

THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: ORIENTALISATION OF SIBERIAN ETHNIC MINORITIES AT WAR ON UKRAINE

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This paper explores the orientalisation of Siberian ethnic minorities who have actively participated in the war on Ukraine¹. The overrepresentation of Buryats and Tuvans within the Russian army has sparked public discussions in Ukraine and Russia about the relations of Siberian minorities with the Russian state. This study is a starting point in analysing the relationship between the state, nationalism and ethnic minorities in contemporary Russia, particularly in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The orientalisation of Siberian ethnic minorities is interpreted as a significant aspect of a broader national and cultural boundary construct between Russian and Ukrainian societies. The research focuses on two key areas: (1) an examination of discursive representations of Siberian minorities in both Ukrainian and Russian media and (2) an exploration of the process of national and cultural differentiation between Russian and Ukrainian societies.

KEYWORDS: Siberian ethnic minorities, Tuva, Buryatia, war in Ukraine, Russia, decolonisation, ethnic soldiering, orientalisation, self-orientalism

At the beginning of the war, Buryat and Tuva soldiers became the face of the Russian aggression on Ukraine in media coverage. Since the onset of military activity in 2014, special attention has been paid by Ukrainian and Western observers to the presence of Siberian ethnic minorities within the militias of the Donetsk and Luhansk

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People's Republics. In the first months of the full-scale invasion in 2022, frequent emphasis in Ukrainian and Western media was placed on the disproportionate number of Siberian minorities among the Russian soldiers killed or captured. This partially available data became a contentious topic regarding the numbers of soldiers fighting and falling (Dugar de Ponte 2022). Analyses of the mortality of Russian soldiers in the first months of the full-scale war showed that the proportion of Buryats and Tuvans among the killed military personnel was four times greater than their share in the overall Russian population (Bessudnov 2022: 887), or even seven to ten times greater (Vyushkova and Sharkhanov 2023). However, it should be noted that in the first months of the war, Russian soldiers of Asian descent (mainly Buryats and Tuvans) were also overrepresented in Ukrainian and Western media. The reasons why Buryats and Tuvans became an *idée fixe* of the media and Ukrainian internet channels are the subject of this analysis.

This article aims to shed light on the role of social representations pertaining to Siberian minorities in the process of societal differentiation during the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. To this end, social representations of Siberian minorities were systematically examined across Ukrainian and Russian media outlets. The phenomenon of orientalisation was investigated as part of a broader process of national and cultural differentiation between Russian and Ukrainian societies. Special attention is paid to the orientalisation and self-orientalisation of Siberian ethnic groups. This paper attempts to explain how the decolonial discourse in Ukraine does not hinder the generation of orientalising representations of subaltern groups inhabiting other peripheries of the post-Soviet space. The conceptual framework of social representations proposed by Serge Moscovici was invoked in the analysis. Social representations are performative, serving not merely to reflect reality but also to actively shape it. They emerge through processes of anchoring and objectification. The anchoring involved naming, classifying and adapting a group to native imaginaries and cognitive schemata. Objectification occurred through the concretisation of the representation using fixed themes, metaphors and symbols, creating an imaginative core for the group (Moscovici 2011, 454-455). In the case of the examined social representations, one can hypothesise that social representations were primarily shaped by the media and social networks (Durani 2023). Because the discourses and ideological frameworks I study actively use postcolonial and decolonial terminology, I will refer to postcolonial theory (Loomba 2015, 19-111), although the local context of using these terms sometimes deviates drastically from the original assumptions of the founders of postcolonial studies.

Empirical research inside a state engaged in war requires the application and development of mixed methods research. For security reasons, in this case, this research did not involve interviewing Russian soldiers in Ukraine but focused rather on their native communities. Within this framework, different methods of remote ethnography (Postill 2017) were combined: the analysis of media discourse (Dijk 1993), field

research conducted among Siberian immigrants, and netnography – ethnographic research techniques applied via the internet (Kozinets 2020). In the research process, I utilised field experience and contacts with research partners gained during fieldwork on public history in Buryatia and Tuva conducted between 2014 and 2019. In the first half of 2024, unstructured interviews were also conducted with Ukrainian activists involved in decolonisation. From May 2022 to November 2023, interviews with immigrants in the European Union, online interviews and monitoring of local media and social networks were conducted. In January 2024, in collaboration with the organisation Asians of Russia and anthropologist Kamil Wielecki from Warsaw University, 16 interviews were conducted in Tuva and Buryatia² in addition to 20 online interviews with residents of these regions. An online survey was also conducted (573 respondents), along with an analysis of local groups on the social media platform VK. The research focused on the attitudes of Buryats and Tuvans towards the war and its impact on their lives. My language skills enabled me to conduct interviews and analyse online content in Ukrainian, Buryat and Russian. For the Tuvan language, I used translations provided by a field researcher from Asians of Russia³.

