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# CLUSTER: (MULTI)NATIONAL FACES OF SOCIALIST REALISM—BEYOND THE RUSSIAN LITERARY CANON

## Introduction

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This cluster was conceived as a commemoration of the centennial of the USSR's formation—long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Today this theme has become even more timely, if not to say vital, in light of the demands for decolonization of the academic curriculum and for a shift in focus of scholarly interests from an inherently valuable and self-contained “Russian culture” and “Russian literature” to imperial practices; to the cultures of the former imperial borderlands; to the history of the formation of national identities and political nations in the expanses of the last European empire that succeeded in preserving itself into the twenty-first century and is attempting to return the world to the past, to the age of imperial conquests.

What happened thirty years ago when the USSR fell apart was not “Armageddon averted,” but rather “Armageddon postponed.” What we are observing now is the beginning of the real collapse of the empire. Its death throes have essentially been ongoing for the last 100 years, beginning with the Bolshevik revolution. In 1922, thanks to the Bolsheviks, the empire was able to find within itself the energies to rehabilitate and restore itself, and even to recapture later a little of what it had lost at the beginning of the century. But the process of disintegration was as unstoppable as that of the emancipation and birth of political nations where the imperial quasi-national entities had been. And although it sped up after 1991, the Russia-orchestrated war in Ukraine is the trigger that will lead to the ultimate collapse of the empire, despite the hopes of those who dreamed of preserving it. Our cluster examines these processes either directly or implicitly in the historical perspective.

Despite the common opinion that in the Soviet era there was nothing in the national literatures but national oppression and Russification (which were undoubtedly present), the authors here start with the premise that in Soviet times the future nations underwent an important stage of national rebirth and discovery of their modern national identity. In each national literature

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this process proceeded in a different way, but, certainly, it was in this very context of the national literatures that the basic features of each contemporary nation were shaped—the language, national mythology and history, and a common national (often traumatic and tragic) experience. Literature is the domain of national imagination, self-awareness, and memory. The authors also assume that socialist realism was not simply the invention of Iosif Stalin, Andrei Zhdanov, or Maksim Gor'kii, not simply the aesthetic doctrine of a totalitarian regime, but also of imperial practice. As such, it needs the serious attention of researchers.

In the last three decades, the national versions of authoritarian—or, in the broader sense, imperial—regimes have repeatedly been objects of study. The spatial and anthropological turns in the humanities have led to a shift in research interests from a structuralist model of the shared morphology of cultural and political state language toward the idiosyncrasies of geographical contexts and regional practices of its appropriation, as well as toward the study of the multiplicity of subjects and objects of power. The metaphor of the panopticon, which, according to Michel Foucault, creates the conditions of absolute transparency and uniformity within disciplinary institutions, is replaced now by the idea of a diversity and hybridity of different forms of culture.

Specific characteristics of local refractions of communism's aesthetic canon have already been analyzed in exemplars of film, architecture, literature, and painting. Nevertheless, the question of the “close contexts” of socialist realism, that is, of the different conditions, practices, and forms of existence of the canon of socialist art in the former Soviet republics, is still very little researched. Almost unknown, too, is the diachronic heterogeneity of socialist realisms in different regions of the Soviet Union: the varieties of different “life phases” of the canon (early Soviet, Stalinist, Thaw, [pre-]perestroika), as well as the obvious non-simultaneousness of the literary process itself in the center and in the periphery.

Articles presented in this cluster address precisely these problems of the inconsistent and therefore multifaceted phenomenon of spatially anchored socialist realisms. Our thesis is that there existed in the Soviet Union not only a variety of manifestations of the canon, but also different regimes and practices of referring to it—including different forms of deviation from it. What were the translation processes of the language of socialist realism from the center to the periphery and the other way around? How did local folklore and tradition influence the aesthetic system of the center—and vice versa? What happened with socialist realism when it was adapted by nations and ethnicities that were conspicuously different from Russian, western/eastern, and Slavic traditions? What kind of relations existed between the para-religious nature of socialist realism and the much more ancient religious beliefs of these nations/ethnicities?

The articles included here are embedded in a certain epistemological and chronological order of analysis. On the one hand, this order follows the logic of historical chronology and geographic diversity, limited, of course, by virtue of the very genre of the cluster to only a few examples: Lithuania, Georgia, and the indigenous parts of Siberia. On the other, it incorporates these specific regional examples—the third, fourth, and fifth articles—into the context

of more common and systemic phenomena: the prehistory of the shaping of multinational Soviet literatures in the late 1920s and early 1930s and the phenomenon of multinational Soviet literature as a special historical version of the model of world literature (the first and second articles). Thanks to this arrangement, the regional versions of the Soviet literary canon are analyzed in a larger and new historical, interpretive, and conceptual framework. The study of their common institutional source allows us to better understand the situation of the individual modalities and of the idiosyncrasies of adaptation to the central “dogmas” that were developed in the 1920s and 1930s through long and stormy discussions. A focus on the Gor’kian concept of Soviet multinational literature as universal, continuing the study of the 1930s period, broadens the horizon of our ideas about not only the ideology of Soviet internationalism but also the debates about the transnationalization of the “literary heritage” in the circumstances of the just-formed dictatorship: following the well-known paradox, the latter aspired to cultural cosmopolitanism and inclusivity while simultaneously imposing a single ideology on the world.

