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The End of Life and the End of the Russian Empire: Depictions of the End of Life in the Historical Novels of the Russian Émigré Community.

Recent scholarship on the literary community of the Russian emigration of the interwar years has advanced the idea that the community's authors were interacting more profoundly with their different external contexts than previous characterizations of the Russian émigré community have suggested. Through the works of, for instance, Greta Slobin, Leonid Livak and Maria Rubins, light has been shed on the often divergent literary and cultural identities that emerged through the interactions of the literary community with the cultural scene of modernist Paris, its interactions with the Soviet Union and its attitudes towards the heritage of classic Russian literature. The works of these scholars attest of the relevance of theoretical perspectives from diaspora, exile, and transnational studies in interpreting the literary output and identity formation of the émigré community. In this paper I want to add to the perspectives used by these scholars by focusing on what I would like to call the exilic anxiety of loss.

Loss, of course, constitutes one of the most important dimensions in the exile's perception of reality. In first instance, this loss is concrete: the loss of home, the loss of land, the loss of dreams and plans bound up with the here and now of their lost homeland, etc. As Edward Said observes in his essay 'The Mind of the Winter':

> … exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their lands, their past. They generally do not have armies, or states, though they are often in search of these institutions. This search can lead exiles to reconstitute their broken lives in narrative form, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people. Such a story is designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole.[1] (51)

Apart from this concrete loss, exiles, I argue, can also experience a more abstract anxiety of losing in their new surroundings. This, then, is the anxiety of losing the narrative of belonging and identity in exile, the narrative about the *self*, a narrative that is created as to overcome an absence of something that was never really there. Here the distinction Dominick LaCapra makes between loss and absence in his work *Writing History, Writing Trauma* is relevant. According to LaCapra, whereas loss is often *concrete and historical*, that is, the event of *losing* or *having lost* something or someone, absence, rather, is structural: the *absence of* something that was never there and never could be. But this structural absence nevertheless seeks its concretization in an *object of loss* to overcome the trauma of absence. Thus, for instance, narratives of nationalistic unity in some past golden age – which, in reality, never existed – are created to foster a sense of belonging in an existence that would otherwise be governed by the trauma of absence[2]. In exile, I contend, such narratives of identity and belonging, that is, the created object of loss, and in this case precisely those of national identity and belonging, tend to be contested more acutely, which can partly be related to the lack of institutions mentioned by Said. Without the necessary institutions that can assert actual power in the foregrounding of, for instance, an imperial narrative on national identity which might be contested by counter-narratives as well but functions as a focal point nevertheless, individual's or group's

[1] Said, Edward, "The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile," *Harper's Magazine*, 1612 (1984), pp. 49-55.
[2] LaCapra, Dominick, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: John Hopkins, 2001.

identities and their narratives can remain in a precarious situation in which a fear of being undermined and eventual loss is continuously apparent. For the exile the object of loss that gives a sense of belonging is contested because she or he is thrown in between different orientations, lacks the necessary institutions, and is confronted with emerging new identities of fellow exiles. Such a fear of losing the object of loss, of being more directly confronted with structural absence, is what I will call here the exilic anxiety of loss.

This perspective can, I think, partly explain the discontent of some of the members of the older generation of the Russian émigré community with the undermining counter-narratives of the younger generation. While the older generation strove for a more essentialist Russian identity through a more preservationist conservatism, the younger generation, rather, fashioned their sense of belonging and identity more transnational, in a constructive dialogue with modernist Paris. This contestation of narratives, the inability of Russia abroad to create strict boundaries in which a dominant, essentialist, separate Russian identity could flourish, can be seen as inherent to the experience of the exile who lacks the ideological apparatus of the state. It is an experience that for some can cause anxiety about the loss of narratives of belonging.

In this paper, I will discuss two works of historical fiction that address this lack of control over narrative that causes an exilic anxiety of loss. In this analysis, I will focus specifically on the portrayal of death, that is, characters being aware of their imminent end. The first work discussed, the novella *Sviataia Elena, malen'kii ostrov* by Mark Aldanov, published in 1921, portrays the final years of Napoleon, spent in exile on the island of St. Helene. The second work is a fictionalized biography on the life of tsarina Elisabeth of Russia, *Tsesarevna*, written by Piotr Krasnov and published in 1933. As can already be seen, in both instances, it is the emperor/empress who dies, already signaling their possible indebtedness to an experience of imperial loss. In spite of these similarities, I will not approach both works in the same way. The novella by Aldanov will be read as a work reflecting upon this fear of loss of the banished. I will read this novella as giving a necessary perspective on the ways in which this fear is brought on by the inability to control historical representation, a perspective through which the novel of Krasnov can be related to the context of exile and interpreted as an expression of this exilic anxiety.