THE DECOLONIAL AGENDA AND ORIENTALISM IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Since the beginning of the war, the postcolonial frame has become widely disseminated among the Ukrainian side and pro-independence activists from Siberian ethnic minorities. Naturally, the postcolonial discourse was represented in Ukraine and Russia by both local scholars and foreign authors adapting postcolonial studies to the study of Eastern European history (see Hrabovych 1994, Shkandrii 2004, Velychenko 2004, Thompson 2000, Sinchenko and Havrylovska 2014 and Etkind 2011). Some authors publishing there characterised the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity as the “first postcolonial revolution” in the post-Soviet space (Gerasimov 2014). In Ukrainian literature and essays of the 1990s and 2000s, the postcolonial discourse was present in the works of mainstream writers such as Yurii Andrukho-vych, Oksana Zabuzhko and Mykola Riabchuk. Nevertheless, one might get the impression that the postcolonial lexicon has recently departed from the intellectual salons and permeated mainstream political discourse. Previously, as asserted by David Moore, postcolonial researchers did not engage in discussions about Soviet space due to Marxist sympathies that prompted them to explore an effective alternative to

- 2 To ensure the safety of field researchers and their informants, interviews were completely anonymous, covert, unstructured and conducted among the family and closest acquaintances of the activists. Researchers were trained in the principles of safe research conduct.
- 3 The researchers consented to the use of their translations but decided to remain anonymous.

global capitalism within the framework of socialist economics (Moore 2001). For many Western scholars, situating Siberian nationalities within postcolonial discourse has been challenging because it remained unclear whether the Soviet project can be considered a form of imperialism (Graber 2020, 30). According to Julia Buyskykh, Western anthropologists until recently failed to recognise the subaltern situation of Ukraine as a “former ‘white’ colony of Russian and Soviet empires” and unreflectively adopted the point of view of the Russian hegemon (Buyskykh 2023, 62-63). In contrast, scholars from former socialist states nurtured their emerging European identity, deliberately sidestepping comparisons between their experiences and those of researchers from the Global South, preferring to speak not of a postcolonial, but of a “post-dependence” situation (Thompson 2011, 290-301).

Apart from the political dimension, decolonisation in Ukraine is also understood as a broad process not limited to the emancipation from political and economic dependencies but also including liberation from the cultural hegemony of the colonial centre. Epistemic decolonisation involves examining and overcoming the power structures and knowledge inequalities that have been established by colonial systems (cf. Chakrabarty 2000, and Mingo 2009). The specificity of the decolonial discourse in Ukraine lies in the fact that the decolonisation programme is associated with the idea of “returning to Europe” and distancing itself from Russia, defined as the antithesis of European values. The ideologists of Ukrainian decolonisation agree with Aleksandr Dugin’s geopolitical concept of Eurasia as distinct from Europe, governed by the “Russian World” and forming an ostensibly standalone Russian civilisation. However, they believe that Ukraine should not be part of this civilisation. A peculiarity of the decolonisation discourse in Ukraine is that it is not anti-European. On the contrary, the ultimate result of decolonisation and emancipation from Russian political and economic dominance as well as cultural hegemony is full membership in the European community (Polishchuk 2020, 76-81).

In this postcolonial situation (cf. Riabchuk 2013) of blurred cultural boundaries, where a significant segment of Ukrainians use the Russian language in daily life, it is worth referring to Fredrik Barth’s concept of ethnic boundary, understood as the social organisation of cultural differences (1969). In the case of Ukrainian differentiation from Russians, one can posit that it occurs through a multidimensional (racial, cultural, civilisational, historical) orientalisation. Relatively few Siberian minorities play a crucial role in orientalising Russians as a radically distinct group. In Edward Said’s notion, orientalism is a mode of perceiving and representing the East through a distorted lens that emphasises the exotic, backward, uncivilised and, at times, dangerous qualities that make them fundamentally different from the West and portray the alien as a mirror image of Western norms. Orientalisation is the process whereby the traditions and characteristics of Eastern cultures are essentialised, reified and presented in an

ahistorical manner, leading to the creation of static and stereotypical images of these cultures. Essentialism reduces complex, dynamic societies to static caricatures based on presumed inherent qualities that supposedly resist change regardless of historical developments or empirical evidence. The concept of orientalisation describes a systematic framework employed by Western thought, literature and academia to manage and construct a perception of the Orient that emphasises its supposed inferiority and justifies Western dominance over it (Said 1994, 43-70). In the current case, Russian soldiers with Asian origins are depicted as savage, bloodthirsty and blindly obedient to authoritarian power, in contrast to freedom-loving, democratic and civilised Ukrainians – genuine Europeans. This essentialised image of the enemy allows for the construction of a civic, European national identity for Ukrainians, which is juxtaposed against Russians. It must be acknowledged that orientalism is not merely a tool of Western dominance. In this instance, it is used by the victims of military aggression as a reactive measure of differentiation, set against the Russian discourse of national unity between Russians and Ukrainians. The Buryats, Sakha and Tuvans, on the one the hand, serve as tangible evidence of the essential Asian character of Russian civilisation and, on the other, they are a metonymy for all of Russia.

When considering the self-representation of Siberian nations, one must refer to the concept of self-orientalism. According to Stuart Hall, the power of colonialism was that it made the colonised see and experience themselves as the Other (Hall 1997, 259). Self-orientalism refers to the process by which individuals or communities from formerly colonised regions internalise and perpetuate the stereotypical images and narratives constructed by colonial powers. It is the process by which individuals or groups adopt and reinforce the essentialised and exoticised images of their own culture as constructed by external, often colonial or Western, perspectives. This is done to gain certain strategic advantages, such as economic benefits or greater acceptance within the dominant culture. Self-orientalism can be both a form of resistance and acceptance of dominant discourses as it allows for the negotiation of one's identity within the context of global power relations (Dirlik 1996, 111-114; Ong 2017, 125-131). Essentialisation and self-orientalism play a significant role in the commodification of ethnic identity, whereby ethnic culture becomes a product of the tourism industry (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 31-33). As regards the self-orientalisation of Siberian ethnic groups during wartime, we observe a loyal acceptance of an assigned exotic representation by the state and its use for empowering their social position.

