

From Celebrated Novel to Media Outrage: The Public Debate Surrounding the Miniseries *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*

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THIS chapter discusses Egor Anashkin's miniseries *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*), which premiered on one of Russia's state-run federal TV channels, Russia-1 (Rossia-1), in April 2020. The series is an adaptation of Guzel' Iakhina's critically acclaimed novel of the same name published in 2015. In addition to the prime-time TV broadcast, the series appeared simultaneously on the Russia-1 YouTube channel. The series garnered record-high ratings among Russian TV viewers (Revizor 2020), and it also received high viewing numbers and praise on the Russia-1 YouTube channel. At the same time, the TV drama created public outrage and controversy in the traditional and new media. Throughout April, Russian newspapers published hundreds of articles, including interviews with the series' producers, director, leading actress, and the novel's author. Other articles discussed the film's reception and reactions of different social groups; similar discussions took place on TV and radio stations. The miniseries became a media event across the ideological spectrum in both pro-government and opposition media organizations. At the same time, the series elicited polarized responses among Twitter and Facebook users. The online debates were then summarized and reprinted in the traditional media. Going back to these debates and analyzing the hype surrounding the series, this chapter attempts to answer the following questions: Why did an unremarkable TV drama produce such an intense reaction among the Russian audience? Why did the series' reception differ from the much more favorable reception of the novel? What current social trends do these debates reveal?

To address these questions, I will first discuss Iakhina's original novel, since the cause of the controversy can be traced to its original plot. I will then talk about the changes that were introduced into the TV series—the changes that sharpened the novel's reception and heightened the media outrage. Finally, I will try to comment on the current social trends indicated by the series' reception.

The roots of the controversy

Iakhina's debut novel attracted the attention of literary critics and achieved high ratings among readers. For the most part, it received considerable critical acclaim, including the 2015 Bol'shaia kniga and Iasnaia Poliana Awards. Iakhina's novel tells of Zuleikha, a young peasant woman living in a Tatar village in the 1930s. Her well-off, abusive husband is murdered during an NKVD raid on the village. Zuleikha is deported to Siberia as a member of the kulak class. Removed from her abusive family and the traditional Tatar village, Zuleikha's experiences in the deportation settlement lead to her personal growth.¹ She falls in love with the settlement's commander, Ivan Ignatov. Her son, Iusuf, who is born in the settlement, is educated by the group of deported intellectuals. At the end of the novel, Ignatov gives Iusuf his name and identity, and Iusuf leaves Siberia to study painting in Leningrad. The novel's plot led to the two major lines of argument: Those over Tatar national identity and those over the Stalinist repressions. These discussions then reappeared, in a much more dramatic manner, following the release of the film. Certain production choices caused additional outrage. Furthermore, the audience reception itself became the cause of additional commentary in the media.

Except for some minor changes heightening its drama, such as the introduction of a love triangle for the main protagonists, the series closely follows the plot of Iakhina's novel. According to its critics, the series flattened the novel's artistic elements, such as the convincing character development. Irina Petrovskaia (2020) describes the series as комикс о тяжелой судьбе закрепощенной женщины Востока, оказавшейся в аду сибирской ссылки.² This simplification or flattening of the plot and

1 The Gulag system included both labor camps and deportation settlements. Unlike the camps, the settlements had relatively fewer restrictions and labor requirements.

2 "a comic strip about the difficult fate of a repressed woman of the Orient who goes through the hell of Siberian exile."

the film's wide audience-reach meant that the potential for controversies already present in the novel's plot was fully realized with the production of the series.

Iakhina's work belongs to the genre of a historical novel, where the life of an individual character is set against dramatic and traumatic historical events. In this respect, the novel is reminiscent of such Soviet classics as Mikhail Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don*, Vasilii Grossman's *Life and Fate*, and Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. These novels, too, were recently made into TV series; yet, none of these films caused the intense reaction produced by the adaptation of Iakhina's novel.