Drawing on a wide body of archival and secondary sources, Evgeny Dobrenko’s article offers an important corrective to the understanding of Soviet multinational literature as a product of the mature Stalinist 1930s: it dates the genealogy of the multinational literary system to the tumultuous mid-1920s, when the Communist Party had not assumed much control over literary affairs. It does so by focusing on the All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP) and its different institutional iterations and, specifically, on the history of its Ukrainian sections’ struggle with the center’s pursuit of control in Moscow. In the process, the article reconstructs the incredible complexity of the 1920s literary scene, when in addition to the more familiar clashes between different aesthetic currents (futurists, proletarian artists, pluralistic fellow travelers), the relationships between the different national Soviet literatures were being intensely debated.

Susanne Frank investigates the emergence of the notion of Soviet literature by zooming in on the debates in the journal *Literaturnyi kritik*—a kind of laboratory preparing the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers (1934). The establishment of Soviet literature as a new “world literature,” according to Gor’kii’s project, was negotiated and based on the idea of national and international heritage. Here, to “inherit” was understood as the act of making use of past accomplishments for the present day. As the debates reveal, before nearly all the representatives of national and somewhat individual positions during these negotiations fell victim to Stalin’s purges, they all attempted to reevaluate and incorporate the most important works of world literature into a national canon. In some cases, this canon had already started to take shape in the years and decades before the revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union, but from now on it was supposed to become the centerpiece of the cultural identity of the new Soviet nation. Thus, the article demonstrates how the concept of a multinational Soviet literature had begun to emerge alongside the Soviet concept of world literature.

Zaal Andronikashvili explores how Georgian socialist realism generated its forms in a complex interaction between national tradition, modernism (national, European, and Russian), and the Russian Soviet canon. Konstantine

Gamsakhurdia's historical novels marked the final transition from modernism to socialist realism, which in the Georgian case meant a pivot from the present to the past. The retreat into the past transformed the history of Georgia into a full-fledged, closed, mythical space, fenced off from a present and future that were no longer Georgian, but all-Soviet, with Stalin acting as their figuration. In the period of literary "de-Stalinization" starting in the early 1970s, novels by Otar Chiladze and Chabua Amirejibi challenged the socialist realist narrative of Georgian history within the framework of the "Great Georgian Novel." All in all, if national modernism aimed to marry the national content with the new forms, Georgian socialist realism had the opposite task: to find a national form for the socialist content. The Georgian example shows the general difficulty of finding a form for content imagined as universal.

Dalia Satkauskytė's article reveals how the Soviet literary field in Lithuania had to transform national literary traditions in order to legitimate the 1940 occupation, to reject the legacy of the independent Lithuanian republic, and to reinterpret the anti-Soviet resistance. The article discusses the not so straightforward processes required to situate the inherited national literary structures, poetics, and elites into the socialist realist model. For example, neo-romantic poets such as Jonas Aistis, Bernardas Brazdžionis, Salomėja Nėris, and Antanas Miškinis had to be incorporated into the new canon in order to demonstrate that the Lithuanian cultural elite welcomed and legitimized the advent of the Soviet regime. The fate of the neo-romantics during the Soviet occupation symbolically reflects that of the entire writers' community: Aistis and Brazdžionis retreated to the west in 1944, Miškinis participated in anti-Soviet resistance and spent eight years in Soviet prison camps, and Nėris became the pioneer of the Lithuanian socialist realist canon.

Finally, Klavdia Smola points out how in the post-Thaw period from the 1960s to the late 1980s—the period of "soft" socialist realism—the northern indigenous minorities not only began to (re)invent literary writing, but also to manifest their own version of the canon and a limited diversity of poetics, viewpoints, and language. Due to the lack of a pre-Soviet written literary tradition, "young" literatures were born from a symbiosis of folklore, beliefs, indigenous-Christian customs and the surrogate literary tradition of the Russian-European center: the Soviet "master plot." Having graduated from the universities in Moscow or Leningrad, the first generations of writers "(re)invented" a view of themselves as simultaneously native and Other. The first generations of writers attempted to "attach" Soviet modernity to the local folklore and at the same time reflected on this cultural clash. The study is of a transitional time: before the local authors had experienced a cardinal reevaluation of their values, finding themselves at the juncture of opposite ideologies—the just-fallen communist ideology, and that of their native paradise lost in the process of modernization.

Taken as a whole, the cluster's articles allow us to confront the common notions of Soviet multinational literature—and, more broadly, culture—as a monolithic phenomenon of the erstwhile empire's dictatorship, devoid of contradictions and individual features. An understanding of the complexity of the origins, life, decay, and death of the Soviet imperial canon in its various national and regional guises can also explain much in the current dramatic collisions in the post-Soviet space.