when Fandorin makes a fleeting, yet consequential remark about the way it feels to walk next to Hasim: “похожий на Панурга рядом с Пантагрюэлем” (CHG 153). On a surface level, this comparison reads like a mere comedic reference to Hasim's enormous body height; yet Panurge and Pantagruel are also the lead characters in Rabelais' work – which, in turn, was studied by Bakhtin. The resulting book *Rabelais and His World* (1965) explored “the interface between a stasis imposed from above and a desire for change from below, between old and new, official and unofficial”<sup>613</sup>.

In my reading, Akunin uses the carnivalesque in this precise sense of suspension between the political and the cultural. Just as Renate Lachmann analysed Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque as a phenomenon of counter-culture, leading her to extend its applicability to Stalinism and the statement that Bakhtin “sees the anticipation of another, utopian world in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway”<sup>614</sup>, a similar mood shift in society can also be registered in Putin's Russia. In 2004, so-called ‘monstrations’ – demonstrations that feature pointedly absurdist, nonsensical slogans – became an annual feature in various cities across Russia. Geir Flikke describes these ‘monstrations’ as popular expressions of an apolitical mind-set; at the same time, however, he also discusses the inevitable political reactions that these events entail, confirming that participants consciously anticipate police retaliation.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> Michael R. Katz, “Boris Akunin's Khuliganstvo: Literary Parodies of Chekhov and Shakespeare,” in *American Contributions to the 14th International Congress of Slavists*, ed. by David M. Bethea (Bloomington: Slavica, 2008): 85-90, 88.

<sup>613</sup> Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), 5.

<sup>614</sup> Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis, “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture,” *Cultural Critique* 11 (1988): 115-52, 118.

<sup>615</sup> Cf. Geir Flikke, “‘Monstrations for Mocracy’: Framing Absurdity and Irony in Russia's Youth Mobilization,” *Demokratizatsiya* 25, no. 3 (2017): 305-34.

In concluding that “Monstrators use irony and evasiveness strategically [...] [to] demonstrate that the specific context offered by the authoritarian regime of Putin cannot successfully control perceptions and what people think and feel”<sup>616</sup>, Geir also describes the inadvertently political nature of much of contemporary Russia’s cultural sphere.<sup>617</sup>

The Chekhovian story arcs present in the novels *All the World is a Stage* and *The Black City* continue this theme and address the conflicted border between culture and politics in contemporary Russia, highlighting the increased theatricality of the post-Soviet political space in the process.<sup>618</sup> It is noteworthy that the subplot about Fandorin’s marriage to the actress Clara runs parallel to the appearance of the Chekhovian subtext in the Fandorin project: in *All the World is a Stage*, Fandorin is recruited into helping his future wife by Chekhov’s widow, Olga Knipper.<sup>619</sup> *The Black City* begins with Fandorin’s journey to Yalta following a request by the “к-комиссии по наследию Чехова” (CHG 6). In the novel’s opening scene, the arrival of General Lombadze interrupts Fandorin’s perusal of *The Cherry Orchard* (*Вишневый сад*, 1904) – a disruption of the cultural by the political that merges the two spheres into a symbiotic spectacle of the absurd through Lombadze’s melodramatic excitability, which reminds Fandorin of “персонаж из ранней чеховской пьесы [...] [л]евые газеты прозвали генерала ‘придворным мопсом’ и шутят, что по утрам он в зубах приносит его величеству тапочки” (CHG 5-6). As a readily apparent copy of Ivan Antonovich Dumbadze, Yalta’s ultraconservative and semi-dictatorial Governor in 1914, the character of Lombadze-Dumbadze is not only turned into a caricature of

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid, 334.

<sup>617</sup> On the opposite end of the spectrum, the resurfacing of show trials likewise gives cause for concern, cf. Catherine Schuler, “Reinventing the Show Trial: Putin and Pussy Riot,” *The Drama Review* 57, no. 1 (2013): 7-17; “Russian Justice and Theatre of Absurd; Show Trial Strengthens the Case for an EU Magnitsky Act,” *The Financial Times*, February 19, 2013.

<sup>618</sup> As noted by Olga Sobolev, Akunin also toyed with the topic of carnivalesque subversion in the novel *The Coronation*, cf. Sobolev, “Boris Akunin and the Rise of the Russian Detective Genre,” 79.

<sup>619</sup> Fandorin’s acquaintance with Olga Knipper dates back to a case involving Chekhov himself: “Как гениально отыскали вы пропавшую рукопись Антона Павловича!” (Boris Akunin, *Ves’ Mir Teatr* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2010), 20; all further quotations will be referring to this edition, abbreviated as (VMT)). This same, ‘lost’ manuscript is mentioned again in the opening pages of *The Black City*, although it is never identified by name – making it a likely contender for Chekhov’s play *Platonov*, one of the writer’s earliest works that was kept in a safe deposit box by his sister Maria and was later confiscated by Soviet officials. It is occasionally labelled Chekhov’s ‘lost play’, making this entire interlude one of Akunin’s characteristic plays with literary history – which, at the same time, posits Fandorin as both a contemporary and a kindred spirit to Chekhov.

mindless subservience, but also becomes an indictment of the disruptive influence of authoritarian regimes on the cultural sphere in general.

True to the tenets of his established writerly persona, Akunin's parodic barb at a figure of Imperial authority carries not only an external referent, but also targets his own work. In *The Black City*, Fandorin is already estranged from his wife, but her presence is still inflicted upon the reader (and Fandorin) at periodical intervals – suggesting a function other than the mere provision of comic relief. As Fandorin's exasperated reactions to Clara's theatrics grow in acerbity, they also begin to open up a parallel discussion about the mockery made out of reality by post-Soviet politics: “В Баку ждали важные дела, государственного значения, а здесь буффонада с туземным колоритом” (CHG 301).<sup>620</sup> Yet just like Clara's film-set, Akunin also exploits the ‘local flavour’ of Baku to attract a wider readership. Similarly, the assassin and love triangle plot that can be found in the sujet of ‘The Caliph's Love’, the film Clara is starring in, is equally present in *The Black City*, calling to mind the success of the romance genre on the Russian book market of the 1990s.<sup>621</sup> As a result, Akunin parodies both the continued success of action and romance productions in Russia and the societal conditions of the 1990s that led to the proliferation of this escapist fare in the first place – a time when “literature considered escapist distracted readers from more serious ideological concerns [...] the detective novel in particular”<sup>622</sup>.

Yet it is not escapist fiction itself that Akunin criticises, but escapist fiction that leads to a complete dissociation from truth and reality – particularly in regard to the genre of historical fiction. As Fandorin visits his wife's film-set in Baku, Simon

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<sup>620</sup> This impression is heightened by the realisation that the majority of Clara's replies are quotations from theatre plays that she has acted in – works by Chekhov, Ostrovsky and Shakespeare among them. Fandorin usually identifies these quotes straightaway, thus providing an insight for the readership on their fake allure; however, as pointed out by Golovacheva, not all of his attributions are correct. One of his mistakes includes a reference to Chekhov's *The Seagull* – a play that Akunin, as previously mentioned, rewrote and therefore knows exceptionally well. Fandorin mistakenly attributes one of Clara's replies to Trigorin, not Treplev – the very same character who was shot in Akunin's re-writing of *The Seagull*. Thus, Fandorin's mistake can be seen as foreshadowing his own death and fate at the end of *The Black City*, cf. Golovacheva, “Dilogiia B. Akunina,” 125-6.

<sup>621</sup> Fandorin's embroilment in the ‘love’ triangle between himself, Clara – playing the heroine in Simon's film – and her actor colleague Leon creates an additional layer of reality between film, history, and Akunin's novel. Just like the historical Harun al-Rashid, Fandorin is the ‘older’ of the two male characters, and just like in Simon's film, he is repeatedly followed and attacked by assassins in Baku. Just like Fandorin, Harun al-Rashid plays the role of hero in both his fictional source text, the *Arabian Nights*, and in Simon's film.

<sup>622</sup> Theimer Nepomnyashchy, “Markets, Mirrors, and Mayhem,” 163-4.

describes the film's plot and mentions the characters of Harun al-Rashid and Hassan-i Sabbah. Fandorin is prompted to ask:

- Погоди, - удивился Фандорин, - если ты имеешь в виду Хасана ибн-Саббаха, он жил на три века позднее Гаруна. Во времена аль-Рашида ассасины еще не существовали.
- В самом деле? – Продюктер не опечалился. – Ну, а у нас так. Неважно. (CHG 61)

Simon's flippant dismissal of historical fact is rendered as an expression of capricious artistic license – but it does not find Fandorin's approval, who subsequently goes on to question Simon's decision to include blunderbusses in his film. Simon replies that these guns were available for cheap from the set of 'The Siege of Izmail' and that he intends to use them for the creation of sound effects (cf. CHG 75).<sup>623</sup> Fandorin's censure echoes Lipovetsky's words, who, when talking about the rise of postmodernism in Russian politics post-2014, criticised the "painless and almost artistic shifting from [reality to performance] which never stops and is never reflected upon as a problem"<sup>624</sup>. Lipovetsky also expressed criticism about the post-Soviet, postmodern replacing of categories such as truth, reality and fact "with the notions of 'hyperreality,' 'simulacrum' and performance, with *concerns for the real subordinated to esthetic considerations* [my emphasis]"<sup>625</sup> – thus also recalling Epstein's earlier work.

The late Imperial interest in action and historical sujets in Akunin's fictional world mirrors the post-Soviet obsession with the same topic, but it also showcases the same inherent flaws. Fandorin's challenge to observe historical accuracy makes the various layers of reality within the fictional text interact with the reality of the reader: as the use of the mocking chapter title 'Настоящий экшн' (CHG 70) indicates, there is nothing 'real' about the action described. The same phrase is repeated at the end of the chapter, thus constructing a literary frame reminiscent of a theatre curtain, drawn open and closed at the beginning and end of a performance. The curtain metaphor is also applied to the whole of Baku at an earlier point in the novel when Fandorin attempts to find a suitable Japanese translation for the city's name: although he initially renders

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<sup>623</sup> The Siege of Izmail was a battle fought between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in 1789, which ended in a decisive victory for the Russian army; the day of the battle, December 22, is now annually celebrated as the Day of Military Honour. An attentive reader will also have caught a potential reference to *The State Counsellor* in the character of Harun al-Rashid, which was the nickname given to Fandorin by Esfir to mock the detective's slave-like allegiance to Governor General Dolgorukoi.

<sup>624</sup> Lipovetsky, "Intelligentsia and Cynicism," 242.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid, 244.

it as “[Г]ород-нувориш [...] Сразу пускает пыль в глаза” (CHG 42), he eventually settles on “Город-Занавес” (CHG 41).

Although Fandorin’s reason for calling Baku a ‘curtain city’ links to his plans to draw the curtains on Odysseus’s career as a revolutionary, the name also appears as a suitable sobriquet for *The Black City*’s preoccupation with the topic of duplicity and deceit.<sup>626</sup> The dangerous effects of a politicised theatricalisation of reality are further highlighted in the novel when another attempt on Fandorin’s life is made during the abovementioned action shoot, during which the killer conveniently exploits the use of Simon’s historically inaccurate weapons to obscure his own location. As artifice’s play with history helps cover up the intrusion, it simultaneously reveals that the ‘real action’ craved by the characters in the novel already exists within their lives.

Read against the backdrop of Russia’s political protest movement in 2012, this ‘play within the play’ can be read as a warning against the deliberate transfer of the political world into the realm of staged nonsense. It reflects a transformation of Akunin’s attitudes towards the limits of his own playfulness, along with a condemnation of distorted representations of history for the sake of cheap showmanship. Writing from within the very genre that lives by these transgressions, Akunin claims a voice of authority on the matter that demands a more responsible stance of irreverence towards contemporary treatments of history and its concomitant forms of nostalgia. Thus, the ‘play within the play’ no longer serves to catch the conscience of the ‘king’, but to hold up a mirror to the readership’s tastes instead.