ENSLAVED NATIONS

When considering the social representations of Siberian ethnic groups in the Russo-Ukrainian war, we must pay attention to the three main media paths generating

them: Ukrainian media, Russian media and self-representations in Russian media⁴. Two fundamental processes can be distinguished in the examined social representations disseminated in the Ukrainian information space: externalisation and orientalisation. Externalisation involves attributing similar political goals and relations with the authorities in Moscow to the ethnic groups from Siberia. In the discourse, Siberian groups play the role of “enslaved nations” who will resist colonial oppression and dismantle Russia from within (Kotubei-Herutska 2022, Oliinyk and et al. 2022). Siberian ethnic groups are supposed to gain national self-awareness and strive to create independent states, burying the artificial conglomerate of the multicultural empire. In this discourse, the international norm is the nation-state. The media discourse here focuses on the subordinate status of minorities, who are used as cannon fodder in Moscow’s imperial war – “the prison of nations”. Ukrainian media actively discuss and support the emigrant independence projects of Russian minorities advocating for the decolonisation of Russia by dividing it into national states (Kraliuk 2022). Ukrainian media constantly speculate about Russia’s breakup:

It is possible to expect the creation of a federation of the Volga and Kama ethnic groups – it will unite oppressed nations with populations smaller than Tatarstan or Bashkortostan. Siberia may establish another flexible supranational structure under economic control and political protectorate from China. The competition for influence in the post-Soviet space will unfold between Turkey, Azerbaijan and perhaps Kazakhstan (Turkic nations), China (Siberia) and Ukraine (North Caucasus, Kuban, Volga, central Russia). Once initiated, the liberation movement will encompass a maximum number of regions, leaving within Russia (Moscovia) only the territories that associate themselves with the Russian narrative and lack strategies to break away from imperial logic. (Sumlennyi 2023)

Within this discourse, the war in Ukraine will catalyse the second phase of the empire’s decolonial disintegration into nation-states – a process that began with the dissolution of the USSR (Bazhan 2022). High-ranking state officials declare such forecasts to be the goals of Ukraine’s foreign policy. The highly media-active Chief of the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine, Kyrylo Budanov, who in December 2022 presented a political map of Russia fragmented into smaller states and territories annexed by neighbours (Sushko 2022). The Verkhovna Rada’s resolution on 18 October 2022, recognising the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as an independent state

4 Certainly, the number of paths can be increased and diversified by adding European, Asian, American, post-socialist and Russian independent media. The analysis of these media entities extends beyond the limits of this paper.

occupied by the Russian Federation (Xotyn 2022), is considered a political performative act aimed at the disintegration of Russia.

Since the beginning of the war, interviews with anti-war activists living in exile have started appearing in Ukrainian media. Coming from various ethnic groups such as Buryats, Tuvans and Sakha-Yakuts, they have formed horizontal bonds and established organisations like the Asians of Russia and the League of Free Nations. In Ukrainian media, they strive to counteract essentialisation and deconstruct the negative social representation of Siberian nations. These activists consistently employ a postcolonial dictionary and advocate for the detachment of Siberian republics from Russia, calling for the creation of independent nation-states.

Militarily insignificant but remarkable from a propaganda standpoint was the formation of the Siberia Battalion within the International Legion⁵, where representatives of Siberian nations serve, recruited among prisoners of war. Vladislav Ammosov, a former officer of Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) from Sakha-Yakutia, initially commanded the battalion. In interviews, the soldiers of the battalion described the Russian Federation as a racist, colonial state – a prison of nations – and declared that they would fight for their right to freedom (Serdjuk 2023). In contrast to other battalions formed by Russian citizens, such as the Russian Freedom Legion, Russian Volunteer Corps and National Republican Army, the creation of the Siberia Battalion elicited a nervous reaction from Russian opposition politicians, who voiced their objection to the separatist ideology of the battalion.

ORIENTALISATION OF SIBERIAN MINORITIES

The analysis of Ukrainian media discourses traces the process of forming social representations among Russian soldiers from Siberian minorities to be traced. The first media mentions of Siberian minorities appeared at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Crimea in February 2014 when, among the recordings made by Crimean residents of the “polite people”, soldiers of “East Asian appearance” emerged. This fact began to be cited as evidence that the so-called little green men were not local separatists but units of the Russian army (Vyushkova, Sharkhanov 2023). Soon after, an increasing number of Buryat soldiers “on furlough” were identified among

5 Units of the International Legion under Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defence consists of volunteers with foreign citizenship: the Russian Volunteer Corps (Russians), the “Freedom of Russia” Legion (Russians), the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment (Belarusians), the Siberian Battalion (Buryats, Sakha) and the Georgian National Legion. Separately, there is the International TRO Legion, created via the initiative of the president of Ukraine. It includes, among others, the Normandy Brigade (Ukrainians of Canada), the Sheikh Mansur Battalion and the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion (Bondaruk 2023).

the separatist militia in Donbas. Buryats became the collective image of all Siberian minorities sent by Russia under the guise of Russian volunteers and Donbas militias formed by “miners and tractor drivers”.