Death is a theme that runs through most of Aldanov's novels. For some of Aldanov's characters, in contemplating their death, a dread of legacy is part of their awareness of their own end, expressed in some cases by characters imagining their obituaries. This is closely related to the importance of vanity, understood by Aldanov as one of mankind's most common traits. Social interaction in Aldanov's works is often guided by the will to self-represent, and the characters often believe that they are able to control the image constructed by the other through this self-representation. This idea of control, however, is inevitably and at times ironically thwarted by death. After their deaths, a funeral and an obituary are, for most people, the last moments in which they are presented in one way or the other, the last moments to which their vain minds turn to project the look of the other upon themselves.

It can be argued that Napoleon's obituary, his legacy, lies in the hands of historians and cultural memory, or that his representation by the other is part of historical representation or cultural myth. In portraying the dread of legacy of Napoleon, *Sviataia Elena* reflects upon problems of historical representation and representation through cultural memory. Given the fact that this dread of legacy arises in a context of banishment and of impending death, the theme of representation is related to a waning ability to assert control over historical representation. These problems of historical representation arising in exile, I argue, resonate with the experience of Russian exiles as well. I will now attend to some fragments of the novella to further explicate this point.

Чтобы развлечь себя и приближенных, он стал диктовать им историю своих походов. Но скоро понял, что другие ее напишут лучше и выгоднее для него: сам он слишком ясно видел роль случая во всех предпринятых им делах, в несбывшихся надеждах и в нежданных удачах. Он отлично понимал, что в каждом из его действий будет найден историками глубокий смысл и роль случая в его судьбе окажется сведенной до минимума. Не по словам и объяснениям станет судить его потомство.[3] (356)

As becomes clear from this scene, in *Sviataia Elena*, Napoleon is portrayed as being conscious of his future representation by historians. Although Napoleon himself believes in chance as history's guiding principle, he is convinced that others will construct a meaningful narrative of his actions in (hi)stories, and that he or his image beyond his death will benefit from this meaning. The irony, of course, is that the Napoleon of *Sviataia Elena* stands in dialogue with the Tolstoian Napoleon of *Voina i mir*, thus implying that the pendulum can also swing to the other side: Napoleon can also be portrayed in less flattering ways, in the case of *Voina i mir* as someone lacking any historical agency and greatness.

In *Sviataia Elena*, an Italian marquess pays a visit to Napoleon on the island. Before actually meeting the emperor, he is guided through the villa where Napoleon resides by marshal Bertrand. In this fragment we notice him walking around inside the villa as though it were a museum already, a *dom muzei* in which some relics of Napoleon are collected. It becomes clear that the marquess is in fact only there for a good story back in his homeland, a nice anecdote, and Bertrand, aware of the possibility to manipulate the observations of the guest and communicate through him with the European continent, guides him along some of the more impressive artifacts. As we can see, however, this carefully build-up image of Napoleon's greatness is deconstructed when the marquess notices the rather small bathtub in Napoleon's bathroom. Bertrand quickly remarks that the emperor's bathroom in les Tuileries was different, thus trying to restore some of the previous grandeur.

The image of Napoleon, who himself is absent in this scene, as if he were already dead, as if his life has already been reduced to objects in a museum, is now in the hands of others. He is now represented by others, and it is very difficult to assert control over this image, even by those feeling responsible for keeping the image of Napoleon's greatness intact.

Маркиз, чуть слышно вскрикивая, переходил от предмета к предмету. У него в кармане лежала заранее приготовленная записная книжка, но ему неловко было пользоваться ею здесь; он не знал, что можно и чего нельзя, и изо всех сил старался запомнить все, чтобы тотчас записать, когда его коляска отъедет от Лонгвуда. Единственной целью толстяка было запастись в этом знаменитом месте, куда его занесла судьба, темами для рассказов на весь остаток жизни. Бертран шепотом называл главные достопримечательности комнаты.
[…]
Через открытую дверь маркиз заметил в небольшой смежной каморке деревянный ящик, изнутри выложенный цинком.
-- Ванна императора, -- пояснил со вздохом Бертран в ответ на молчаливый вопрос итальянца. -- В Тюльерийском дворце, -- добавил он, -- у его величества была не такая ванна...[4] (362-4)

[3] Aldanov, Mark, "Sviataia Elena, malen'kii ostrov," in *Sobranie sochinenii v 6 tt., tom 2*. Moscow: Pravda, 1991, pp. 313-390.
[4] Idem.