Throughout *The Black City*, Akunin discusses the contrast between a calamitous world and its cultural recoding into laughter by resurrecting and interrogating the spirit of Chekhov’s work. Having already questioned Chekhov’s sharp-witted understanding of parody and humour in *The Seagull* by asking why the play was considered a comedy in the first place, Akunin raises a similar thought in Fandorin’s meditations on *The Cherry Orchard*:<sup>627</sup>

[...] он вдруг понял, почему ‘Вишневый сад’ комедия. Это пьеса, написанная чахоточным больным, который предчувствует, что его грустная жизнь закончится фарсом. Скоро он

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<sup>626</sup> It also provides an equally metaphorical hint at Fandorin’s looming ‘death’ and the end of the novel – a curtain drawn on his own career, so to speak.

<sup>627</sup> Parts quotes a blog article written by Akunin and in which he discusses this question in her footnotes; unfortunately, the corresponding website is no longer available online. Cf. Parts, “Boris Akunin’s Postmodern Čajka,” 47 (footnote 21).

умрет на чужбине, и его привезут назад в вагоне-холодильнике с надписью ‘устрицы’. Типично чеховский прием комедийного снижения трагической ситуации. (CHG 6)<sup>628</sup>

The ‘overturning of authority’ through the use of tragicomic laughter is a desire shared by Chekhov and Akunin. As pointed out by Parts, Akunin’s use of the detective genre emphasises Chekhov’s own proclivity for “providing questions rather than answering them”<sup>629</sup>, a feat which also characterised Chekhov’s fictional works – some of which pertained to the detective genre. Thus, Alfred Sproede provided a relevant update to the interpretation of Chekhov’s novel *The Shooting Party* (*Драма на охоте*, 1884) when he argued that the novel functions not just as a parody of the Russian readership’s outspoken taste for crime fiction at the time, but also as a critique of the Russian legal system and its internalised state of corruption. In placing the criminal in the role of both narrator and *sudebnyi sledovatel’*, Chekhov created an early version of the unreliable crime fiction narrator that would later become an internationally successful format under Agatha Christie. Yet Chekhov also delivered a shrewd, if harsh, commentary on the theatrical aspects of the Empire’s legal system, which provided a smokescreen for widespread corruption and illegality:

The diagnosis of the local nobility and regime of dignitaries is scathing. Chekhov presents the criminal proceedings as a ‘cultural’ event, which becomes memorable not through its precise investigations and questioning of witnesses, but through the exchange of educated hints and clues related to world literature.<sup>630</sup>

This verdict, censuring the use of fake culture(dness) as a veneer for a corrupt political system and revealing this disconnect through the use of literary intertexts, simultaneously echoes Akunin’s design of *The Black City*.

Chekhov’s willingness to provide a counternarrative to the official representation of Empire was also documented by Jeffrey Brooks. Brooks traces a distinct change in the representation of the Russian Empire as a multi-ethnic state in the illustrated press

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<sup>628</sup> The historically correct description of Chekhov’s last journey in a train wagon marked for oysters not only parallels this and prompts real tragicomic laughter, but also foreshadows Fandorin’s own ‘death’ at the end of *The Black City* – which catapults him into a prolonged coma and reduces him to comical insignificance as he is eventually carried onto a train by his assistant Masa in the form of a “длинный сверток из овчины” (Boris Akunin, *Ne proshchaius’* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2018), 2).

<sup>629</sup> Parts, “Boris Akunin’s Postmodern Čajka,” 41.

<sup>630</sup> ‘Die Diagnose der lokalen Adelsgesellschaft und des Honoratiorenregimes ist vernichtend. Den Strafprozess präsentiert Čechov als „Kultur“-Veranstaltung, die statt durch präzise Ermittlung und Zeugenbefragung vor allem durch den Austausch weltliterarischer Bildungsreferenzen in Erinnerung bleibt,’ Alfred Sproede, “Rechts- und Justizkritik im frühen osteuropäischen Kriminalroman,” in *Investigation - Rekonstruktion - Narration: Geschichten und Geschichte im Krimi der Slavia*, eds. Nina Frieß and Angela Huber (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2019), 13-49, 27.

of the 1890s, which he links to the publication of Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island* (*Остров Сахалин*, 1893) and Tolstoy's *Redemption* (*Воскресенье*, 1899). Brooks portrays the 1890s as a decade that was characterised by “an ongoing discourse on nation and identity and the moral self that unfolded [...] in the new popular media”<sup>631</sup> – a verdict that could be applied verbatim to the post-Soviet period. He also states that Chekhov temporarily succeeded in working a “glint of imperial pride”<sup>632</sup> into his narrative. Singling out *Sakhalin Island* for his analysis, Brooks points out how Chekhov integrated previously marginalised groups into his portrayal of the Russian nation, focussing on people's characteristics and values instead of pre-defined ethnic or social backgrounds. According to Brooks, this approach helped Chekhov in his portrayal of an “inclusive body politic, embracing Russians of disparate origin together with criminals and obscure native peoples, and showing the ability of inherent personal and cultural strength to triumph over adversity”<sup>633</sup>. In thus using literary subversion to challenge “the state's role in defining the nation”<sup>634</sup>, Chekhov advocated a “solicitude for outcasts and for all nationalities as well as [...] sympathy for people who had overcome sins and failings”<sup>635</sup> – reminiscent of the *neschastnyi* mind-set of earlier decades.

Lastly, Brooks mentions *The Steppe* (*Степь*, 1888) in his discussion of Chekhov's re-writing of multi-nationalism in the Russian Empire – a work that Akunin also referenced in 2015, when he used it to criticise the Russian patriotic movement.<sup>636</sup> Condemning the hate-fuelled, ostentatious forms of nationalism characteristic of the Russian patriotic movement at the time, Akunin postulated that “всякий настоящий патриот – человек достойный”<sup>637</sup>, followed by a direct quote from Chekhov's short story:

Дурной, крикливый, кичливый ‘патриотизм’ отвратителен. Чехов, повесть ‘Степь’: ‘*Наша матушка Расия всему свету га-ла-ва!*’ - запел вдруг диким голосом Кирюха, поперхнулся и умолк. Степное эхо подхватило его голос, понесло, и, казалось, по степи на тяжелых колесах покатила сама глупость’. [original emphasis]<sup>638</sup>

<sup>631</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, “Chekhov, Tolstoy and the Illustrated Press in the 1890s,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 2 (2010): 213-32, 216.

<sup>632</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid, 224.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid, 215.

<sup>637</sup> Boris Akunin, “Patriotizm i ‘patriotizm’,” *LiveJournal* (blog), April 11, 2015, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2015/04/11/>> [accessed 18 December 2019]

<sup>638</sup> Ibid.

The concept of the ‘благородный муж’, or ‘noble man’ is the underlying idea for the development of Fandorin as a Chekhovian man and intelligentsia prototype. Although first mentioned in *The Winter Queen* in the description of Fandorin as “[ю]ноша чистый, смелый, благородных устремлений и патриот отечества” (AZ 134), the concept of the ‘noble man’ became a mainstay of Fandorin’s character construction only after the character’s prolonged period of service in Japan and his concomitant internalisation of certain dominant tenets of Eastern philosophical thought. Fandorin’s ruminations on the topic are typically linked to behavioural maxims of honour and dignity, such as in *The Death of Achilles*, where the idea that “поддаваться неразумным эмоциям недостойно благородного мужа” (SMA 145) is accompanied by the dictum that “благородный муж не может быть ничьим орудием” (SMA 362). In the novel *Special Assignments (Особые поручения, 1999)* Fandorin refers to Confucianism and states that “Благородный муж насыщается, воздерживаясь”<sup>639</sup>, whereas in *The State Counsellor*, Fandorin finds consolation “в изречении Мудрейшего: ‘Благородный муж знает, в чем его долг, и не пытается от него уклониться’” (SS 253).

References to both Confucianism and Buddhism continue to influence the discussion surrounding the ‘noble man’ in the Fandorin project. In the novel *The Diamond Chariot*, which covers Fandorin’s time in Japan, the detective mentally argues that “[с]уществует Справедливость, Правда, защищать которую — обязанность всякого благородного человека. Нельзя позволять, чтобы рядом безнаказанно совершалась подлость”<sup>640</sup>. Another of these maxims states that “[б]лагородный муж знает, что мир несовершенен, но не опускает рук” (ALM 55). Finally, in the novel *All the World is a Stage*, Fandorin links his concept of the ‘noble man’ to the intelligentsia itself, criticising the latter’s tendency to talk, but not act, and calling it the central shortcoming of the intelligentsia as a social group:

‘Классический интеллигент’ - существо для России вредное, даже г-губительное! Сословие вроде бы симпатичное, но обладает роковым недостатком, который так верно подметил и высмеял Чехов. Интеллигент умеет достойно переносить невзгоды, умеет сохранять благородство при поражении. Но он совершенно не умеет побеждать в борьбе с хамом и мерзавцем, которые у нас так многочисленны и сильны. До тех пор, пока интеллигентское

<sup>639</sup> Boris Akunin, *Osobyie porucheniia* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2010), 252.

<sup>640</sup> Boris Akunin, *Almaznaia kolesnitsa* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2019), 469. All further quotations will be referring to this edition, abbreviated as (ALM).

сословие не научится д-даться за свои идеалы, ничего путного в России не будет! [...] Это должна быть драка по своим правилам, правилам б-благородного человека! (VMT 134-35)

Akunin's understanding of the Chekhovian ideal thus not only focusses on a willingness to challenge authoritarian narratives about Empire and Nation, but also formulates a different perception of the intelligentsia's main function – viewing it as the agent, not just the philosophical mastermind, of change.

Fandorin, designed as a representative of this new type of intelligentsia hero, is the 'noble man' made manifest, inserted into Russian history in an attempt to see where the journey would lead him. Aron noted the detective's similarity to a Chekhovian character as early as 2004, long before the publication of *All the World is a Stage* and *The Black City*:

Fandorin's temperament [...] is unmistakably that of an Anton Chekhov: neither optimist nor pessimist, but a pragmatic skeptic wary of grandiose social projects and believing in a few self-made and self-policed rules of honorable living. Chkhartishvili's hero daily practices the four virtues that Chekhov seemed to consider Russia's only hope: decency, dignity, competence and hard work.<sup>641</sup>

As outlined previously, Aron interprets this character profile as proof for Akunin's desire to sever Fandorin from Russia's traditional intelligentsia heritage altogether. However, I would argue that Fandorin's criticism of the classical intelligentsia is not so much aimed at its basic existence than at the continued imperfection of its ideals. Fandorin's fundamental belief in the possibility of change for the better is what sets him apart from the general chorus of intelligentsia-critical voices of his time – and that of Akunin's post-Soviet readers.

That being said, it is also crucial to keep in mind that Chekhov's efforts to change the Imperial narrative, temporarily successful as they were, in the end failed to create a lasting impact. Following the resurgence of right-wing political parties after the 1905 revolution, the attractiveness of Chekhov's identity narrative for the public faltered, which prompted Brooks to call the 1890s a "lost moment of increasing toleration and acceptance of different peoples within the empire"<sup>642</sup>. Similarly, the once hopeful anti-nostalgic discourse purported by Akunin in the 1990s, along with his attempt to fashion a new narrative of nation based on a dignified version of enlightened patriotism, was

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<sup>641</sup> Aron, "A Champion for the Bourgeoisie," 155.

<sup>642</sup> Brooks, "Chekhov, Tolstoy and the Illustrated Press in the 1890s," 221.

exposed to a comparable climate of restorative nostalgia – forcing him to reevaluate his innovative intelligentsia stance.