The discussion of Soviet history as depicted in the TV series occurred along the lines of the persistent conservative/liberal divide. Soviet history remains a highly contested subject in Russian cultural and political discourse, and it plays an outsized role in contemporary Russian culture. In his *Warped Mourning*, Alexander Etkind writes that "Political opponents in Russia differ most dramatically not in their understanding of economic reforms or international relations, but in their interpretations of history" (Etkind 2013, 10). The importance of history has only grown since Etkind's book came out, and Soviet history has become increasingly a site of active government intervention.³ Despite these state-promoted efforts, Soviet history, and especially its traumatic aspects, remain one of the most divisive social topics. In Russia, conservative and liberal ideological camps are defined to a significant degree by their approach to and evaluation of Soviet history. On the one hand, Russian liberal elites see the Soviet past as a burden that has to be cast aside in order to move on to a democratic future, while conservative elites, on the other hand, "look back on the Soviet period as a golden era for Russia" (Gjerde 2011, 150). Since 2014, Russian history, especially the history of World War II, has acquired a central role in the Russian government's discourses of national stability and security (Bækken & Due Enstad 2020, 343). At the same time, the government narratives of Stalinist repressions remain inconsistent (Bækken & Due Enstad 2020, 343). The political elites refuse to choose sides in the public discussions of Stalinism (Malinova 2019,

3 The government's attempts to create a "usable Russian past" have attracted much attention from scholars. See, for example, Koposov (2011; 2018), Malinova (2019), Miller (2014), and Sherlock (2007).

96). The lack of social consensus makes this historical period a sensitive and important topic for artistic expression and political debates.

The question of non-Russian territories and identities is another unsettled question in post-Soviet Russia (Protsyk & Harzl 2013, 1). The history of ethnic minorities in imperial Russia and the USSR has rarely been addressed in the recent public discussions of the past.⁴ The post-Soviet resurgence of imperial preoccupations and the anxiety surrounding Russia's territorial integrity have impeded the development of Russia's own discourses on ethnic minorities (Protsyk & Harzl 2013, 3). As a result, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian culture remained largely unreceptive to the postcolonial theory that influenced Western scholarship and culture in the late twentieth century. Moreover, Russian intellectuals intensely dislike political correctness, associating this term with socialism and the Soviet legacy (Anisimova 2017, 1–2). Both the novel and the series intertwine the two contested issues of the Soviet past and Soviet imperial legacy; these two questions are, in turn, complicated by the gender dynamics of the narrative. The series adaptation raised additional questions of authenticity, such as the representation of the original novel, authentic depiction of a Tatar village, and correct depiction of the Soviet past.

Soviet modernity

The novel describes a particularly traumatic period in the Soviet past: the collectivization of 1930, the development of the Gulag camps and settlements, and massive deportations of the 1930s and 1940s. The author claimed that the novel's events are loosely based on the biography of her ethnically Tatar grandmother, whose family was deported to Siberia. However, the majority of the plot's details come from other personal accounts and memoirs written by those dekulakized, deported or imprisoned in the Gulag camps and settlements (Guzeva 2016).

4 Telling in this respect is the censoring of Khusein Erkenov's film, *Ordered to Forget* (*Prikazano zabyt'*, 2014). The Russian Ministry of Culture prohibited the film's distribution for public screening, arguing that its depiction of Chechen deportation and murder by the Soviet authorities in 1944 would cause ethnic unrest. Moreover, the government claimed that the historical events depicted in the film could not be verified—an argument that ran counter to the claims of the historical organization Memorial, who insisted on the authenticity of the film's historical account (Kavkazskii Uzel 2014).

Iakhina's novel represents an interesting combination of Soviet literary clichés and original elements.⁵ In the novel's plot, the author relies on Soviet literary traditions, while complicating these traditions by the complexities of character development and linguistic experimentation. The novel's language is expressive and cinematic, characterized by the focus on the characters' movements and vivid descriptions of scenes. This cinematic quality might be related to Iakhina's original intention to write a film script that later developed into a novel. The narrative often shifts to reflect the viewpoint of the main characters. It alternately takes up the perspectives of Zuleikha, Ivan Ignatov, and Iusuf. Each character has their limitations, and the difference between the reader's knowledge and the character's viewpoint forms a certain ironic distance. At the same time, the novel follows certain Soviet traditions of character transformation common in Socialist Realist literature and film. In its basic outline, the plot tells of a Tatar woman who leaves her repressive traditions for the love of a Russian communist officer. Mark Lipovetsky claims that Iakhina thematically and stylistically recycles Soviet literature (2016, 191). Of course, the camp setting complicates the possibility of such a Socialist Realist reading, nevertheless, the Soviet narratives of assimilation and modernization of an ethnic subject are clearly discernable in Iakhina's novel and reappear in the film adaptation.