This is one of the final scenes from the novella. Napoleon is bedridden, his end is drawing near. He has already dictated his testament, has already meticulously explicated his demands for the funeral to the abbot. He has, in short, already asserted control over the last forms of self-representation. However, upon hearing Bertrand reading an English news article in which the assassination of the duke of Enghien, which was ordered by Napoleon, is condemned, Napoleon, in an act of rage, commands an amendment to the testament, and dictates his side of the story of the assassination of Louis Antoine de Bourbon. Here the dread of legacy, the fear of historical representation, surfaces most clearly. It is therefore telling that the words stated by Napoleon on the lost battlefield of Waterloo are mentioned in this scene: "-- Все кончено... Все погибло..." Apparently, self-representation, as portrayed in *Sviataia Elena*, is a battlefield as well, but one that is only lost with the coming of one's death. The testament, as can be seen, is the last form of communication with the outside world, and, therefore, the last possibility of self-representation, the last possibility of *defense* of one's own image.

Граф Бертран стал читать императору только что полученные английские газеты. В одной из них была резкая статья против лиц, виновных в расстреле герцога Энгиенского. Внезапно, во время чтения, Монтолон толкнул Бертрана в бок. Гофмаршал поднял глаза от газеты и с ужасом заметил, что у императора страшное лицо; такое выражение он видел у его величества за двадцать лет всего раза два или три, -- в последний раз после битвы при Ватерлоо, когда Наполеон сказал окружающим с легким эпилептическим смехом:

-- Все кончено... Все погибло...

Бертрану представилось, что у его величества и сейчас начнется эпилептический припадок.

-- Завещание... Дайте сюда мое завещание! -- прохрипел Наполеон.

Монтолон бросился за завещанием. Император дрожащими пальцами вскрыл пакет и, ничего не говоря, приписал несколько строк к последнему параграфу первого отдела:

"Я велел арестовать и судить герцога Энгиенского потому, что этого требовали безопасность, благополучие и честь французского народа; в то время граф д'Артуа, по собственному его признанию, содержал в Париже шестьдесят наемных убийц. В подобных обстоятельствах я и теперь поступил бы точно так же"...[5] (382-3)

In *Sviataia Elena*, the dread of legacy of Napoleon is reflected upon within a context of dwindling relevance of the former emperor. First of all, Napoleon and his consort are less capable of asserting control over the narrative of Napoleon due to the context of exile. The reaction of Napoleon to the visit of the Italian marquess is telling in this case. Although Napoleon is hesitant to meet him at first, Bertrand persuades him to do so by arguing that the marquess can be used as a mediator through which Napoleon can communicate with the European continent. The very possibility of regaining some form of control over the narrative causes Napoleon to liven up and, indeed, use the marquis exclusively to insult his adversaries. After this visit, Napoleon remains elevated for some time and even thinks that his death might still be far away.

With the closing in of death, however, Napoleon is again confronted with the finitude of his control. In a last effort, as we have seen, he takes combat with an English newspaper over the portrayal of an assassination he was responsible for.

Exile, the relativity of one's importance, the lack of control over the narrative of oneself, hindered communication with the outside world, imperial demise – these are all themes that resonate with

[5] Idem.

the experiences of the Russian exile as well. As such, if we were to replace Napoleon's anxiety of losing control over a personal historical legacy with a broader anxiety of losing control over national historical legacy, Aldanov's novella can be interpreted as reflecting on the already mentioned exilic anxiety of loss. This national historical legacy, as is suggested in the novella, can be contested in alien surroundings by different counter-narratives, counter-narratives that exist in the new surroundings, and counter-narratives by those in power, supported by a state apparatus.

With this in mind, I will now turn to Krasnov's novel *Tsesarevna*. More invested in portraying a life story of a historical figure than Aldanov's novella, the finale of the novel logically coincides with the final moments of empress Elisabeth's life and her eventual death. In one of these last chapters, with the empress already sick in bed, the reader finds Elisabeth doubting her legacy. This doubt is partly informed by the imperial army's failure to control their capture of Prussian Berlin for a longer period, but also, as is suggested, by the empress's awareness of the little time she still has left on this earth. She reads an ode of Lomonosov in which her achievements are commemorated and is confronted with a profound feeling of meaninglessness in all these achievements, as if, with her own death, the importance of her achievements diminish as well. In the evening, count Alexei Razumovsky keeps her company. Elisabeth, unable to sleep, laments to him:

> — Ушла, Алеша, моя красота. А ушла красота — и жить что-то не хочется.
> […]
> — Пусто, Алеша, кругом. Не верю я больше ни людям… ни себе. Хотела я сделать большое дело. России послужить хотела… По отцовскому следу хотела идти… И что же?.. Пусто… Пусто… Ничего не сделано… Ничего нет.[6] (341)

Razumovsky, however, objects to this self-representation and starts to recount the different achievements of Elisabeth: the abolition of the death penalty and domestic customs, the improvement of the state's finances etc. But for every achievement Elisabeth finds a negative consequence and she ends the conversation when she feels as though Razumovsky is eulogizing her before her actual dead.