As *The Black City* shows, Akunin became increasingly aware of the parallel between Chekhov's and his own fate. In the novel, Fandorin's embodiment of the 'noble man' principles is put under constant scrutiny. In part, this is done through the novel's colonial setting: despite concerted efforts to adapt to his new surroundings – for instance by radically changing his appearance following the escape from his would-be assassins, shaving his head, switching his clothes, adopting the new name 'Iumrubazh' (meaning 'round head') and taking instructions in 'good manners', such as loudly slurping his tea and not taking off his hat indoors (cf. CHG 140) – Fandorin still showcases several traits that unmistakably mark him as an Imperial citizen. Thus, he frequently employs the same exoticising gaze as his compatriots, perceiving his surroundings through an explicit colonial filter that retains an aloof manner and betrays a certain condescending attitude towards the local populace. Hasim comments on this at the end of the novel, saying: “Ты думал, я тупой дикарь. Ты относился ко мне свысока. [...] Я долго водил тебя, как собаку на поводке” (CHG 360). This is no longer just Hasim speaking to Fandorin – it is the colonised subject speaking to its coloniser.

Hasim's role in the novel is overall a complex one, regardless of the overt simplicity of his character. On the one hand, he appears as a mouthpiece of the Caucasian mind-set in *The Black City* and as a character who provides comic relief through his good-natured sense of self-complacency and his happy-go-lucky attitude. Fandorin receives several local philosophical gems from Hasim, such as “богатые все плохие” (CHG 125) and “[в]раг моя враг – мой друг, ясно?” (CHG 127). Hasim also proposes a thoroughly misogynistic, yet creative interpretation of the gendered Russian language, which Fandorin promptly applies to a more abstract political context:

Хорошее слово всегда 'он', плохое слово – 'она'. Я женщины не уважаю. Вся зло от них. Интересная идея. Не про женщин – про отношение к словам. Сразу видно, что человеку нравится, а что нет. Например, говоришь: 'Милостивая государь, могу ли я доверять ваша честная слово?' (CHG 126)

Last but not least, Hasim also feigns a dislike for literacy. Linking the power of the written word to manipulation and secrecy, he censures: “Я буква не знаю, читать-

писать не умею. Вся зло от грамота. Чиновник пишет, полиция пишет, буржуй пишет – все плохие люди пишут” (CHG 151). From a historical point of view, Hasim is not wrong: not only had literacy levels in the Russian Empire reached an all-time low towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but they also carried overt ethno-religious connotations in a city like Baku, where “literacy among Azerbaijani workers was as low as 18% and among other Muslim workers as low as 5%; in contrast, literacy rates among Russians were 76% and 51% respectively”<sup>643</sup>. As most of the administrative power in the region was controlled by Russians, Hasim’s association of literacy with evil likewise identifies it with the Russian ruling elite in Baku.

At the same time, Hasim’s attitude highlights authoritarian attempts to impose a narrative of dominance onto its population – along with Akunin’s own role as a literary ‘evil man’. The self-referentiality in this statement, which elevates literature into contested and incendiary material, is further strengthened through the role that the written word plays at central plot points in *The Black City*. Thus, the note that Odysseus leaves at the assassination site in Yalta starts Fandorin on his journey to Baku; conversely, Fandorin uses his diary as a trap for Odysseus once he realises that it is being monitored, and starts to insert fake schemes that allow him to control his adversary’s movements and bring about the confrontation that leads to Odysseus’s temporary arrest (cf. CHG 340).

Language and literature as a means to distort reality also gain prominence when Hasim uses a note to lure Fandorin into Odysseus’s final ambush. Hasim’s role reversal from friend to foe at the end of the novel reveals that both his wrong grammar and his anti-intellectual attitude were only play-acts, meant to lead Fandorin astray and to expose the folly of Fandorin’s colonial gaze – along with his contemporary readership’s willingness to buy into these stereotypes. As Fandorin’s inappropriateness becomes the reader’s, it creates interrogation points about everyday Orientalism for both the past and the present.

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<sup>643</sup> Sicotte, “Baku and Its Oil Industry,” 386. Cf. Boris N. Mironov, “The Development of Literacy in Russia and the USSR from the Tenth to the Twentieth Centuries,” *History of Education Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (1991): 229-52, 246.

### *Intelligentsia vs Banditry*

The most important lapse in judgment that Fandorin commits in regard to Hasim is his infatuation with the image of the oriental bandit figure, which sets off their acquaintance and simultaneously jumpstarts the novel's main chain of events. Following the second assassination attempt on Fandorin's life, during which he is dumped inside an oil rig and rescued by Hasim, the bandit gains the detective's confidence by means of a rather simple conversation: "Погоди-ка. Это ты за нами ехал? - Я. - З-зачем? Ты кто? - Как зачем? Грабить хотел, - с достоинством ответил силач" (CHG 124). The extent to which the detective falls prey to the allure of Hasim's bandit image is obvious in his choice of monikers for the Azerbaijani, whom both Fandorin and Masa call "настоящий человек. Искренний человек, хоть и акунин" (CHG 167), "Портос, только в папахе и черкеске" (CHG 130) and "богатырь" (CHG 124). At the same time, Hasim's actions and approach to life often confuse Fandorin, whose value system fundamentally differs from Hasim's. Indeed, the latter seems to know only a single fixed benchmark in life: "Уважаемый человек всегда прав, даже когда неправ" (CHG 130).

Transferred onto a post-Soviet context, Hasim becomes the late Imperial equivalent to a loyal, but lawless mafia bandit: respectability, in Hasim's view, is commanded exclusively through power and despotism. Truth and untruth lose all meaning in this context, making the seeming incongruence between the terms 'traitor' and 'hero' disappear at the same time. Hasim's firm belief in the validity of his value system is corroborated by his opinions on the ubiquity of crime and lawlessness in the society he is a part of. While explaining the difference between the terms 'разбойник' and 'гочи' to Fandorin, Hasim states: "Плохие люди на свете много. Всегда есть у кого штраф взять [...] Будут не давать – убью. Порядок такой. Кто не хочет отдавать – можно убить" (CHG 125).

Ultimately, it is unclear whether Hasim is a product of his times or a contributor to its various forms of lawlessness – most likely, he is both. However, his character clearly resembles the susceptibility of the infantile *muzhik* to a stronger father figure. Hasim's loyalty towards Odysseus marks his quick adoption of whatever value system is proffered by this paternal stand-in person, as long as it is presented with panache and confidence:

Он открыл мне глаза на жизнь, когда мы сидели в одной камере. Научил меня хорошо говорить, хорошо думать. Всему научил. Он мне как отец.[...] Отец мудрый, - сказал Гасым. [...] отец сказал, что, пока ты стоишь на его пути, дел сделано не будет. Ты поедешь в Вену и помешаешь войне. А без войны не будет революции. Тебя обязательно нужно убить. (CHG 359-60)

As a result, Fandorin's desire to see the Russian periphery as a dangerous, oriental frontier not only produces the spectre he wishes to perceive, but also leaves him blind to the real Hasim hiding behind a masquerade of buffoonery.

In a characteristic exploration of parallel timelines, Akunin's treatment of the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century taste for stories about the Caucasus's mysterious bandit-like rogues also draws a direct link to the concomitant post-Soviet enamourment with the same theme. According to Frederick White, "the Russian bandit was a romantic hero [and] a cultural hero [...] evolving in response to the changes in post-Soviet society"<sup>644</sup> throughout the 1990s. The national identity implications of this process were complex: White documents both a growing Western interest in cultural productions of the kind and a reciprocal Russian desire to satisfy their neighbours' demand in search for a positive self-image. Marsh observed this interplay in Pelevin's work, describing *Generation P* as a novel that depicts "a mafia bandit who instructs an advertising copy-writer to compose a Russian idea so that Russians can impress the Americans"<sup>645</sup>.

It thus appears that in post-Soviet culture, Russia's lasting infatuation with the bandit theme is not only characterised by a continued desire for external affirmation, but also by a move away from the Imperial 'periphery' that it traditionally inhabited. Instead, it has settled comfortably in the midst of the neo-Imperial 'heartland' – lending further support to Akunin's distinctive collapsing of the border between those two contested terms. In acknowledging both Fandorin's fascination with the bandit image and his contemporaries' admiration for contumelious corruption, Akunin explores a well-known 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary trope against a post-Soviet frame for reading.

This exploration was all the more timely against the backdrop of 1990s Russian cinematography, in which the bandit theme occupied an even more prominent place than it did in literature. White comprehensively commented upon the fact that the

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<sup>644</sup> Frederick H. White, "Balabanov's Bandits: The Bandit Film Cycle in Post-Soviet Cinema," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 25, no. 2 (2016): 82-103, 89.

<sup>645</sup> Marsh, "The Nature of Russia's Identity," 563.

“unfamiliar freedom that brought out the worst in human nature also provided filmmakers with ready stories from their daily lives”<sup>646</sup> – which led to a surprising spike in the popularity of the bandit motif in post-Soviet film productions. As the bandit theme was increasingly used to invent a conceptual smoke screen that glorified transgressions of the law as an expression of anti-Western, Russian exceptionalism, it also bolstered the advancing institutionalisation and normalisation of crime in the post-Soviet world.

White chose the highly popular filmic work of Aleksei Balabanov as a case study for this observation, which lays bare the intense reciprocity between Russian and Western culture that shaped and informed much of the Russian national identity debate in the 1990s. Writing about the development between the immensely successful productions *Brother* (*Брат*, 1997) and *Brother 2* (*Брат-2*, 2000), White flags up the growing desire to not just passively, but actively contradict or even punish the West – and, by doing so, “[alleviate] national anxieties and post-Soviet humiliations [...] striking a positive chord with post-Soviet audiences”<sup>647</sup>. However, post-2000, White’s appraisal of Balabanov’s cinematic work took a dramatic turn. Talking about the film *Dead Man’s Bluff* (*Жмурки*, 2005), White not only concluded that Balabanov decisively declared an end to the bandit cycle, but that he did so in response to the restructuring of Russian society under the Putin regime. Describing how Balabanov turned towards parodic pastiches of his own work, White details how the portrayal of former petty bandits was first transformed into oil and gas magnates and then into corrupt government officials – “the new bandits of the Putin years”<sup>648</sup>.

Akunin traces this exact development in *The Black City* through the parallel world of Simon’s film production. During Fandorin’s set visit, Simon talks admiringly of the government official and industrialist Putilov and a certain Sal’kovskii, who is described as the local director of the Imperial Mining Department. Praising the latter’s steely resolve and unimpressionability, Simon says:

Ему предлагают взятку, говорят: ‘Мы вам заплатим двадцать тысяч и гарантируем полную конфиденциальность.’ А он в ответ: ‘Давайте лучше сорок и болтайте кому угодно’. Не человек – крупновская броня!  
– У нас в империи таких бронированных сколько угодно, - заметил Фандорин [...] (СНГ 89)

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<sup>646</sup> White, “Balabanov’s Bandits,” 85.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid, 92.

Not only are both of Simon's idols Russians by ethnicity, they are also employed in the very trades which White pointed out as the career branches for Putin's 'new bandits'. Sal'kovskii's open embrace of bribery and defiance of the moral code that dictates shame for criminal behaviour mirrors the post-Soviet image of the proud bandit figure who revels in his own lawlessness. The association of this kind of behaviour with Krupp steel, the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century synonym for hardiness and defensibility, lends additional bellicosity to the image, framing aggressiveness and an open disregard for the law as desirable manifestations of strength.

As Putin's rise to power cemented a law and order mentality in post-Soviet Russia that produced a shift of criminality from street to government levels, the lawlessness of the 1990s grew into a criminal code of law in which banditry is portrayed as necessary for survival. Fandorin's enamourment with Hasim results from the latter's identical embrace of his own criminality, highlighting the appeal that this lack of duplicity carries for a post-Soviet readership: "У нас считается, что прикидываться приличным человеком хуже и стыднее, чем откровенно демонстрировать свое природное скотство" (CHG 296). However, Fandorin's ultimate fate also functions as a warning about this kind of mind-set: as the detective succumbs to the lure of the oriental bandit image, considering criminality permissible and even charming within the context of Baku, he is ultimately made to pay the price of his life for this faulty double standard. Fandorin's failure also carries catastrophic results for the international stage: on the one hand, Odysseus-Diatel is freed from prison and released back into the revolutionary void; on the other hand, Fandorin fails to fulfil his task as negotiator between the warring Empires in Europe, meaning that World War I will inevitably break out.