The book approaches the traumatic aspects of Soviet history through the prism of redemption; it seems to suggest that while not everyone survives the camps, the experiences in the camps can be overcome and even lead to personal growth. Even the novel's depiction of death is somewhat matter of fact, and this feature becomes even more pronounced as the plot progresses. For example, here is the description of the fate of the newly deported Greeks and Crimean Tatars:

Новый контингент оказался слабым на здоровье, горячая южная кровь плохо переносила сибирские морозы—в первые же холода многие слегли с пневмонией [...] зимой семрукское кладбище пополнилось пятью десятками могил. *Басурмане*, так похожие друг на друга смуглостью кожи, густотой бровей и курчавостью

5 Galina Uzefovich (2015) tries to capture this paradox when she comments that the novel's reader unsuccessfully tries to come to terms with its combination of the miraculous and the entire absence of the miraculous.

волоса, хоронили сородичей по-разному: греки—сбивая из жердей тощие деревянные кресты, татары—строгая на длинных бревнах заковыристые полумесяцы. И кресты, и бревна расположились на кладбище впритирку, тесными кривыми рядами, вперемежку с другими надгробиями. (Iakhina 2015, 209)⁶

Taking the viewpoint of Ignatov, the passage presents the deportees as an undistinguished collective and as a problem.

In her reliance on a redemptive narrative, the author uses what, following Etkind, I would characterize as the “Solzhenitsyn line” in depicting the Gulag experience. Etkind contrasts the Gulag narratives of Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn. Whereas Solzhenitsyn sees the Gulag as a space of moral perseverance, Shalamov presents Gulag experience as meaningless suffering. According to Etkind, the two authors have different approaches to the meaning of historical trauma: Shalamov does not see any redemption in the past, whereas Solzhenitsyn believes in a possibility of the past as redemptive sacrifice. “While Solzhenitsyn presented his experience of survival as a moral lesson for humankind, Shalamov steadfastly denied any value in the gulag experience” (Etkind 2013, 86). The contemporary official narratives attempt to present the camp experiences as a redemptive and even patriotic sacrifice for the future of the motherland (Sniegon 2019, 132).

While reducing the moral emphasis of Solzhenitsyn, Iakhina’s novel connects the camp experience to the narrative of personal perseverance and growth. The story of the novel’s three main characters, Zuleikha, the Red commander Ignatov, and Zuleikha’s son Iusuf, show personal growth and transformation through the experiences of life in the camps. One could even argue that the characters undergo a redemptive journey that would be incomplete without the Soviet penitentiary system. It is telling that, like the rest of the settlers, Ignatov is abandoned by the Soviet state and nearly dies with the rest of his contingent. Therefore the

6 “The new contingent turned out to have weak health, their hot southern blood did not tolerate the Siberian frosts well. In the very first cold, many fell ill with pneumonia. In winter the Semruk cemetery was replenished with five dozen graves. The infidels, so similar to each other in their dark skin, thick eyebrows and curly hair, buried their relatives in different ways: the Greeks made skinny wooden crosses from poles, the Tatars strict crescents on long logs. Both crosses and logs were packed into the cemetery, in tight, crooked rows, interspersed with other tombstones.”

book has a paradoxical view of Soviet modernity as both traumatic and progressive at the same time. Even the Gulag settlement is transformed at the end of the narrative from an almost unlivable place in an inhospitable climate to a normal, cozy town:

В поселке громко, людно—воскресенье. В распахнутых окнах дышат ветром свежие занавески, палисадники белеют жасмином. Ватага крикливых пацанят гонит мяч, всаживает его в чинно шагающий отряд серых гусей—вожак шипит, стелет по земле длинную шею, кидается вперед, но из-под ворот уже летит, оглушительно лая, пара мохнатых псов, шугает гусей прочь. Пахнет дымом, баней, свежеструганным деревом, молоком, блинами. Где-то хрипло и нежно воркует патефон [...] (Iakhina 2015, 203)⁷