Personified Buryat soldiers, identified by name, became the protagonists of entire newspaper cycles and viral videos used to expose the involvement of professional Russian soldiers in the war in Donbas while simultaneously creating the stereotype of a foolish and cruel Buryat – Russian cannon fodder. In February 2015, a recording of Russian singer Iosif Kobzon’s visit to a hospital in Donetsk went viral. During the visit, he conversed with Dorzhi Batomunkuev, a severely burned Buryat tank crewman. The singer’s awkward phrase, “Oh, you are Buryat – that brings me great joy”, while speaking to a man with a horribly burned face, illustrated the cynical attitude of Russian authorities towards their soldiers. A Buryat volunteer Vladimir Andanov, known as Wacha, was even more popular on the Ukrainian internet. This soldier often recorded and posted videos of his activities in Donbas and readily gave interviews. Ukrainian authorities accused him of murdering Ukrainian war prisoners. Confident and brash, Wacha became the face of the Russian occupiers’ barbarity and cruelty.

The Buryat issue was also addressed by Russian propaganda. In 2015, the pro-Kremlin youth organisation *Set’* (Network) produced an appeal from Buryat students to the Ukrainian people, refuting rumours about the participation of Buryat soldiers in the conflict in Donbas. In the video, the youth ironically called themselves “Putin’s combat Buryats” and argued that Chechens, Buryats and Russians in Donbas are just a phantasmagoria created by “intimidated Ukrainians” deluded by the “oligarchic junta”. The Buryat appeal was interpreted in Ukraine as subversive, becoming a classic example of the primitivism and absurdity of Russian propaganda, and the term “Putin’s combat Buryats” began to be used to refer to all representatives of Siberian minorities in the Russian army.

The final anchoring in the social representation of the wildness and “bloodthirstiness” (*krovozherlyvist* in Ukrainian) of Siberian ethnic minorities occurred after the revelation of genocide in Bucha and Irpin. The blame for the crimes was attributed, among others, to Russian units from Khabarovsk and Pskov, which had multi-ethnic compositions. Initially, in the media, responsibility for the massacre was placed on Buryats and Tuvans (Vyushkova and Sharkhanov 2023). Representatives of Siberian ethnic minorities in the Russian army thus began to serve as tangible evidence of the Asian, horde-like character of the Russian state. Photographs were shown of soldiers with Asian facial features holding the flag of the Republic of Sakha, and it was claimed that the “Buryats” were responsible for the massacre because, “along with the Kadyrovites, they are the cruellest villains in the horde army” (Vynohradova 2022). The Siberian people were almost exclusively blamed for the crimes against civilians, the torture of prisoners and looting. The article, titled “Tuva is Coming or the Horde of Executioners in Galoshes”, read as follows:

Marauders sent their loot to Rubtsovsk, Kyzyl, Chita, Ulan-Ude and other cities in eastern Siberia and Transbaikalia. Several battalion tactical groups were formed based on these regions belonging to the Eastern Military District of the Russian Federation. According to witnesses of the brutal events, it was the Buryats, Khakass and, especially, the Tuvans who revelled in the sense of impunity and the killing of innocent victims. Very young men seemed to delight in the process of intimidating and taking the lives of everyone around them (Voloshyn 2022).

Russian Asians, as the radical Other, help reinforce the differentiation (on different levels – civic, civilisational, ethnic, cultural and racial) between the citizens of Ukraine and Russia. The Significant Other represents what the in-group does not want to be and embodies the negative traits rejected and not accepted by the group (Buchowski 2020: 73). The media behaviour of individual soldiers and young Putinists was quickly attributed to entire ethnic groups. Thus, before the Russian invasion in 2022, a figurative scheme to associate Siberian minorities with cruelty, savagery, stupidity and uncritical compliance with Russian ideology had already been constructed. Such socially constructed representations were linked to a new historical policy in which Russia presented itself as a thief of history. Muscovy, as a continuation of the Golden Horde, conquered the true Rus'-Ukraine and usurped the right to its historical heritage.

ORIENTALISATION OF RUSSIA

The orientalising of Siberian ethnic groups involves the figure of the radical Other – the face of Russian brutality and the embodiment of Russia as the genetic, institutional and cultural heir of the Golden Horde. The theory of the radical distinctiveness of Russians is not new. It was promoted by Franciszek Duchiniński, a 19th century Polish historian and ethnographer from Ukraine operating in Paris, who referred to Muscovites as a Turanian race, who differed from Europeans and “real” Ruthenians in appearance and mentality. He argued that Muscovites have a non-European despotic form of governance, the presence of an Asian collectivist community and a tendency towards nomadism. They illegitimately appropriated the name *Rus'*, which rightfully belongs only to Ukrainians (Górny 2014, 99-115). At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, in his monumental ten-volume work *History of Rus'-Ukraine*, the Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky presented Ukraine-Rus' as the true successor of the pre-Mongol Rus' state, laying the foundations for Ukrainian national historical policy. The theory of the stolen name and history of Rus' was subsequently promoted in Ukrainian historical journalism after the country had gained its independence in 1991 (see Dashkevych 2013).

After 2014, the discourse of the Muscovite Horde became the dominant reactive discourse in Ukraine's public sphere, serving as a counter-discourse to the Russian thesis portraying Ukrainians as a nation invented in the 19th century by Austro-Hungarian politicians.