Audacious as this play with history may seem at first glance, it is, essentially, just a continuation of Akunin's exploration of his alternative national hero paradigm. As Akunin re-writes Russian history by inserting a 'noble man' and intelligent into the crucial political events of the late Imperial era, he challenges readers to reconsider the teleological fallacies often attached to historical events of global magnitude. Akunin's previous commitment to preserving the historical timeline more or less dictates that he will not take the extreme liberty of saving the world from World War I; nevertheless,

Fandorin's mission showcases the kind of leadership and moral integrity his character was meant to represent, and which simultaneously symbolises the alternative role Russia could have played on the international stage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – had there been a different hero narrative and a real civic nation in place.

Fandorin's failure to carry out his task returns readers to a discussion about the survival chances of Akunin's hero narrative. Ultimately, Fandorin is kept from his mission by a combination of two factors: his false assessment of Hasim and his subsequent attempt to remedy this failure by upholding the strictest of moral codes. Fandorin is lured into Odysseus's trap by a fake letter from his ex-wife, in which she asks for his urgent help. Deciding that it is the moral thing not to ignore the missive, he sets out to rescue her – despite having no desire to actually help her. Odysseus comments on Fandorin's predictability by mocking the success of his scheme: “Я не сомневался, что ты решишь напоследок поиграть в рыцаря. Люди твоей породы слишком предсказуемы” (CHG 359). As Odysseus leaves Hasim to finish the job, Fandorin is given the opportunity to avert his death sentence by telling a rather simple lie. However, Fandorin decides to remain true to his moral integrity – even at the cost of sacrificing security in Europe:

Свернуть в сторону от зла, преградившего тебе путь, означает признать свою жизнь никчемной. Можно было бы сейчас наврать – казалось бы, чего проще? Но и этого Фандорин позволить себе не мог. (CHG 361)

The decision to die rather than betray the ‘*moralisches Gesetz in ihm*’ makes Fandorin, on the one hand, a novelty among his contemporary literary fellows; on the other hand, it also turns him into an embodiment of the powerlessness of the individual noble mind within a sea of corruption.

As a result, Akunin's exploration of the ‘noble man’ theme simultaneously poses an exploration of the aspects of ideal leadership – Fandorin's among it:

[...] когда благородный муж становится правителем (что случалось в истории редко), все общество, следуя его примеру, тоже начинает тянуться вверх: улучшаются нравы, в моду входят благородство, бескорыстие, отвага. Когда же воцаряется сяожэнь, всеобщим законом становится унижение подданных [...] в эпоху правления сяожэней в обществе распространяются лживость, вороватость и вероломство [...] (CHG 153)

Written in the context of the events of 2011/12, there is reason to assume that this quotation refers not just to the issue of late Imperial leadership, but also to the explicit case of Putin's presidency. This suggestion is corroborated by a reply written by

Akunin to a LiveJournal user asking about the role distribution between Fandorin and Putin in 2012:

*Есть ли в Фандорине старшем, черты нацидлера?  
Нашего-то? Обижаете. Фандорин – 'благородный муж', а Владимир Владимирович – архетипический сяожэнь.<sup>649</sup>*

As this juxtaposition creates a clear frontier between the two hero narratives provided from above and below, it also reactivates a discussion about the intelligentsia's actual leadership potential. In the same year as *The Black City* was published, Akunin expounded on this question in one of his blog posts:

*Цзюньцзы должен оставаться 'благородным мужем' в любой ситуации, и ничего плохого с ним тогда не случится. Максимум - убьют. Но благородная гибель 'благородного мужа' - всегда тяжкое поражение Зла. [...] Броня и арсенал благородного человека – этическое превосходство. Точка.<sup>650</sup>*

Yet Fandorin's death nonetheless spells out the end of Akunin's experimentation with the idea of the 'noble *intelligent*' – a verdict in part reversed by the subsequent resurrection of the detective, but overshadowed, nonetheless, by Fandorin's complicity in his own 'death'. Finishing a diary entry on the differences between 'good' and 'evil' men, Fandorin ends up chiding himself:

*Хотелось написать что-нибудь утешительное, чтобы выйти из самоедского расположения духа, а вместо этого получилось морализаторство с нарциссическим уклоном: все плохие, один я хороший, только очень уж к себе, бедняжке, строг. (CHG 241)<sup>651</sup>*

This struggle between the ideal and the real is one of the defining moments of Fandorin's character development in *The Black City*. It is also indicative of the post-Soviet intelligentsia's struggle for recognition, along with their supposed lack of initiative in carving out a new function for themselves in society. As Fandorin's failure to take more decisive action earlier on precipitates his demise, he also becomes a living reminder of the fateful passivity of the intelligentsia he represents. Situated between a

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<sup>649</sup> Boris Akunin, "Otvety na voprosy i Obrashchenie za pomoshch'iu," *Echo Moskvy* (blog), January 16, 2012, <[http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b\\_akunin/849226-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/b_akunin/849226-echo/)> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>650</sup> Boris Akunin, "Otvety na voprosy," *LiveJournal* (blog), December 3, 2012, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2012/12/03/>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

<sup>651</sup> This quote, I believe, could also easily be read as a meta-textual commentary inserted by Akunin about what he was trying to achieve with the Fandorin series – along with the question of what he does not want the project to become.

useless (neo-)Empire and a ruthless Soviet elite in the making, the hope for a new kind of national hero is not altogether buried, but silenced – and, quite literally, put to sleep.

### 3.3.3. Conclusion

In 2012, Akunin stated in his LiveJournal blog that “[н]ачиная с ‘Театра’, я использую своего главного героя в качестве *фронтальной разведки*: как оно там, по ту сторону Времени? [my emphasis]”<sup>652</sup>. The turbulent political events of 2011 and 2012 not only prompted Akunin to take on the role of scout on the frontlines of historical memory, but also to frame Russia’s nostalgia for Empire in the explicit semantic field of warfare. The result of this confrontation between politics and culture was *The Black City* – one of the darkest Fandorin novels in the overall series and a work in which the two competing narratives of Empire and Nation have drifted further apart than ever.

In *The Black City*, the visible fiction of late Imperial rule as a period of international might and internal stability is thoroughly subverted. The city of Baku appears as a concentration of all of the Empire’s problems: ethno-religious, political, economic. Just as in previous instalments, the novel traces the source of these problems back to the Empire itself, focussing in particular on the issues of incompetent leadership, resource greed, and the synchronous escalation of violence and ethnic tensions in the Caucasus. The Russian Empire’s double vulnerability in the form of its railway network and its dependency on a steady flow of oil feature centrally in *The Black City*; yet despite the name of the novel, the fight for control over the oil market is only one piece of the overall puzzle – comparable to a symptom in an overall sick body politic.

Throughout *The Black City*, Imperial rule in the Caucasus appears both criminal and inept, as epitomised in the character of Shubin. The Empire’s self-proclaimed role as a mediator in the region crumbles against the rich historiographical backdrop of Akunin’s novel, which features a record number of historical prototypes used in the creation of world-building background characters – among them General Lombadze-Dumbadze, Governor Nakashidze, the head of the Tsar’s security Spiridonov (modelled after Aleksandr Spiridovich) and the minister Sal’kovskii, whose prototype

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<sup>652</sup> Akunin, “Otvety na voprosy.”

was most likely Konstantin Skal'kovskii. All these representatives of Empire in the novel perform, first and foremost, the role of instigators of social and ethnic strife, posing as the main source of instability in the region.<sup>653</sup>

By fuelling the ethnic tensions in the Caucasus, the representatives of Empire are also shown to speed up the breakdown of the existing social contract – which is inherently shaky to begin with. One of the foremost broken links between state and society in the novel is the local police, whose failure to inspire trust among the citizens eventually also contributes to Fandorin's downfall: because the detective cannot send the police after his kidnapped wife, he begrudgingly sets out to the meeting place himself. The inadequacies of the Imperial system of colonial rule figuratively become a source of danger for its own citizens, and by extension the Empire as a whole.

The ultimate embodiment of incompetent leadership in the novel is the Romanov family itself, which is notably absent: unlike in previous Fandorin novels, neither the figure of the Tsar nor any of his relatives appear in acting roles in *The Black City*. Instead, the process that was foreshadowed in *The State Counsellor* has come to full fruition: as the fight against authoritarianism has grown into a fight for ideas, it has also turned into a fight against the system *in toto*. The Tsar's inconsequence is not just voiced by Odysseus-Diatel, but also by Fandorin himself, who – in stark contrast to his previous, youthfully passionate defender's stance – utters the harsh criticism: “Лучше бы Господь обвенчал Россию с каким-нибудь другим ж-женихом, подаровитей” (CHG 10).

Whereas the Empire fails to modernise itself in a way that would vouchsafe its survival, its opposition has evolved into a force that foreshadows the rise of the Bolsheviks. Having created a surveillance state to curb citizens' liberties, the Empire's ruling elite has also provided its opponents with the very mechanisms of surveillance that enable civic disobedience. Akunin successfully construes a portrayal of cross-party unification under Bolshevik leadership that stresses the movement's appeal as a force of change in the face of unrelenting authoritarianism, not failing to point out the concomitant lack of loyalty among various members of the government apparatus.

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<sup>653</sup> Akunin deviated from the course of documented history in an uncharacteristically strong manner by killing off Spiridonov. The real Spiridovich survived the First World War and succeeded in emigrating in 1920, whereafter he became a historian.

The issue of successful leadership connects the narrative exploration of Empire and Nation in *The Black City*. Looking for authoritative voices to lead in the construction of a viable national identity narrative, Akunin returns to a discussion of Russia's historic process of self-colonisation. Fandorin's inability to overcome his Imperial mind-set plays a central part in this, as does his desire to perceive the Imperial periphery as an exotic Other. Indicative of an overall Imperial need to find self-definition against a visibly distinct and clearly recognisable Other, the attempts of both Fandorin and his compatriots to fixate the 'real East' are, in essence, nothing but the desire to discover the nature of the 'real Russia'. As Akunin relocates the estrangement of the ruling and educated classes and their concomitant feeling of being strangers unto themselves – to borrow Julia Kristeva's words – to the literal periphery of Empire, he explores both Russia's role as a colonising power and Fandorin's internalisation of the Imperial gaze. Tellingly, all of Fandorin's attempts to delineate Russia from the outside world lead to a collapse of the borders between self and Other, ending in Fandorin's summary that “на Диком Востоке, как и на Диком Западе, человеческая жизнь, вероятно, стоит дешево” (CHG 47). Thus, the people of Empire are not so much divided by social class or ethnic origin as they are united in the shared experience of a denigrating disenfranchisement.

Invoking a post-Soviet parallel, Akunin links the open disregard for lawfulness and morality in Imperial Russia to the growing post-2000 desire to refute and even punish the West. Throughout *The Black City*, Akunin constructs a cinematographic subplot surrounding Fandorin's actress-turned-wife that runs parallel to the main events of the novel and serves as a nod to the wildly popular 1990s bandit motif in Russian cinema and culture. Problematizing the internalisation of this bandit mind-set under the Putin regime, Akunin criticises the fact that Russian society – unlike the heroes in Balabanov's famous bandit films – has not yet completed the journey from self-stylization to self-parody, but instead condones the institutionalisation of criminality within politics and society. In choosing this mode of portrayal, Akunin simultaneously turns the seemingly harmless world of Simon's film-set into a surprisingly caustic perspective on post-Soviet escapism. Fandorin's reactions to Simon's irresponsible treatment of history are similarly scathing as his responses to his estranged wife: “Актриса, до кончиков ногтей. А значит, своего рода

инвалидка, не умеющая отличать игру от жизни [...]” (CHG 246). In reacting negatively to transgressions of the border between playfulness and lawlessness, Akunin also speaks out for a more responsible use of cultural voices in the re-imagining of history.