The director reproduces the same small-town aesthetic in the series. Referring to the improbable lifestyle in the settlement, Petrovskaiia (2020) ironically comments:

Переселенцы, брошенные в сибирской тайге, оборванные, холодные и голодные, в одночасье возводят дивной красоты поселок с уютными домиками, украшенными резными наличниками. В часы досуга на танцплощадке перед клубом, освещенной гирляндой огней, ссыльные (как в фильме «Любовь и голуби») танцуют кадрили.⁸

On a symbolic level, the redemption narrative is represented by the tale of the bird Simurgh that serves as the leitmotiv in both the book and

7 “It’s loud and crowded in the town on Sunday. Freshly washed curtains breathe in the open windows, and the front gardens are white with jasmine. A gang of noisy boys chases a ball, drives it into a marching detachment of gray geese —the leader hisses, spreads his long neck on the ground, and rushes forward, but a pair of shaggy dogs is already flying from under the gate, barking deafeningly, scaring the geese away. It smells of smoke, the bath house, freshly planed wood, milk, pancakes. Somewhere a gramophone coos hoarsely and gently [...]”

8 “Ragged, cold, and hungry settlers, abandoned in the Siberian taiga, build overnight a wondrously beautiful village with cozy houses decorated with carved window frames. During the leisure hours the exiles (as in the movie *Love and Doves*) dance a square dance on the dance floor in front of the club, lit by a garland of lights.” *Love and Doves* is a classic, late Soviet film by Vladimir Menshov.

the film, as Zuleikha retells the tale to her son. This classic Persian tale tells of the different kinds of birds who undergo a harrowing journey in search of a mythical bird. At the end of their journey, only thirty birds survive; yet, they achieve transcendence and learn that they themselves represent Simurgh. In parallel to this tale, the thirty deportees, including Commander Ignatov, survive the first winter in Siberia. The diversity of the birds parallels the ethnic and social diversity of the first settlers. Central to this idea of redemptive Soviet modernity is the book's approach to the Soviet national project.

Contradictory Soviet international

Iakhina's novel focuses on the most traumatic and paradoxical period in Soviet nationalities history, since during the 1930s national policies were actively promoted, while national groups and entire ethnic groups were deported or purged (Martin 2001, 22). A number of scholars point out the contradictions inherent in the Soviet approach to nationality policy. To describe these contradictions, Terry Martin famously introduced the term "affirmative action empire." The USSR was a paradoxical multi-ethnic state that combined incompatible policies and features:

[...] an extraordinarily invasive, centralized, and violent state formally structured as a federation of sovereign nations; the successor state to the collapsed Russian empire that successfully reconquered most of its former national borderlands but then set out to systematically build and strengthen its non-Russian nations, even where they barely existed. (Martin 2001, 18–19)

Moreover, the idea of liberation and emancipation was built into Soviet discourses on the Muslim East. Despite Soviet control over the ethnic republics and territories that resembled the control of other colonial powers, the USSR also engaged in the discourses of anti-colonial liberation—discourses that obscured the Soviet domination. The Soviet Union "understood itself as an emancipating state that ended the colonial exploitation of the former Russian colonies and helped the Muslim populations to attain development and modernization" (Kamper 2013, 5).

Iakhina addresses Soviet nationalities history in her depiction of collectivization and ethnic deportations. Despite including this painful his-

tory, the novel simultaneously creates the settlement as a kind of international melting pot—a model of Soviet assimilation. Ignatov notices once that there are nineteen nationalities living in the settlement (Iakhina 2015, 201). Here people of different nationalities unite in suffering, sharing their experiences, contributing to the community's survival, and achieving personal transformation. It is interesting that Iakhina emphasizes this reading in her interviews. For example, she stresses the novel's universal quality in her interview to Radio Svoboda:

Ведь когда действие романа переходит во вторую часть, там практически национального-то и не остается. Там остаются только люди очень разных национальностей, но при этом с них слетает все наносное, все предрассудки, в том числе и национальные. Они остаются просто наедине друг с другом. Я писала о людях, а не о людях конкретной национальности. (Medvedev 2020)⁹

The novel places universal values over national characteristics, connecting national and ethnic traditions to “prejudices.” For example, Zuleikha's Muslim faith appears superficial, she mixes Islam with beliefs in goblins and spirits, and her faith gradually fades away in the settlements.