In 2014, the Ukrainian television channel Ukraine aired a documentary series titled *Ukraine. In Search of Itself*. The series presented the idea of cultural and genetic symbiosis between the residents of Moscow and Sarai (the capital of the Golden Horde). Ivan III was described as the organiser of a political upheaval within the Horde. During the same period, Ukrainian historians and publicists promoted a "stolen history" discourse in which the real Rus was today's Ukraine, and Russia was the heir of the Golden Horde – a Eurasian cultural hybrid composed of heterogeneous Finno-Ugric, Slavic and Tatar-Mongol components. This stolen history became the official interpretation of Ukrainian historiography. The Horde also appeared in cinema. In 2019, the British-Ukrainian blockbuster *The Rising Hawk* was released, adapting the historical novel *Zakhar Berkut* by a celebrated Ukrainian writer Ivan Franko (Franko 1944). *The Rising Hawk* tells the story of the betrayal of the Carpathian Rus' elite and the struggle of the Carpathian Rus' against the Tatar-Mongol invaders, drawing clear parallels to the current events in Ukraine. The identification of Russia with the Golden Horde intensified with the beginning of the invasion, and the term "Hordians" became widely used on major Ukrainian TV channels in reference to Russian soldiers and politicians. In his address to the nation on the 50th day of the Russian invasion, President Volodymyr Zelensky explicitly articulated the idea of Russia's Horde lineage, pointing to the barbaric shelling of Ukrainian cities as evidence: "Rus' would not ruin itself. It was done by outsiders – Orda and other invaders. Here is who has arrived on our land. And they fight in the same way – to plunder and destroy" (Mazurenko 2022).

On social media, theories are promoted suggesting that the Russian language is an artificial conglomerate of Finno-Ugric, Kipchak, Mongolian and Old Church Slavonic languages, invented and codified by the Russian Academy, Mikhail Lomonosov, Nikolay Karamzin and Alexander Pushkin; this artificial language was then disseminated through schools and other state institutions in the Russian Empire.

At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this curious entity emerged based on Old Church Slavonic foundations, with lexical elements from Tatar, Polish and Ukrainian; pronunciation influenced by the Mokshan language; and syntactic structures resembling French, known as the Great Russian Language (Karpanov 2023).

Prior to the codification, the spoken language in Moscow was purportedly a Tatar-Slavic creole, a notion believed to find its reflection in the historical literary

monument *A Journey Beyond the Three Seas* – travel notes made by Afanasy Nikitin, a merchant from Tver, during his journey to India in 1466–1472 (Karpanov 2023). Therefore, we are dealing with the alienation of Russia at the levels of language, culture, history and political institutions. The orientalisng discourse attempts to transform the colonial centre that dictates aesthetics, cultural norms and behavioural patterns into the periphery of European civilisation.

The opposition of Ukraine-Rus' versus Russia-horde has been naturalised and no longer causes controversy in Ukraine. It is part of the war's historical policy. The "hordisation" of Russia is a component in the radical differentiation and othering of Ukrainians from Russians, a fundamental element in nation-building. This differentiation has proven to be a necessary defensive mechanism, as Putin justified the invasion of Ukraine by claiming that Ukrainians are part of the Russian nation, and the supposed distinctiveness of Ukrainians was invented in the 19th century by Poles and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Putin 2021). In turn, Ukrainians collected over 25,000 petition signatures urging the president to change the official name of the Russian state to the Moscow Federation, or Moscovia (Shakhvorostova 2023), while a less popular petition demanded the official name in Ukrainian be changed to "Orda". From a broader perspective, a significant part of the Ukrainian intelligentsia is attempting a persuasive procedure similar to what Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera and Jenő Szücs did, promoting the concept of a "kidnapped" Central Europe entirely distinct from Russia and the USSR: culturally, historically and politically (Todorova 1997, 140-160). Russian and Soviet cultural influences are reinterpreted within the framework of postcolonial theory (see Riabchuk 2013), and the cultural and political task of Ukrainian society is to overcome the postcolonial condition, return to Europe and reclaim its expropriated history from Russia – an Asian state originating from the Golden Horde (Pakhlovska 2008, 64, 398). Paradoxically, the orientalisation of Russia is one of the decolonisation strategies wherein the opposition between the great Russian culture and history and marginalised, folk Ukrainian culture without a tradition of statehood is overcome.

RUSSIAN DISCOURSE ON SIBERIAN MINORITIES AT WAR

In the state-controlled Russian media, soldiers from Siberia are presented as heroes – homeland defenders. Accusations of war crimes are denied, and all such information is treated as absurd elements of Ukrainian propaganda. On the contrary, information about Russian prisoners being tortured by "Ukrofascists" is presented. A Buryat soldier with the call sign "Kyakhta" shared his motivation for participating in the so-called Special Operation Z: "Two of my grandparents fought in World War II – they

were wounded. I decided to follow in their footsteps. After all, a soldier is there to defend the state's borders – its sovereignty” (Voennoslužasij 2023).

Based on this statement, one can understand how, in Russian propaganda, the boundary between the territories of Ukraine and Russia has recently been blurred, a situation attempted to be further legitimised by officially annexing the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhia in October 2022.