As a result, Akunin not only makes a dismantling of nostalgia into a central concern of *The Black City*, but also stresses the role of art in shaping perceptions of reality. This discussion seems largely informed by the increased politicised distortion of culture in the post-Soviet space – yet Akunin’s criticism is also aimed at his perceived lack of public reaction to it: “можно жить в современном городе, где на каждом углу кричат газетчики, и не иметь ни малейшего представления о том, что происходит в мире” (CHG 355). Such an attitude was also expressed in Akunin’s social media posts from early 2012, where he pleaded with his readers: “Те из вас, кто не верит в референдумы; кто твердо уверен, что ‘в этой стране все бесполезно’; кто просто не интересуется политикой, пожалуйста, потерпите”<sup>654</sup>.

Akunin’s desire to counteract the post-Soviet tendency towards nostalgic escapism finally also finds its expression in his elevation of the Chekhovian character type into a cornerstone of his new national hero narrative. As in the previous Fandorin novels discussed in this thesis, Akunin’s portrayal of the Imperial nation is construed along a careful interweaving of classical literary intertexts in *The Black City*. The two main cultural tendencies for affiliation are identified as the Chekhovian vs. the Dostoevskian world view: in Akunin’s reading, the first comprises an embrace of quasi-carnavalesque critique of authoritarianism and the cultivation of an individualised sense of responsibility, whereas the latter stands for a kowtowing to authority, a proliferation of moral masochism and a concomitant indulgence of nationalist isolationism, along with the devaluation of the individual freedom to choose to act morally – which is presented as an inherently faulty concept. While neither of these standpoints is treated as outright desirable or condemnable by Akunin, they are used as reference points on a gradient upon which Akunin’s protagonist clearly favours the Chekhovian end.

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<sup>654</sup> Boris Akunin, “Kandidaty v voprosy na referendumе,” *LiveJournal* (blog), May 31, 2012, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2012/05/31/>> [accessed 20 December 2019]

The routine doubling between protagonist and anti-hero, i.e. Fandorin and the character Odysseus-Diatel, is carried out within this same framework of juxtaposition and transplants *The Black City*'s discussion of the national hero motif onto the opposition between Chekhovian and Dostoevskian values. The comparison of the two characters as alternative national hero blueprints eventually zeroes in on the question of morality. Whereas Fandorin appears as the Chekhovian 'noble man' by upholding a non-violent stance of moral integrity, Diatel is willing and intent on bringing down the system with a bang – without taking responsibility for the consequences. By pursuing this course, both Diatel and his loyal henchman Hasim will eventually end up on the side of Russia's national heroes, but they will be supporting a regime that is going to replace one system of oppression with another. Thus, Akunin provides an implicit warning about the mindless elevation of historical victories into benchmarks of national glory, and once again reveals the volatility of hero concepts in general.<sup>655</sup>

Subsuming the principles of proactive intelligentsia leadership and inviolable moral integrity under his Chekhovian-inspired hero theme, Akunin lastly also questions the suitability of his protagonist for the role of 'noble man' and national leader. Fandorin attains a moral victory, but he loses the overall battle for change. Although he is resurrected in a subsequent and final novel, Fandorin's fate provides a symptomatic interrogation point for the intelligentsia in both its Imperial and its post-Soviet form: just like Fandorin, the temporarily vanquished intelligentsia of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reappeared as the voice of cultural reason at a later point in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just like him, it also let itself be vanquished amid a neo-Imperial consolidation of power, following another turn-of-the-century period of instability. The victory of reason is therefore neither pre-written nor a matter of course – and its authority is increasingly made into a subject of debate.

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<sup>655</sup> Vishevsky noted this trend in the Fandorin series as early as 2001, when he commented on Akunin's anti-heroes with the words: "Negative in the tenets of their genre, these literary characters turn out to be positive in the realm of history," cf. Vishevsky, "Answers to Eternal Questions in Soft Covers," 738.

#### 4. Conclusion: The Empire That We (Never) Lost

Болезнь всякой гнилой власти в том, что она вытесняет талантливых людей на обочину. (CHG 86)

The past, in contemporary Russia, has turned into a kind of future perfect, or future imperfect (both are clear deviations from Russian grammar).<sup>656</sup>

In 2017, Akunin gave an interview to Anastasia Edel, a Russian-born American writer and social historian. When asked about his relationship with Russia, he stated:

I write my ‘letters’ to Russia—books. And I receive answers, via Facebook or comments on my blog. It’s hate mail, mostly. Like, *Stop reviling our great Motherland, you bloody Russophobe*. So, I guess, the separation is likely to continue for a while longer. [original emphasis]<sup>657</sup>

From Russia’s most popular representative of crime fiction to the country’s literary *enfant terrible*: Akunin’s changed perception in the Russian public is indicative of a wider shift in the social and political make-up of the country, which hinges on questions of historical truth, cultural memory and the increasingly unstable border between fact and fiction. Delivering an insight that is both timely and thought-provoking, the Fandorin project helped chronicle these changes from 1998 until 2018.

Having started as a predominantly stylistic, playful experiment on the genre boundaries of detective fiction, the Fandorin series evolved into a multi-faceted investigation of post-Soviet Russia’s nostalgic re-orientation towards its past. By actively generating impulses to critically address the regnant simplification of the late Imperial era, along with the underlying crisis of national identity it represents, Akunin assumed a key role in tackling the repressive perversions of historical memory that currently define the post-Soviet Russian sphere of both politics and culture.

The main objective of this thesis was to move beyond the existing, genre-based studies of Akunin’s work and embark on a detective quest of my own, analysing the Fandorin project as an anti-nostalgic *pièce de résistance* of alternative remembering for Empire within the wider post-Soviet nostalgia debate. This investigation was

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<sup>656</sup> Boym, “From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia,” 152.

<sup>657</sup> Anastasia Edel, “A Top Russian Dissident on Why Putin’s Honeymoon with Trump Won’t Last,” *Quartz*, February 15, 2017, <<http://qz.com/910971/boris-akunin-russian-dissident-explains-how-democracy-died-under-putin-and-what-the-us-can-still-do-to-resist/>> [accessed 17 December 2019]

guided by three underlying research questions: (1) Which elements of the Fandorin project make it a ‘new detective novel’ in the post-Soviet context, capable of critically addressing post-Soviet distortions of the past? (2) Which widespread nostalgic tendencies accompanied the creation of the Fandorin novels, and how did these shape the design of the project overall? (3) To what effect did Akunin use his ‘new detective novel’ to deconstruct the existing romanticised narrative for identification with Empire, whilst resuming the intelligentsia’s original nation-building mission through the provision of a future-oriented counter-narrative?

*(1) Akunin’s ‘new detective novel’*

Akunin’s choice of historical detective fiction – a genre that is both popular and interactive at the same time – involved a broad readership in a critical problematisation of Russian history and updated crime fiction for a specific post-Soviet usability. Akunin’s intimate knowledge of the history and development of detective fiction in Russia and abroad enabled him to create a middle-brow format that utilises the genre’s long-standing function as a vehicle for socio-political critique, but which simultaneously honours its Russian literary roots. Unlike Western crime fiction, the Russian crime novel was a deeply subversive genre from the start, often eschewing legal solutions to crimes in favour of empathy for the criminal. Jumpstarted by the Great Reforms of 1864 and brought to life in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Russian crime fiction produced a series of literary works and police memoirs over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that frequently focussed on an incompetent police force, the Russian *neschastnyi* figure in society, and a deeply ambivalent attitude towards the terms *zakon i spravedlivost’*.

As a result, the Russian crime novel consistently brought the instability of the Imperial system and its legal code to the fore – only losing its strongly subversive character towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Russian writers started looking westward in the search for individual detective heroes to emulate. Both the British Sherlock Holmes and the American detective prototypes Nick Carter and Nat Pinkerton were incorporated into Russian crime fiction, producing a plethora of action-filled and entertaining detective stories. At the same time, the substitution of socio-political critique for cheap effects and garish cover pages created a lack in originality

that Akunin, with the confidence of the postmodernist writer, belatedly aimed to fill. Akunin's self-stylization as a literary anarchist and 'evil man' played an important part in the realisation of this project, as he posited himself as a writer who actively seeks to break established cultural paradigms and discover new answers to old problems – providing historical insights that disturb, engage, and provoke all at the same time.

In the Fandorin project, Akunin combined the socio-political critique of early Russian crime fiction and the literary style of the late Imperial period with the Russian reader's 20<sup>th</sup>-century taste for action plots and foreign dandyism. The result is a commercially viable project that rids post-Soviet popular fiction of its negative connotations with pulp fiction, and which freely mixes Russian and international detective traditions into a new form altogether. The format of the postmodern detective novel was crucial to this journey of discovery, as it allowed Akunin to move away from easy answers and ready-made solutions and face the dilemma of Russia's incomplete historical memory from multiple, contrasting perspectives.

Consequently, three main aspects spell out the originality of Akunin's 'new detective novel'. First of all, Akunin applies the international crime fiction tendency of connecting a "a wider interrogation of society or of what constitutes criminality"<sup>658</sup> with the explicitly Russian problem of a post-Soviet identity crisis – thus positioning himself as a readily recognisable detective fiction writer of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who deals with more than just a simple whodunit-problem. As the first Russian writer to imbue the highly formulaic genre of crime fiction with this new function, Akunin acknowledges detective fiction's reality-shaping power and its ability "to affirm and also to undermine all concepts of identity, be these at the level of nation, ethnicity, culture, or at the level of gender and genre"<sup>659</sup>. At the same time, the entirety of the Fandorin project also draws attention to the imperative role that narratives play in present-day perceptions of reality – both in a Russian context and on a global stage. This avenue for interpretation potentially opens up room for further studies on the role of crime fiction in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century post-truth world.

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<sup>658</sup> Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn, "Introduction: Investigating Identities," in *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction*, eds. *ibid.* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009): 1-11, 1.

<sup>659</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Second of all, the middle-brow format that Akunin created for his detective fiction project successfully bridged the gap between a post-Soviet taste for escapist fare and a need to tackle identity concerns via a discussion of history. Akunin embraced the post-Soviet shift towards popular culture, but without losing sight of the tenets of critical postmodernism. By unapologetically espousing commercial reasoning and willingly engaging with various new types of media, Akunin actively linked his literary craft to the political events of his day and postmodernised several traditional aspects of the detective novel – the treatment of history among them. As Akunin chose to view history as a Moebius strip of mutual interaction between past and present, he tackled not just the issue of nostalgia in a way that set him apart from other writers of his time, but which also provided an appropriate visualisation of the instability of post-Soviet reality. In Akunin’s reading, “the world is ruled by principles entirely different from those apparent at the surface level, leading ultimately to rejection of ideological master narratives and skepticism towards the logic of history per se”<sup>660</sup>. By revealing the parallels between the pre-Soviet past and the post-Soviet present, Akunin refused to provide a stable endpoint for his detective’s quest for truth – whilst also paying homage to the resilience and complexity of 19<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual thought and pointing out their gradient loss in the contemporary cultural sphere.

Lastly, in taking a stance for a more courageous and demanding attitude towards nostalgia in post-Soviet Russia, Akunin also deviated from the widespread entrenching of oversimplified attitudes about the Russian past among the Russian intelligentsia. By positioning an intelligentsia member in the role of his main detective figure, Akunin reactivated the intelligentsia hero type in literature at a time when the intelligentsia was being proclaimed as dead. Thus, he expressed hope in the group’s ability to resume their historical nation-building mission, whilst also reviving the reading traditions of the late Imperial era – a time when “there was no simple opposition between literary intelligentsia and lower-class readers. By the 1880s, and even more so by the 1900s, [...] Russia was [...] acquiring a ‘middlebrow’ fiction of its own”<sup>661</sup>. In reminding his readership of this heritage, Akunin attempted to reverse the emerging anti-intellectual tendencies in Russian culture and to fashion a ‘popular’ literature capable of uniting a

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<sup>660</sup> Platt, “Historical Novel,” 80.