An example of the novel's emphasis on universal values is the upbringing of Zuleikha's son, who learns his life lessons from many different people in the settlement, all representatives of different professions and nationalities within the settlement—a German doctor, a Jewish French teacher, a Russian painter, a Chuvash fisherman, and a Tatar mother.

Zuleikha's personal trajectory is similarly problematic from the perspective of ethnic identity politics. The novel predicates the protagonist's personal growth on her removal from her native village. Her experiences in the village are all negative. She appears completely oppressed by her husband's family to the point of over-identifying with her oppressors. Therefore, Zuleikha keeps repeating that her husband is good, even though the readers can clearly see that he is extremely abusive and she suspects that he plans to murder her at several points of the narrative.

9 “Really when the novel moves to the second part, there is practically nothing national there. Only people of very different nationalities remain, but at the same time, they lose everything superficial, all prejudices, including national ones. They remain simply alone with each other. I wrote about people, not about people of a particular nationality.”

While the protagonist's thoughts create an ironic distance between her and the reader, this simultaneously puts the reader into a superior position of a modern, often Russian, subject contrasted to the archaic Tatar woman.

The novel is quite brief in its depiction of the Tatar past and life experiences. For example, there is no storyline about Zuleikha's parents. It seems that she comes from a loving family that experienced some hard times or even tragedy. Because of this absence, the novel lacks an opposing positive depiction of Tatar identity. Moreover, the protagonist's mindset, as well as her personal transformation become less convincing. Similarly undeveloped is the background of Zuleikha's in-laws, and as a result, her husband and her mother-in-law appear as unrealistic monsters—the othering that plays into an orientalist tradition. Zuleikha calls her mother-in-law “Upyrikha,” a word denoting a female vampire. This association is further confirmed by the conversation between her mother-in-law and her husband, when it transpires that the two were suspected of surviving by eating their relatives during the famine: *И слышишь, сынок? Мы их не ели. Мы их похоронили. Сами, без муллы, ночью [...] По кладбищам людоеды табунами ходили, чуть увидят свежую могилу—разроют и сожрут покойника.* (Iakhina 2015, 27).¹⁰ This grotesque imagery of the past demonizes not only Zuleikha's in-laws but also the traditional Tatar village as a whole.

The personal transformation of the protagonist, a young Tatar woman, which occurs after her removal from the traditional village, acquires colonial undertones. Zuleikha gradually changes in the Siberian settlement. She becomes a skilled hunter and a medical assistant, and acquires remarkable personal and physical strength. Western colonialism, as well as its Soviet variant, often relied on the discourses of traditional gender oppression as its tool. For example, in early Soviet narratives about Central Asia, women's liberation metonymically represented the liberation of Central Asia by means of Soviet ideology (Massell 1974). Michael Kemper (2011, 2) argues that contemporary Russian discourses on the East follow Soviet paradigms, what he calls “Soviet Orientology.” Even today, issues of gender and sexual identity are used as reinforcements

10 “And do you hear, son? We didn't eat them. We buried them. We did it ourselves, without a mullah, at night [...] The cannibals walked in herds through the cemeteries, as soon as they saw a fresh grave, they would dig up and devour the deceased.”

of negative stereotypes about Muslims in both Russia and the West. In her reading of the novel and of the series' gender politics the Tatar cultural critic Nuriia Fatykhova (2020) remarks that one should not confuse feminism with the imperial celebration of a woman's dislocation from her cultural and religious traditions. Fatykhova finds the love story between Zuleikha and Ignatov especially disturbing, since Ignatov represents both the colonial and ideological aspects of Stalinism. She explains that this love theme is not legitimate because "in Russia they never said who had been a criminal and who had been a victim. The authorities never apologized to the peoples of Russia, including Tatar women. And this love story is presented without any thought given to trauma" (Costa-Kostirsky & Shcherbina 2020). For Fatykhova, the story is problematic, because the trauma of Stalinism has never been addressed, especially in the context of Stalinist ethnic policies.