In an interview, another soldier with the call sign “Buryat” recounts that the population of Ukraine initially feared Buryats because Ukrainian soldiers frightened them with stories. However, after he shared Buryat traditions and his mother's advice to treat civilians well during the war, people liked him and cried when he left (Tararuev 2022). Such “frontline testimonies”, usually difficult to verify, aim to highlight the cruelty of Ukrainians and mobilise enraged compatriots to join the ranks of the Russian armed forces. The belief in the particular cruelty of Ukrainian soldiers towards prisoners of war from Asian regions of Russia seems to be well-established among representatives of Siberian minorities. For example, a respondent from Ulan-Ude stated the following:

This war is terrible, and we all wish it would end. It is a pity for Ukraine, but on the other hand, they castrate our Buryats when they fall into captivity. Everyone here is outraged by that, and many of our guys volunteer for the army to avenge their brethren. (45-year-old Buryat female, Ulaanbaata, interview in Russian 09.09.2023.)

Likely influenced by these narratives propagated by Russian propaganda, some Siberian soldiers engage in retaliatory actions that bear the hallmarks of war crimes. The most notorious incident was depicted in a video shared online in which a Russian soldier (later identified as Ochur Suge Mongush) from an Akhmat battalion castrated a Ukrainian prisoner while he was still alive (Steporuk 2022).

Official Russian media deny any war crimes committed by Russian soldiers. Instead, there is a friendly exoticisation of Siberian minorities, portraying the war as an opportunity to showcase their ethnic culture, demonstrate unique values and highlight national peculiarities in character. Thus, Ria Novosti reported that Tuvan communication specialists secure military communication because Ukrainians cannot understand their language (Kražev 2022). Video reports showing Tuvans exchanging orders and information via radio at command points are also frequently presented by Russian war correspondents. The new narrative about “Indigenous code talkers” turns the linguistic distinctiveness of the Tuvans into an important asset, giving the Russian army an advantage. Most information focuses on lamas and shamans who, under the leadership of Russia's Supreme Shaman, Tuvan Kara-oola Dopchun-oola,

perform rituals supporting the army behind the lines and directly on the front. Many reports have also been created about volunteers from the republics delivering yurts and other military equipment to the front.

In Russian media, stories about shamans and Buddhist monks ritually supporting Siberian soldiers are often featured, likely aimed at portraying the Russian army's tolerance towards cultural diversity within the Russian Federation. Below, as an ethnographic curiosity, is a description of how shamans protect soldiers from Ukrainian shelling:

We sent three yurts to Rostov. It is a humanitarian mission. It is like a nomadic home, a home for Hun warriors. Shamans will perform humanitarian ceremonies there, protecting anyone who asks for them. The closer to the front lines, the faster soldiers can get there, and the rituals have more power. We wanted to bring these three yurts to Donbas, but people feared that shamans would come there. What are these yurts for? When the ceremony takes place, Hun warriors come there. For example, HIMARS, we call them "Chimeras". If a Chimera is approaching, Hun warriors who have been sleeping wake up. They need a place, yurts, and they see their home and all kinds of accessories, and they help our soldiers. (Aniseeva 2022)

Shamans are also supposed to "restore souls to the bodies" of wounded or mentally traumatised Russian soldiers. Cultural differences, ethnographic peculiarities and shamanic practices in the wartime reality serve as an example of Russia's multicultural society, where there will also be a place for Ukrainians from the so-called new territories. At the same time, the tolerated boundaries of ethnocultural distinctiveness are highlighted – diversity is tolerated in the ethnographic dimension, but not in the political one.

SIBERIAN SELF-ORIENTALISATION

Eccentric activists from the Buryat Hunnic Foundation also attempted to subversively utilise the discourse promoted by the Ukrainian side about the "Asian horde". With the onset of the war, they began to argue that Russia was indeed the heir to the Mongol hordes and, from a broader perspective, the empire of the Huns, whose leader, Attila, brought Western civilisation to its knees. Putin is supposed to be the new Scourge of God who will defeat the West, and Buryat, Kalmyk and Tuvan soldiers fight in accordance with the code of Chinggis Khan, being ruthless to the enemy but caring for the civilian population. The chairman of the Hunnic Foundation, Oleg Bulutov, regularly appears in Russian media, orientalisng himself as a prophetic shaman who learns the future from Hunnic ancestors:

The Special Military Operation will end next spring. But it will be preceded by a decisive battle on the Dnipro River, taking place where the ancestor of Attila, Balamber, began a war with the Goths to intervene on behalf of the Slavs. [...] There was a Hunnic leader who lived in the fourth century AD, and the battle itself took place on the Erac River, which is the lower Dnipro, where everything is happening now. Even the locations match, can you imagine? It is noteworthy that the Huns came through Crimea, and the Gothic state encompassed virtually all modern European countries. And these parallels are not unique. What if we roll back not 13 but eight centuries (because history always repeats itself every eight hundred years, the head of the foundation is convinced) and remember how Batu, the grandson of Chinggis Khan, defeated the German-Polish army? Or what happened during the reign of his great-great-grandson Khan Mengu-Timur, who founded Azak (today's Azov), Soldaia (Sudak) and even, according to one theory, Moscow? [...] By the way, during the reign of Mengu-Timur, there was not a single instance of him acting against the Russians. On the contrary, Russian detachments joined him on campaigns. It is not by chance that there are so many Buryats among the fighters on the front lines now. It's not because they went there for money or anything else. They simply have a mission! (Bobytkina 2023)

Such rhetoric can be juxtaposed with a series of eccentric statements by Russian soldiers, propagandist journalists and politicians and is sometimes interpreted by local political observers as the “intentional bringing of discourse to absurdity when one is forced to support what we are doing in Ukraine publicly but does not want to take responsibility for it” (41-year-old Russian male Ulan-Ude, online interview in Russian, 16.03.2023).