> — Тяжело, Алеша, крестьянам живется. Нос вытянешь — хвост завязишь. Хотела дворянам помочь — крестьян обременила.
> — Э, мамо!.. А каков Петербург учинила?.. Красоты-то сколь много!
> — Да что ты, Алеша, точно слово посмертное, похвальное надо мною говоришь, заслуги мои поминаешь. Даже страшно мне стало с того.[7] (342)

Although their differences are not settled, the scene itself quite clearly is meant as an apologia of Elisabeth's reign, a defense of her historical memory. This notion of defense is especially important for this reading. At the very least, before the defense comes a sense of threat, and threats to narratives of belonging and identity, of Russianness and the mission of Russia abroad, abounded in exile. It is telling that the White Army monarchist Krasnov turns to such defense through the representation of a dying empress full of fear of her own legacy, which can be interpreted as reflecting an anxiety of the legacy of the empire itself. This scene thus suggests that with the end of the empire comes the anxiety of losing a created object of loss, the glory and the unity of the Russian Empire, that gave a sense of belonging and identity, but which has now come under threat.

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[6] Krasnov, Piotr, *Tsesarevna*, Moscow: Veche, 2013.
[7] Idem.

Strikingly, it is through the authority of a contemporary of Elisabeth, a man of state, the historical Razumovsky, that some form of control over the narrative is reasserted, thus suggesting that the only possible historical narrative can be represented by someone of power directly representing the Russian Empire. A reassertion, therefore, of the control of the late empire over the narrative of national identity even beyond its existence.

As has been shown in the analysis of deathbed scenes in the works of Aldanov and Krasnov, the concept of an exilic fear of loss due to a diminishing control over the dominant narrative provides for novel insights in these works. Through this concept, Aldanov's novella can be understood as reflecting on the anxiety that accompanies the loss of control over narrative, situated in a context of exile and imperial loss. The works of Krasnov, on the other hand, rather can be understood as a defensive reflex caused by this anxiety, hence their apologetic character. His novel seeks to reestablish control over the narrative by reasserting the authority of the lost empire as the exclusive source of historical truth, the sole narrative possible. Nevertheless, Krasnov's novels display an anxiety of the relevance of this imperial narrative. Russia abroad, even for someone with a seemingly unshakable belief in the glory of the Empire like Krasnov, remains a context of collision of different narratives of belonging and identity without the ideological apparatus of the imperial state providing for an authoritative narrative.

I would like to conclude this reading by nuancing the emphasis on anxiety above. The focus has been mostly on a fear caused by this anxiety. Although I do retain that this fear is important in informing the exilic experience, reactions to it diverge and can also confess of a strategy of acceptance, of making the exilic experience a productive part of creation. In this fragment from an article by one of the community's most prominent critics Georgii Adamovich, in which he discusses the state of literature in emigration, Adamovich conceives of exile as a *chance*. The experiences endured, the relative freedom of emigration compared to the Soviet Union, the proximity to the literary community of France, and, most importantly here, the absence of any support, are seen by Adamovich as having a potential for literary creation. Thus, informed by anxiety, a narrative of resilience is proposed in which the exilic experience is embraced.

Ей надо было бы этой свободой воспользоваться. Она прошла через всё, что бывает дано людям видеть и испытать, у неё обострился слух, обострилось чутье к страданию, она узнала нищету, потерю влияния, общее безразличие: все вообще, чему мир учить, кажется, только избранных...[…] Ведь все-таки то, что в нашу эпоху случилось с людьми, случается раз в тысячелетие, если не реже, ведь все-таки не было за всю историю России случая, чтобы человек остался без всякой опоры в бытии, без какой-либо поддержки где бы то ни было: должен же он понять кое-что такое, о чем в «нормальных условиях» и не думал![8] (336-7)

[8] Adamovich, Georgii, "O literature v emigratsii," *Sovremennye zapiski*, 50 (1932), pp. 327-339.