<sup>661</sup> Lovell, “Literature and Entertainment in Russia,” 20.

diverse Russian audience. By doing so, he also counterbalanced the widespread cynicism that had become a characteristic trait of the post-Soviet intellectual elite at this time, and which continues to pose a particular problem on the way to solving post-Soviet Russia's identity and nostalgia crisis. As a result, Akunin devised a hero not only capable of a critical engagement with the intelligentsia's past, but also of a meaningful search for a usable identity narrative in the depths of Russian history.

### *(2) Post-Soviet Russian Identity Crisis and Nostalgia*

As perestroika pushed Russia into a deep-seated identity crisis, the country developed multiple parallel processes for the mediation and commodification of nostalgia, which became one of the main operational acts of identification for the construction of a new national identity narrative in the post-Soviet era. In the early and mid-1990s, these processes were largely focussed on memories of childhood carefreeness and an earnest desire to mend the broken timeline of Russia's past. Towards the end of the decade, the decline of the democratic experiment and Yeltsin's failure to create "commemorative traditions to preserve positive memories of Russia's founding moment or its adoption of a new constitution"<sup>662</sup> began to erode the public willingness to critically reflect on the uncomfortable realities of the past. The regime change that occurred at the beginning of the 2000s further broke down the multipolarity of the existing discourse, harnessing its simplified remnants to a singularized narrative of past glorification instead.

As images of stability, strength, and paternalistic authoritarianism gained in prescriptive prominence about both the Imperial and the Soviet past, they also started to impose the oppressive comfort of a sanitised national identity narrative of eternal value onto the Russian public. The Putin regime crafted a historical timeline that recovered Russia's 'lost' periods from their protracted acts of silencing, whilst simultaneously mediating the idea of a prolonged crisis of the Russian state – thus effectively conquering the interpretative agency over four centuries of Russian history. Putin's labelling of the disintegration of the Soviet Union as 'the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century' in 2005 officially elevated Empire back to a conceptual category for the public perception of the Russian past, framing the 1990s as a historical

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<sup>662</sup> Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia*, 181.

aberration in need of reversal. As a result, official memory politics after 2000 increasingly funnelled the disorganised 1990s trauma and nostalgia discourse into an official rhetoric that neatly fit under the umbrella of nostalgia for the super-status of Empire.

The national scope and nationalist overtones of this historical narrative offered a welcome – and, in many ways, desirable – reprieve from the prevalent 1990s rhetoric of self-flagellation. However, it also forcibly boosted the development of a nostalgia culture that interpreted the term Empire to mean “not only that a country was powerful but also [...] that it was in the forefront of progress”<sup>663</sup>. Subsequently, the Imperial past became an increasingly attractive resource for the extraction of ideological capital. In my reading, this also meant the re-emergence of Geoffrey Hosking’s historical theorem about Empire impeding the formation of a Nation: by giving official sanction to the reactionary sentiments that were already existent in Russian society in the late 1990s, the Putin regime effectively suppressed its alternative voices, streamlined the public discourse on Russia’s past into a fairy tale about Russian exceptionalism and Imperial might, and undermined Yeltsin’s focus on openness, tolerance, and democracy – shambolic as it was. By doing so, it also weakened the development of a civil society and elevated the concerns of power over those of policy.

In today’s Russia, cultural memory about the 19<sup>th</sup> century is predominantly limited to notions of geopolitical power and Imperial martyrdom, whereas the rich intellectual culture of thinkers, writers, and artists who carried a very different vision for the country is being silenced. Similarly, the Soviet era is commemorated, but largely in martial terms of warfare, an elevation of national suffering, and various forms of Stalinist adulation, not through official references to the dissident heritage or the countless victims of terror, war and the gulag years.<sup>664</sup> As Noordenbos correctly pointed out, “Putin has never made equally decisive statements about the ‘catastrophe’ of Soviet executions and deportations, or its other crimes of repression and corruption”<sup>665</sup> as he has about the loss of Empire.

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<sup>663</sup> Dominic Lieven, “The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as Imperial Politics,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995) 4: 607-36, 607.

<sup>664</sup> One exception to this might have been Russia’s continued enamourment with the concept of the Russian people being the best read in the world, but I believe it is fair to presume that this ‘fact’ (if it ever was one) no longer applies to the post-Soviet book market and reading culture.

<sup>665</sup> Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature*, 13.

The Fandorin project forms an important counterweight to this overall tendency, as it neither dismissively invalidates nor uncritically embraces the nostalgic impulses that came to dominate the post-Soviet Russian search for a national identity. Instead, it presents the ambivalent cultural world of the Imperial era as harbouring the key to a solution for the contemporary Russian identity crisis. Akunin corroborates his readership's desire to uncover identity pillars worth emulating in the past, but rejects the simplified depictions of symbolically charged images of Empire in favour of an often uncomfortable investigation into the Russian past and its intelligentsia heritage. Empire, in the Fandorin project, is therefore not just a romanticised backdrop, but one of the main subjects of discovery and interrogation.

I will now outline the main ways in which Akunin deconstructed the prevalent image of Empire in the Fandorin series.

### *(3.1) The Deconstruction of Empire*

Throughout the Fandorin project, Empire appears as a character in its own right. The basic idea that “the criminal *writes* the secret story of his crime into everyday ‘reality’ in such a form that its text is partly hidden, partly distorted and misleading”<sup>666</sup> is investigated on both a textual and an extratextual level in the Fandorin series: on the one hand, Akunin's fictional, historical Empire acts as the main culprit behind the crimes committed in the Fandorin series. This means that the glorifying distortion of historical memory committed by the present state likewise constitutes a criminal act – a crime that may differ from previous instances of the silencing of history, but which nonetheless proves highly problematic. On the other hand, Akunin's role as ‘villain’ makes it possible for him to expose these crimes in the traditional role of the subversive intelligentsia writer, and to break his analysis of Empire's weaknesses down into subject blocks that carry a distinct recognisability for the post-Soviet reader.

My analysis of Akunin's process of writing Empire has revealed three such subjects blocks along which the author deconstructs the official nostalgic narrative about Imperial Russia as a stable, lawful, and imitable state. The three subject blocks, as explored in the three novels I discussed, are: (1) periphery vs centre, (2), East vs West and (3) leadership vs society. Over the course of the Fandorin project, Akunin's

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<sup>666</sup> Hühn, “The Detective as Reader,” 454.

treatment of these issues substantially lost in playfulness, substituting his characteristic tongue-in-cheek irony with an increasingly more acerbic and explicit commentary on present-day nostalgic politics.

### 3.1.1 *Periphery vs Centre*

Across the Fandorin project, Akunin's exploration of the Imperial heartland and its border regions draws attention to the sheer scope of the Empire under discussion. Instead of equating size with strength, Akunin rephrases Russia's Imperial borders into a source for its present-day identitary confusion – thus elevating the categories of heartland and periphery into subjects for a geopolitical as well as a psychological reflection.

In all of the Fandorin novels discussed, the idea of a clearly fixable, distinctly Russian heartland of Empire is upended through repeated portrayals of the supposedly Other that is at the same time also the own. *The Death of Achilles* discusses architectural landmarks from the Imperial era, but simultaneously reveals the neo-Imperial inauthenticity and historical hollowness that characterise the resurrection of this pseudo-Imperial glory. The choice of a Chechen antagonist, hired by the Kremlin to assassinate a national hero, turns the classical topos of the infiltrated heartland upside down, portraying Moscow as an uncontrollable, peripheral force instead.

This process continues in *The State Counsellor*, where the revolutionary deeds of Grin, the peripheral Jewish Other, pale in comparison to the treason committed by Pozharsky – the heir to Russia's historical 'Saviour of the Motherland', whose statue adorns the Kremlin and acts as a literal embodiment of Empire within the Imperial heartland. The discussion of the periphery is further lifted out of its geopolitical context as the Kremlin and its subordinate government structures are portrayed as the main seats of liminality and transgression – subverting Moscow's representative function of Imperial wholeness and strength in the process.

In *The Black City*, the actual geographical periphery is explored on location in the Caucasus – yet Baku, too, reveals Russia's unresolved issues of the internal Orient as posing a much greater danger for the Empire's survival than the revolutionary activity along its physical borders. As representatives of the heartland infiltrate the Empire's border regions for economic and political gain, the traditional image of "the Caucasus

and its peoples as that alien setting against which Russian characters discover and define themselves”<sup>667</sup> is turned upon its head. Akunin rejects established portrayals of the Caucasus as “something of a representation of hell and of the transgressive nature of life on this edge of the empire”<sup>668</sup> and relocates the periphery’s supposedly hellish aspects to the centre of Imperial rule instead. In doing so, he creates expressions of Russian self-definition that skilfully reveal Russia’s long-standing inferiority complex as the main source behind these transgressions.

Akunin consistently collapses the distinction between self and Other in situations that carry relevance for both Imperial and post-Soviet Russia, thus applying the tenets of a postmodern historical understanding to present Russia’s contemporary instability as an heirloom of Empire, not a post-1991 import from the West. *The Death of Achilles* features references to Luzhkov’s neo-Imperial building projects and the Chechen Wars of the 1990s, which is a topic that also resurfaces in the terrorist setting of *The State Counsellor*. The latter novel additionally deals with the problem of Anti-Semitism in Russia, whereas *The Black City* explores the significance of oil for Russia’s long-standing and troubling presence in the Caucasus.

In all these explorations, Akunin highlights the continued topicality of what Alexander Etkind termed Russia’s process of internal colonisation for a contemporary Russian readership. As the exploration of this topic primarily occurs through Fandorin and his character doubles, Akunin reverts to one of self-colonisation’s main literary expressions: “The circular character of [doubles] matches the reflective character of self-colonization, which is striving to define its Other and ends up with doubles of the Self”<sup>669</sup>. However, this doubling process also extends to a more abstract level: as Russia’s internal colonisation process is relayed as a late Imperial problem, it is also shown to have found its double in the Russian present.

In summary, I suggest that Akunin’s consistent linkage of periphery and heartland to the topic of Russia’s internal colonisation process conveys one of the central messages of the Fandorin project. By expanding his portrayal of the periphery into a cultural construct that spans all of Empire, Akunin likewise turns periphery and heartland into interchangeable categories that lose their status as geopolitical givens.

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<sup>667</sup> Clowes, *Russia on the Edge*, 141.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

<sup>669</sup> Etkind, *Internal Colonization*, 247.

The Imperial heartland is characterised by a peripheral self-understanding of its inhabitants, who in turn carry this internal peripherality to the Empire's borders in a futile search for lines of cultural demarcation.

In thus highlighting the hollowness of a neo-Imperial re-imagining of Russia as a to-be-born-again Empire, Akunin flags up the necessity of recanting Russia's *sonderweg* fantasies and invented narratives about a 'geopolitical catastrophe'. Instead, he highlights the need to focus on the challenges posed by Russia's lingering problem of the internal periphery. The failure to comprehend this problem is ultimately elevated into an existential threat when Fandorin's own struggles to overcome his colonial gaze lead to his 'death' at the end of *The Black City* – marking him as a Russian, vanquished by the very periphery he fails to understand.

### 3.1.2 East vs West

Akunin's deconstruction of the centre/periphery-binary also aligns with his discussion of the Russian Empire's cultural vacillation between East and West. In the Fandorin novels, both the European West and the Asian East appear as equal stimuli for the development of Russia, neither of which is portrayed as inherently detrimental or uniformly beneficial. Just as the Russian periphery is shown to be an invisible and fluid conceptual border, so is Russia's alignment across cultural spaces shown to be malleable and, in a sense, unstable.

The ambivalent treatment of Asia throughout the Fandorin series is a particularly important feature in the overall project, as it provides an innovative counterweight to the 1990s infatuation with the West and the post-2000 rise of neo-Eurasian doctrines. Akunin portrays Russian views about Asia as encapsulating parallel ideas about despotic backwardness and enchanted exoticism; likewise, the West appears as both a seat of enlightened civilisation and a source of unsettling liberalism. Instead of disproving either narrative, Akunin corroborates both sides of each – exposing, in the process, the multi-faceted othering processes that went into the construction of the Russian sense of self over the course of the centuries.