However, these eccentric statements align with the promoted idea of Russia's unique Eurasian character and a development path distinct from Europe (Waldstein and Turoma 2016, 11-20). In Buryatia, some pro-war activists promoted the idea that Russia is a descendant of the Golden Horde and, therefore, has the right to occupy lands once conquered by Batu Khan. In this way, they legitimised the military annexation of Ukrainian territories. On the site of a reconstructed Hunnic settlement on the outskirts of Ulan-Ude in 2023, shamanic rituals were performed to provide Buryat soldiers with protection and support from the spirits of Chinggis Khan and Attila – great conquerors of Europe (Namsaraeva 2024, 134-135).

Unprofessional and subversive vernacular forms of interpreting history and international relations constitute a part of the ideology legitimising the current political system in Russia, which distances itself from liberal democratic Europe, along with its imperial resentment and nostalgia (Namsaraeva 2024; cf. Balzer 2021). Otherwise, they would not be tolerated in public discourse. Russia's Eurasian *Sonderweg* simultaneously creates a space for the political and historical integration of Asian minorities (Tatars, Bashkirs, Buryats, Tuvans) whose intellectual elites, in the realm of historical

policy, somewhat identify with post-Mongol forms of statehood; the Tartar-Mongol conquests and the state structures they established laid the foundations for Eurasia as a specific political and civilisational space (Wiederkehr 2007, 43-57; c.f. Graber 2020, 37).

Since the 1990s, parallel to the mainstream Russian historiography, native, vernacular historiographies have developed in which authors attempt to give a new meaning to the history of the Russian state to overcome the subordinate status of colonised minorities and make them equal, active subjects of the state-building process. Thus, Tatar authors Gali Enikeev and Shichab Kitabchy, in their monograph titled *Legacy of the Tatars*, deconstruct and “demythologise” history, arguing that until the time of Peter the Great, Russia was, in fact, a Russo-Tatar horde (heir to the Golden Horde – *Altyn Orda*), which, due to forced Westernisation, was colonised by German officials and the ruling class, resulting in the population being transformed into an enslaved people through the institution of serfdom⁶. Building on the works of Nikolai Trubetskoy and Lev Gumilev, Tatar intellectuals criticise Western European cultural hegemony and call for building a society based on native Eurasian solidarity (Enikeev and Kitabčy 2013, 175-217). While some Tatar elites prefer to trace their nation-state traditions back to Volga, Bulgaria – a state annihilated by Mongol invasions – attempts to integrate their ethnic history into the history of the Russian state seem ubiquitous.

Therefore, it must be stated that opposition representatives of national minorities in exile promote the history of their nations as a history of colonial oppression. At the same time, loyalists, creatively leveraging the concepts of Russian Eurasianists, attempt to use another Russian anti-European shift to propagate their own Eurasian ideas, within which the peoples of Siberia and the Volga along with Russians, have been building an idiosyncratic civilisation for centuries. The Horde is subversively transformed from a symbol of barbarism to that of a unique development path and a way to empower national minorities.

The Eurasian historical discourse promoting institutional continuity between the Chinggis Khan Empire and contemporary Russia is prevalent among the Turkic-Mongolian intelligentsia. However, the mainstream of this discourse is produced by amateurs and activists rather than professional historians. In cooperation with Slavic ideologues of Eurasianism, this community develops alternative historical, geopolitical and civilisational frameworks for Russia. Given the radical antagonism

6 The persistence of references to the Golden Horde is evident in the case of the Bashkir activist Fail Alsynov, who was sentenced to four years on 17 January for “inciting ethnic hatred”. Alsynov, known for organising ecological protests in Bashkortostan, was convicted for publicly using the expression “kara halyk” (literally, black people), referring to the dependent population of the Golden Horde. The court intentionally misinterpreted it as racist hate speech. The four-year sentence for the activist sparked mass protests in the republic.

with the West, these previously marginal voices are increasingly incorporated by symbolic elites (cf. Dijk 1993, 46) into public discourse and have begun to constitute an essential element of Russia's political imagination, shaping public opinion. In this case, orientalist ethnicity is strategically utilised to suppress larger national and political frameworks (Graber 2020, 211-212).

Self-orientalisation in the image of the untamed descendants of the Huns and Chinggisids (descendants of Chinggis Khan) is accompanied by the subversive use of the orientalist representation of Russia as the Golden Horde. By antagonising "corrupt Europe" and the "eternal Eurasian Empire", which has subjugated the West in the hypostases of Attila, Chinggis Khan and Putin, loyal representatives of Siberian ethnic groups, try to reframe the history and geopolitical position of Russia and themselves. They aim to overcome their marginality and occupy a central position in the post-war imagined Russian community. The experience of many Siberian ethnic minorities is situated within a broader context of political marginality and cultural autonomy. Being on the periphery presents both challenges and opportunities in terms of political and cultural expression. For the Buryats within Russia, their marginal status not only marks them as outsiders within the broader national context but also provides a unique platform from which to articulate their distinct identity and challenge central authorities (Graber 2020, 211). This encapsulates how peripheral communities leverage their position to challenge and redefine the narratives imposed upon them by central powers. In the redefined Eurasian narrative, Siberian ethnic groups become the historical and cultural core, and their territories are the hinterland where the Eurasian civilisation was born.