The association between the Russo-Soviet assimilation and modernity appears not only in the novel's plot but also in the author's interviews. For example, in describing Zuleikha's story, Iakhina states: "If not for the circumstances that force her to enter the modern world, she would have gone on to live in what was essentially the Middle Ages" (Guzeva 2016). Here Iakhina seems to subscribe to the vision of Soviet modernization that still dominates contemporary Russian interpretation of the history of Russia's ethnic peripheries. The plot's general outline and the descriptions of the Tatar village easily lend themselves to accusations of colonial and imperial cultural logic.

The novel's language also follows a particular move from Tatar to Russian or even European identity. Early parts of the novel include Tatar words that Iakhina explains in the appended glossary; the number of these words declines in the following parts, being replaced by Russian and even occasional French. The film adaptation further exacerbated this linguistic peculiarity. The series did not use Tatar language even in the early village scenes. Only one Tatar word, son (*ulym*), appeared in the entire production (Costa-Kostirsky & Shcherbina 2020). This cultural aspect appears significant in the context where the cosmopolitan and centralizing role of the Russian language for Russia's ethnic minorities and former Soviet republics remains an important concept for Russian intellectuals. For example, a famous Russian writer, Liudmila Ulitskaia, claims that the Russian language played a central cultural role in the USSR, since it

connected the remoter corners of the country to world culture (Ulitskaia 2012, 63).¹¹ This cosmopolitan understanding of Russian language and culture and, by extension, the Soviet experience is represented by the storyline concerning Zuleikha's son, Iusuf, who gets his education in the Siberian settlement. Because the deportees belong to different social and ethnic backgrounds, he is able to learn from their diverse experiences. He receives exclusive attention from the members of the Leningrad intelligentsia, who teach him painting, French, and humanist values.

At the end of the novel, Iusuf decides to leave the Siberian town to study painting in Leningrad. Even the settlement's commander contributes to Iusuf's fate as a future Soviet intellectual. As the son of a former kulak, Iusuf has no permission to leave the settlement, so Commander Ignatov forges his birth certificate and gives him his own name and background. The forged birth certificate now reads: Иосиф Игнатов, 1930 года рождения. Мать: Зулейха Валиева, крестьянка. Отец: Иван Игнатов, красноармеец. (Iakhina 2015, 220).¹² This renaming and violation of Stalinist laws finally unites Zuleikha and Ignatov. Ignatov becomes Iusuf's symbolic father, and the three turn into a new multi-ethnic Soviet family. In the same way, Iusuf's education fulfills the Soviet ideal of the transformation of an ethnic subject into a cosmopolitan Soviet intellectual, even if this personal growth emphasizes the humanist rather than the ideological influence of Soviet culture. Yet, to achieve this universal subjectivity, Iusuf has to reject his Muslim and Tatar identity. It is significant that the novel is not open to imagining an alternative identity that incorporates Tatar roots. Thus, Iusuf is not influenced by the forms of ethnic art.

From adaptation to controversy

In his study of Russian cinema of the 2000s, Stephen Norris argues that Russian historical blockbuster films have served as a space for debates about national history, and the Internet provides an important outlet for this historical contestation (Norris 2013, 315–16). The state played a prominent role in supporting the production of these historical block-

11 It is telling in this respect that Ulitskaia wrote the preface to Iakhina's novel, and connected the author to the great Soviet Russophone writers, such as Chingiz Aitmatov and Fazil' Iskander.

12 "Iosif Ignatov, year of birth 1930. Mother: Zuleikha Valieva, a peasant. Father: Ivan Ignatov, a Red Army soldier."

busters. Vika Kravtsova finds a similar political significance in the state's promotion of Iakhina's novel and the subsequent film (2020).¹³ The novel does not oppose either imperial ideology or the politics of historical reconciliation. However, like the historical blockbusters, the series led to the probably unintended result of media and public outrage. The public response and controversy created by *Zuleikha* surpassed the Internet reactions to the historical blockbusters of the 2010s; none of these films led to similar outrage in the online and traditional media or generated thousands of comments among Twitter and YouTube users.¹⁴ The fact that the series simultaneously appeared on prime-time television and online resulted in a much broader audience than the earlier films which were initially limited to Cineplex distribution.