As a result, I concur with Baraban's view that "Akunin's heroes see the advantages and drawbacks of both the West and Russia, de-idealizing, though not

denigrating, and offering a more appreciative view of both”<sup>670</sup>. In this adaptable attitude, Akunin in many ways resembles the approach of Vladimir Sorokin, whose literary work also dealt with the topics of Empire, Asia, and the intelligentsia over the course of the 1990s and 2000s. According to Tatiana Filimonova, Sorokin not only moved from a predominantly postmodernist play with conventions towards an increasingly more noticeable socio-political agenda in his work, but also “[exposed] a paradoxical view of China [...] as a metaphorical extension of self and an increasingly powerful ‘Other’”<sup>671</sup>. In line with such alternative postmodern representations of the East, the Fandorin project propagates the peaceful co-existence, not the mutual exclusivity, of Western and Asian influences on both the Russian past and its present.

Throughout the Fandorin project, Akunin’s overt criticism of stereotypical national pigeon-holing supports this reading. The casting of ethnic minorities in the role of villains, such as the Jewish Grin in *The State Counsellor* and the Caucasian Muslim Achimas in *The Death of Achilles*, elicits historical and contemporary stereotypes about groups facing discrimination in post-Soviet Russia, only to subsequently re-contextualise the associated narratives of threat as outgrowths of Empire. In *The Black City*, Akunin notably omits the creation of an ethnic Other as the main antagonist altogether, focussing instead on the destabilising role that Russians have historically played for others and themselves. By portraying the Imperial ruling elite as providing a breeding ground for corruption and an all-encompassing *homo homini lupus est* mentality, Akunin also reveals how the late Imperial mind-set has created its own anti-heroes – embodiments and scourges of ‘Mother Russia’ alike.

Lastly, Akunin increasingly problematises the Russian exploitation of stereotypes about East and West in the context of lawlessness. As he condemns the pervasive bandit mentality that has captured post-Soviet Russian culture, Akunin compares instances of power abuse in the Russian Empire to the selective democratisation processes that have shaped the post-Soviet reality – drawing an equally damning picture about both eras as a result. Consequently, the detective journey that Akunin invites his readership on ultimately reveals the crime story of their own, present-day lives. As Akunin’s use of national stereotypes keeps circling back to the Russian

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<sup>670</sup> Baraban, “A Country Resembling Russia,” 409.

<sup>671</sup> Tatiana Filimonova, “Chinese Russia: Imperial Consciousness in Vladimir Sorokin’s Writing,” *Region* 3, no. 2 (2014): 219-44, 220-1.

complicity in the central criminal cases of the novels, he also produces a counter-narrative to the contemporary infatuation with the image of the lawless criminal as the embodiment of Russia's 'special path'. The overall impression this produces is doubt about the benefits of an open embrace of criminality, which ultimately only preserves the power of Empire at the cost of internal stability for the nation. As Empire becomes the main source of criminal activity in the Fandorin project, the Imperial discourse is likewise shown to offer a highly undesirable and unstable identity narrative to fall back on in the present day.

### 3.1.3 Leadership vs Society

The fragmentation of late Imperial society and the associated instability of Empire are lastly also revealed through Akunin's discussion of the issue of ideal leadership. In all the novels analysed in this thesis, problems born of internal strife in the late Imperial state apparatus are linked to a breakdown of the existing social contract. Again, the ultimate cause of this internal strife is the Empire itself, which artificially inflates the rivalry among its various police and law enforcement institutions in order to secure the lasting power of the Tsar.

The weakness of official *zakon* is reflected in the fragility of *spravedlivost*' in Imperial society. Readers encounter this problem throughout the Fandorin series in the form of a panoptical surveillance society that enacts a similar degree of repressive violence on members of the public as it does on representatives of the state. In *The Death of Achilles* and *The State Counsellor*, this problem is largely rendered obvious through the surveillance of Fandorin by his higher-ups and the descriptions of a growing public distrust in the police; in *The Black City*, this latter process reaches a climax, as the Russian Empire's colonial mismanagement creates a situation where considerations of power completely overrule those of policy. As a result, Hosking's theory comes back to life and acerbates Baku's potential as a political hotbed, hastening the fall of the 'Imperial elephant'.

The relevance of the topic of Imperial misrule and incompetent leadership for a post-Soviet readership was also addressed by Akunin. Throughout the Fandorin series, readers encounter a number of characters who are modelled after contemporary prototypes – a process that extends to figures from politics, economy and society.

Thus, in *The Death of Achilles*, the first face of government and Empire that Fandorin encounters is Governor General Dolgorukoi, whose megalomaniacal attempts at resurrecting past glory mirror Mayor Luzhkov's 1990s grand designs for Moscow. In *The State Counsellor* and subsequent novels, Akunin's representatives of Empire become increasingly more evocative of general paternal father figures; Fandorin's own susceptibility and child-like trust in figures of Russian authority is turned into an emblematic symbol of the wider issue of Russia's 'Tsar-father' mind-set, which continues to inform post-Soviet attitudes towards political leadership. The fact that the Romanovs are first presented as untrustworthy, then rendered altogether superfluous shows the development of Akunin's critique of authoritarian leadership, along with his gradual doubts about the principle of successful Russian leadership *in toto*.

### (3.2) *The Reconstruction of Nation*

Within the context of cultural responses to Russia's post-Soviet identity crisis, it is important to point out that Akunin did not only dismantle the dominant narrative about Empire. While the majority of literary works from the 1990s followed such a singularly destructive, *chernukha*-inspired approach to exploring Russia's issues with itself – followed by the post-2000 trend to explore increasingly simplified narratives of self-glorification that eschewed self-critique altogether – the Fandorin project simultaneously dissected established truths and provided a counternarrative of future-oriented self-critique, which was not just aimed at the state, but also at the post-Soviet intelligentsia and Akunin's entire middle-brow readership. As Akunin engaged the public in an open discussion of Russian national history, he attempted to promote society-wide ideals suited to the task of creating a functioning model of civic citizenship. He also pursued the formation of a more variegated and – by virtue of being so – more inclusive sense of national identity.

Akunin's portrayal of 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary and cultural conventions followed two main trajectories: (1) a prolific use of intertextual sources as a means to test the applicability of Russia's existing national hero paradigms to the post-Soviet national identity crisis, accompanied by the evolution of Akunin's own hero ideal in the character of Fandorin, and (2) a problematisation of the fragile border between art and artificiality, which carries topical applicability for the post-Soviet cultural and political

space and which created the Fandorin project's meta-textual detective quest to uncover the complicity of Russia's cultural elite in facilitating a restorative nostalgic turn in politics.

### 3.2.1 *Intertextuality and National Hero Narratives*

Akunin's use of intertextuality is guided by his desire to critically illuminate Russia's 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia heritage and to question the ways this legacy continues to influence post-Soviet Russian cultural thought. Instead of invoking literary history to instil a sense of restorative nostalgia among his readers, Akunin looks to Russia's literary past in an attempt to dispel the halo that has been constructed around its cultural ancestry.

Although the original impetus for this reappraisal of cultural authority came from Akunin's self-proclaimed role as a 'literary anarchist' – mixing the popular with the intellectual as a way of creating a 'new detective novel' – the later Fandorin novels suggest a much more purposeful counteraction of the nostalgic misappropriation of literary voices from the past. Thus, a large number of Akunin's intertextual references in *The State Counsellor* and *The Black City* are not aimed at the corresponding source texts per se (although Akunin would doubtlessly be in favour of a careful re-reading of them), but at the culture of critical thought they symbolise, and which he considers the crucial – possibly the only, apart from the elegance of style – reference point for a nostalgic remembering of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As an advocate of a civic citizenship approach to building a Russian nation, Akunin unites quintessentially moral intelligentsia ideals with the notions of political activism and patriotism. His protagonist Fandorin fulfils the role of detective not just in order to detect the fractured lines of late Imperial political life, but to simultaneously uncover elements in Russian history and culture that would help guide the Russian public on the way to a stable future. As part of this detective quest, Akunin returns a range of 19<sup>th</sup>-century classical texts to his readership's attention, presenting and dissecting various literary hero narratives amidst his search for a new hero ideal.

As the Fandorin series progresses, this discussion becomes both more streamlined and more self-referential. Whereas *The Death of Achilles* saw a somewhat haphazard de-throning of Pushkin from his (quite literal) throne, the resurrection of Lermontov

and the deromanticisation of the actual military hero Sobolev, the novel's antagonist Achimas did not recall any particularly overt literary prototypes. In contrast, *The State Counsellor*'s Pozharsky and Grin followed clear literary blueprints, fulfilling the roles of literary scribe of fate and positive hero, respectively. Grin's attempt to fashion himself into a new kind of *bogatyr* in the positive hero tradition of the late Imperial and early Soviet era – mixing influences from Lermontov, Nekrasov, Chernyshevsky and Ostrovsky into an intertextual Frankenstein's monster – ultimately revealed the unsuitability of this national hero narrative for the post-Soviet present, as it failed to provide a forward-looking, constructive reimagining of Russia's future and propagated a destructive patriotism reminiscent of post-Soviet patriotic spectacles instead. In *The Black City*, Akunin limited his intertextual forays to a concise confrontation of the Dostoevskian and Chekhovian literary heritage, which eventually zeroed in on the question of individual morality. By choosing to elevate Chekhov into his protagonist's literary ideal, Akunin also lifted Fandorin from the contextual sidelines of earlier instalments and moved him into the explicit focus of his alternative national hero paradigm.

Over the course of the Fandorin project, this national hero narrative underwent several transformations – all of which occurred in response to changes in the post-Soviet political landscape and the intelligentsia's concomitant failure to address them. The pronounced optimism Akunin first embraced in the design of his detective hero in the late 1990s speaks to the generally open cultural sphere at the time, but the lustre of Akunin's idea of imbuing an enlightened patriot with the active willingness to cooperate with the state waned soon after its inception. Mere months before Putin's official rise to power and only about one and a half years after the start of the Fandorin series, Akunin's hero construction underwent a major re-alignment, resulting in Fandorin's exit from state service in *The State Counsellor* and the burying of Akunin's first version for an alternative national hero paradigm.

Because of this timeline, Aron's enthusiastic 2004 proclamation that Fandorin is “nothing short of an existential breakthrough – an alternative to the silent opposition to the regime and alienation from state-produced resignation, dour cynicism, sullen submission and shoddy work characteristic of the intelligentsia's way of life”<sup>672</sup> lacks

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<sup>672</sup> Aron, “A Champion for the Bourgeoisie,” 154.

the textual clout to be fully convincing. While Aron correctly identified a change in Akunin's national hero design, which thenceforth placed moral self-responsibility over a duty to the state, he failed to address the fact that this was not only a compromise and deviation from the original project idea, but that it highlighted the apparent impossibility of a softening of the confrontational frontier between state and nation in contemporary Russia. Although Fandorin acted as a stalwart defender of moral integrity and self-improvement, his split from the state apparatus simultaneously incapacitated him from contributing to any timely changes within the country he was trying to (pre)serve.

At the same time as Akunin's doubts about the validity of his national hero narrative grew, Fandorin was also increasingly turned into an object of discovery himself. It is true that "[a]s if heeding *Vekhi's* call, Fandorin's first priority [was] not to change Russia, but to change himself - or rather to change Russia by changing himself and helping others around him to change as well"<sup>673</sup> – at least from *The State Counsellor* onward. As the official ruling elite of Empire and its revolutionary enemies were grouped on one side of a moral abyss, Fandorin occupied its opposite side. The problem I see with Aron's verdict, however, is that over the course of the Fandorin project, Fandorin remains alone on his side of the chasm: although his notion of bettering Russia by bettering himself reads like a textbook embodiment of civic citizenship, Akunin's faith in the success of this approach ultimately faltered, culminating in an overall sense of resignation and the death of his protagonist.