CONCLUSIONS

At the very beginning of the war in Ukraine, the Russian Federation extensively utilised soldiers from ethnic and national minorities originating from the impoverished peripheries of the empire. For economically marginalised minorities, becoming a "volunteer" in the war is often seen as the only way out of debt traps, a form, according to Alexander Etkind (2011) of "internal colonisation", wherein cultural domination of the centre is accompanied by exploitation of the poor peripheries. Essentially, the exploitation is neither ethnically nor racially profiled but is enforced through both market practices and authoritarian measures. The poorest social strata, as well as individuals with an unmanageable debt load, are offered military service for money beyond their reach along with the suspension of debt executions. A similar mechanism for recruiting a cheap "labour force" is applied to immigrant workers and impoverished residents of neighbouring post-Soviet countries. Market recruitment instruments are reinforced by oppressive practices, forcing subalterns, such

as prisoners, immigrants from Central Asia who have acquired Russian citizenship and Ukrainians from occupied territories, into service. This necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) is primarily executed through economic calculation, sending individuals who can be enrolled as cost-effectively as possible into military service and the war. National minorities are not part of this group coincidentally, it is the result of prolonged economic and political marginalisation of the periphery at the expense of the centre in Moscow.

In recent years, the militarisation of society in the republics has intensified through the establishment of military-educational institutions. Military cadet schools with boarding facilities have been established in the republics, and children attending regular schools are encouraged to join the ranks of the *Yunarmiya* (young army). This paramilitary youth organisation prepares children and teenagers for military service. In ethnic regions, new military units have been created, becoming significant and attractive places of employment. Therefore, we are dealing with a deliberate, institutionalised policy of militarising ethnic peripheries, a phenomenon of “ethnic soldiering”: ethnic groups from the periphery are disproportionately incorporated by the metropolis into the army, resulting in ethnic soldiers becoming an essential tool for state territorial expansion (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992, 22-25).

It involves intersectionality, where ethnicity intersects with poverty and racial differences. This intersectionality, until recently, allowed for the discrimination of non-European citizens of Russia. In regions like Tuva, Buryatia and Transbaikalia – some of the poorest in Russia — contract military service has for decades been an effective channel for social mobility. The aggression against Ukraine temporarily elevated the social status of Siberian ethnic groups as communities that experienced significant wartime losses. Conversely, the high number of casualties poses a threat of depopulation for entire generations, casting doubt on the continued viability of the collaborative nationalist model, where national elites receive cultural autonomy, support and career opportunities inside the structures of the Russian state in exchange for loyalty (Szmyt 2023, 62-70). A new postcolonial vocabulary and decolonial ideology is now applied by Siberian activists in exile, who call for the decolonisation of Russia and the establishment of independent ethnonational states.

In Ukrainian society, soldiers representing Siberian nations serve as the radical Other, facilitating the process of differentiation between Russians and Ukrainians. Referring to Fredrik Barth’s concept (1969), we can assert that Russified Siberian minorities have become instruments for the social organisation of cultural and national differences. Racial profiling applied to the Buryats, Tuvans and Sakha-Yakuts is extended to all Russian citizens. This “brand extension” reconstructs existing postcolonial and post-dependency Russo-Ukrainian relations.

Ukraine, historically treated by the imperial centre as the “border” of the Russian world, is now challenging the Russian discourse that invented a historyless,

artificial, rural and provincial Ukrainian identity. Faced with genocide and Russian military aggression, Ukrainians counter with a discourse about Moscow as the descendant of the Golden Horde. Strategic essentialisation refers to the deliberate use of an essentialist framework by marginalised or colonised groups to foster a sense of collective identity or to achieve political goals (cf. Spivak 1996). However, in this case, it is more apt to speak of the “strategic orientalisation” of an aggressive Other, a purposeful act of resistance against the imperial epistemic order imposed by Russia that deprives Ukrainians of agency, identity and sovereignty. Strategic orientalisation of the adversary is an attempt at emancipation from Russian cultural hegemony, involving the provincialisation of Russia and its culture, even in historical terms. The decolonial framework, which has held a dominant position in the Ukrainian view of Russia and Ukrainian-Russian relations since the beginning of the war, is specific in that the Ukrainian concept of decolonisation involves freeing itself from geopolitical and economic dependence on Russia as well as from the hegemony of the “great Russian culture”. Unlike most decolonisation movements worldwide, Ukrainian decolonisation does not distance itself from Europe but rather attempts to “return” to it – to become a regular nation-state in East/Central Europe, like Romania, Poland or Czechia. Differentiation from Russia – essential for stabilising national borders – is achieved through the use of binary oppositions (Asia-Europe, despotism-democracy).

In Ukrainian public history, there is a process of “reclaiming the history of the Ancient Rus” (a synonym for Ukraine-Rus’ and the Kyivan state)⁷, a history appropriated by Moscovia during the time of Peter the Great. Soldiers from Siberian nations are used as tangible evidence of Russia’s civilisational, racial, cultural and political otherness. Consequently, they become the subject of heightened, sometimes obsessive attention in Ukrainian media and social networks. Simultaneously, while dreaming of the ultimate disintegration of imperial Russia, these same media entities support the pro-independence, decolonial aspirations of political activists from Siberian minorities.

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7 This happens despite many Ukrainian professional medievalists rejecting this term as coined by Karamzin for the purpose of legitimising the transfer of central power from Kiev to Moscow.

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