In many ways, this makes Akunin similar to Chekhov, the author he invokes in the development of Fandorin's stance of moral self-dependence and the principle of the 'noble man'. In Akunin's reading, Chekhov is elevated to the role of intellectual godfather to the flatlining post-Soviet intelligentsia: convinced of the basic value of morality as an individual choice, he offered a workable and authentic embodiment of the multifaceted national identity of the historical Russian Empire. Fandorin's stance of inviolable moral integrity not only transported these Chekhovian values to the post-Soviet time, but also made him an innovative protagonist for a contemporary readership: as the identitary lostness that produced detrimental forms of self-attribution and othering during Imperial times returned to do so in post-Soviet Russian

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<sup>673</sup> Ibid, 153-4.

society, Fandorin's stalwart views mirrored the attitude of the Russian intelligentsia just before the 1917 revolution and offered a workable model for its internal revivification.

Yet as the development of the Fandorin project coincided with the consolidation of the Putin regime, Akunin's search for a sustainable intelligentsia mind-set of proactive morality faced the identical problem of a consolidation of reactionary powers in politics and society. This process reached its zenith during the 2011/12 protest movement when Akunin participated in the call for greater democratic freedoms and an end to Putinism. While doing so, he mirrored Chekhov's focus on non-violent, socially responsible forms of change. Chekhov's categorical rejection of violence "made it impossible for him to accept the revolution which he felt was about to break out"<sup>674</sup> – and similarly, in December 2014, Akunin chose the anniversary of his involvement in the protest movement to reflect on its outcomes, outlining once again his initial hopes for a peaceful opposition movement that could have brought about a democratic turn and toppled the government without the use of bloodshed or violence.

However, while looking back at these previously held convictions, Akunin also arrived at the disheartening conclusion that his optimism was misfounded from the start. Making use of the train imagery that is synonymous with discussions of Russia's fate as a state, Akunin outlined three possible future stops in 2014: the Lubyanka, i.e. a complete devolution into a totalitarian police state, Biriulevo – synonymous with a descent into criminality and lawlessness – and the self-explanatory Revolution Square:

Я верил в то, во что верить не следовало. Я принимал желаемое за действительное. А белые ленточки хороши только на свадьбе... [...] Двери, собственно, уже закрылись. Остается лишь гадать, какой будет следующая остановка. Там развилка из трех станций, и поезд может повернуть на любую. Станции называются 'Лубянка', 'Бирюлево' и 'Площадь революции'. С моей точки зрения, это как выбирать между четвертованием, сожжением на костре и расстрелом. При таком выборе я, разумеется, за расстрел.<sup>675</sup>

Akunin's sense of resignation in response to the failed protest movement and the overall development over the course of the 2000s recalls the failure of Chekhov's own attempts at changing the Imperial narrative from within. Akunin's increased preoccupation with the Chekhovian mind-set towards the latter half of the Fandorin

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<sup>674</sup> Polotskaya, "Chekhov and His Russia," 27.

<sup>675</sup> Boris Akunin, "Ostorozhno, dveri zakryvaiutsia. Sleduiushchaia ostanovka...," *LiveJournal* (blog), December 13, 2014, <<http://borisakunin.livejournal.com/2014/12/13/>> [accessed 20 February 2020]

project adequately demonstrates his attempts to fortify his national hero paradigm against the growing conviction of an inescapable historic parallel between his own era and Chekhov's. Once again, Filimonova issued a similar summary of Sorokin's oeuvre when she noted a complete absence of "hope for Russia's spiritual salvation"<sup>676</sup> in his work following the millennial turn.

Having first highlighted the underlying ambivalence of previous Russian national hero narratives and the inherent volatility of hero concepts in general, Akunin was ultimately forced to concede the ephemerality of his own narrative. As exile becomes the only refuge for Akunin's hero, Fandorin embodies the intelligentsia's repeated failure to oppose the regime in a constructive, proactive way. This problem not only pertains to the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, but also to the late Soviet period, during which the intelligentsia "repositioned itself as the moral elite. Articulating a promise of morality in an immoral society became its main function"<sup>677</sup>. Writing from the vantage point of 2020, it appears that another period of potential self-renewal within the intelligentsia has passed – once again without producing any of the desired changes.

To all appearances, Akunin has joined the chorus of disillusioned voices about the intelligentsia's future. In 2016, he published a collection of short stories titled *Unchekhovian Intelligentsia (Нечеховская интеллигенция)*, based on historical subjects that Akunin had previously explored in his LiveJournal posts. In 2018, the Fandorin project came to a close. In a commemorative article, the literary critic Galina Iuzefovich summarised Fandorin's unique role in post-Soviet literature and called him "единственным настоящим героем, которого за 25 лет своего существования сумела породить постсоветская литература"<sup>678</sup>. However, Iuzefovich also noted the dwindling potential for imitation that this new hero model possesses in the changed circumstances of post-Soviet Russian politics:

Из героя, чье сердце билось в унисон с сердцами читателей, он, по сути дела, превратился в реликт прежней эпохи — ностальгический, воплотивший в себе наши собственные идеалы и мечты, и потому сегодня вызывающий не столько любовь, сколько жалость и неловкость — о господи, какими же глупыми, смешными и наивными мы были каких-то

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<sup>676</sup> Filimonova, "Chinese Russia," 239.

<sup>677</sup> Serguei Oushakine, "Introduction. Whither the Intelligentsia: The End of the Moral Elite in Eastern Europe," *Studies in East European Thought* 61, no. 4 (2009): 243-48, 245.

<sup>678</sup> Galina Iuzefovich, "Akunin zakonchil posledniuiu knigu o Fandorine," *Meduza.io*, October 10, 2017, <<http://meduza.io/feature/2017/10/10/akunin-zakonchil-poslednyuyu-knigu-o-fandorine>> [accessed 21 December 2019]

20 лет назад. [...] мы все, выросшие с этим героем, некогда очарованные им, разделявшие с ним его иллюзии и несбыточные надежды, должны присутствовать при этом прощании.<sup>679</sup>

Invented in order to combat nostalgia, Akunin's hero has become an object of nostalgia himself – nostalgia for the optimistic, courageous and critically elegant self-reflectivity of Russia's cultural climate in the 1990s.

### 3.2.2 *Art vs. Theatricality*

Finally, Akunin's loss of playfulness in treating the national hero theme in the Fandorin series also went hand in hand with an increased focus on the theatricality of post-Soviet politics and a problematisation of the question about recommendable limits for artistic escapism. More than any other discussion point in the series, this question helps to illuminate the post-Soviet context for Akunin's decision to proclaim his self-invented national hero paradigm (almost) dead – whilst also highlighting his condemnation of the post-Soviet intelligentsia's complicity in this process.

Akunin began discussing the problematic relationship between authorial activity and a re-writing of reality within two years of starting the Fandorin project. His early treatment of the theme was characterised by a generous degree of playfulness, leading the characters in *The Death of Achilles* to rail against their pre-written fates in much the same vein as Lermontov's Pechorin did – by asking general questions about human self-determinacy, instead of launching a concrete attack on the blurry boundaries between lived reality and political spectacle. In contrast, *The State Counsellor* featured Pozharsky's explicit wish to impose his narrative of Russian exceptionalism onto the Russian body politic – producing the impression that life in the Russian Empire is a controlled spectacle, orchestrated according to the laws of deceit and deception that are instituted from above. In *The Black City*, Akunin made the link between post-Soviet politics and the production of criminal simulacra even more explicit by introducing the cinematographic world of Simon's film-set – creating a constant clash between political investigations and theatrical asides of seemingly superfluous randomness.

As the Fandorin novels increasingly questioned the permissible limits of escapist fare, they also pointed out the irresponsible collapsing of the border between fact and

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<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

fiction in the post-Soviet Russian space – practising self-critique as much as a critique of the intelligentsia and Russian society as a whole. In doing so, Akunin practised a characteristic feat of foresight and anticipated Lipovetsky’s 2018 warning about performance becoming “the Achilles heel of contemporary Russian politics”<sup>680</sup> by more than a decade. At the same time, Akunin went one step further in the Fandorin project and problematised the conflict of performance superseding reality as the Achilles heel of contemporary Russian culture in general.

Ultimately, the Fandorin project made it clear that artificiality can only become an Achilles heel if left unchallenged by the public. In many ways, Yurchak’s definition of Soviet *stioob* as a mixed stance of irony, cynicism, and passivity that affected all spheres of daily life still seems to affect large swathes of Russian culture:

By refusing the boundary between reality and performance, seriousness and humor, support and opposition, sense and nonsense, bare life and political life, life and death, this humor imitated the performative shift of authoritative discourse and all the concomitant paradoxes and discontinuities that resulted from it in the everyday.<sup>681</sup>

As Fandorin’s growing adherence to late Imperial thought patterns in the later Fandorin novels shows, Akunin is aware of the post-Soviet intelligentsia’s problematic passivity. He framed this not only as a legacy of Soviet times, but traced its roots back to late Imperial thinking – highlighting the need to question and reform the entire intelligentsia tradition in order to secure its survival.

In the end, Akunin’s Fandorin project – aimed at providing a solution to Russia’s post-Soviet identity crisis, counteracting the nostalgic romanticisation of Russia’s past, and creating a new national hero paradigm situated at the border between intelligentsia and civic-minded intellectualism – failed and succeeded at the same time. Just as the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century intelligentsia effort to create a nationwide national identity offer had its internal flaws and suffered from an overly ambitious scope, so did Akunin’s project. The Fandorin series aimed high and was disenchanted by reality; yet Akunin’s initiative nonetheless symbolizes literature’s importance in the formulation and formation of national identity narratives – the resulting plurality of which is a boon, not a bane. Akunin’s significance as a writer of post-Soviet historical detective fiction lies precisely in the provision of such historical mind-games as presented in the

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<sup>680</sup> Lipovetsky, “Intelligentsia and Cynicism,” 242.

<sup>681</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 289-90.

Fandorin project, which contribute to the safekeeping of pages of Russian cultural history that otherwise risk being consigned to oblivion. In confronting his readers with answers to unasked questions, Akunin challenged them to continue the detective play at would-have-been history that he initiated and to mend the broken story thread that a resurrection of Empire at the cost of integrity produces.

Going forward, Akunin's innovative use of the detective genre to defuse the increasingly explosive border between fact and fiction can hopefully act as a case study for popular literature's unique potential to verbalise and tackle problems of a transcultural relevance across the global stage. Akunin's pioneering role in the discussion of convoluted identity issues through popular culture has not lost in topicality since his emergence on the post-Soviet book market, and is beginning to create echoes in the work of younger writers from Eastern Europe, too – such as Ziemowit Szczerek, whose semi-journalistic gonzo deconstruction of Ukrainian and Polish identities *Mordor Will Come and Eat Us (Przyjdzie Mordor i nas zje, czyli tajna historia Słowian, 2013)* features a nod at Akunin's hero, describing Russian police cadets in a telenovela as “innocent and filled with noble ideals like Erast Petrovich Fandorin”<sup>682</sup>.

An equally timely takeaway from this analysis of the Fandorin project is the need for further literary investigations into the incomplete task of de-Sovietising Russia's cultural sphere, which will ideally feature an analysis of the post-Soviet cultural cynicism trap amid a larger pool of intelligentsia voices. A comparison of Akunin's oeuvre to that of other critically postmodern writers such as Sorokin or Pelevin would be just as compelling as a look at the further development of historical fiction in Russia, for instance in the work of Sergei Lebedev. Lastly, given Akunin's prolific activity in genres other than detective fiction over recent years, a book-length analysis of his overall role in Russian contemporary literature that would take into account his move towards historiography and high-brow fiction, and which would contextualise this evolution against the backdrop of the Fandorin project, would be a highly rewarding endeavour.

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<sup>682</sup> ‘unschuldig und erfüllt von hehren Idealen wie Erast Petrowitsch Fandorin,’ Ziemowit Szczerek, *Morder kommt und frisst uns auf*, translated by Thomas Weiler (Dresden and Leipzig: Voland & Quist, 2017), 104.

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