The miniseries was conceived by the channel Russia-1 as a high-budget and high-quality production of the kind often based on literary classics and historical subjects. Among this kind of miniseries are Aleksandr Proshkin's *Doctor Zhivago* (2006), Sergei Ursuliak's *Life and Fate* (2012), Valerii Todorovskii's *The Thaw* (2013), and Aleksandr Kott and Konstantin Statskii's *Trotskii* (2017). The topic of national history unites these projects, however, none produced the kind of public reaction created by *Zuleikha*. In the case of this TV production, the already contested Soviet past is complicated by the addition of the "nationality question." The release of the series became a media event, where both the original novel and its adaptation produced a wide discussion which was replicated across multiple platforms: social media, such as Youtube, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as the traditional print and broadcast media. The Tatar historian, Al'brit Bustaev, argues that the novel's screening on a federal channel introduced the story into the ideological mainstream, therefore, giving Iakhina's work a greater significance (Costa-Kostritsky & Shcherbina 2020). At the same time, the TV adaptation reduced the complexities of the plot and linguistic experimentation of the literary original, increasing the opportunities for controversy. Especially intense was the reaction of the Communist Party of Russia and other Stalinists, as well as the members of the Tatar community. The Communist Party of Russia demanded the immediate removal of the series. The accusation

13 This support can be seen in the novel's choice for a high-budget production on one of the main state channels.

14 The first episode of the film collected 11,088 comments on YouTube.

of defaming Soviet history made against the series is quite ironic, since, as I have shown in earlier discussion, the novel has a nuanced representation of Stalinist repressions; and the novel's message of redemption and reconciliation did not change in the film. However, many commenters did not pay attention to the nuances of the plot. The mere mention of Stalinist repressions was enough to provoke their condemnation. Moreover, the series introduced some new forms of historical representation that were absent from the novel; the production emphasizes Stalinist repressions not only through the depicted suffering of the dekulakized peasants but also through the voice-over that enumerates the events of the early 1930s. This voice-over is later attributed to Zuleikha's already adult son, Iusuf, who recounts his mother's and the country's history. The series extended the historical span of the original novel, ending the story in Khrushchev's Thaw. Therefore, in the final episode, Zuleikha travels to Kazan to meet her son, now a famous painter, his wife, and their young daughter. The series then contrasts the Stalinist repressions to the cultural relaxation of the Thaw.

The Communists' demands to stop the broadcast of the series reflect a particular tendency in contemporary Russian culture: On the one hand, there is an awareness of Stalinist repressions. At the same time, a vocal part of Russian society subscribes to a more and more rigid Stalinist myth that sees any public representations of negative descriptions of the Stalinist era as the tarnishing of Soviet history. While the official culture has a more nuanced, if contradictory, view of Stalinism, it similarly has a tendency to disregard negative aspects of Soviet history. As a result, Stalinists are often able to dominate the cultural debate and to control cultural monuments.¹⁵ They are also well represented in the Internet debates. According to Elena Perrier (Morenkova), Stalinists are gaining more and more digital ground, and they appear more active and more highly mobilized than liberal civil society (2019, 164). Indeed, the YouTube and Twitter comments on the series were dominated by users who accused the film of being anti-Soviet.¹⁶

Visualized on screen, certain details of the plot produced a strong audience reaction; many viewers remarked on the violence of the Soviet authorities, such as the killing of the child who tried to run away from

15 The most recent expression of this tendency is the removal of the memorial placards in the city of Tver.

16 Here I rely on qualitative analysis of online content.

the deportation train, and the drowning of the dilapidated barge with the imprisoned deportees. While these violent scenes appeared in the novel, they attracted more attention as a part of the TV production. Reflecting on these negative representations, Zakhar Prilepin called the series Russophobic (Borisova 2020). In general, Russophobia was one of the most common accusations against the film among patriotic Twitter users (Rosbalt Like 2020). This accusation of Russophobia becomes especially ironic in the context of the strong reaction from the Tatar community.

Even the novel led to rather sharp criticism from Tatar readers. The plot's colonial elements and their depiction in the series further provoked negative responses among the Tatar audiences. Thus, even at the production stage, many Tatar actors refused to take part in the project (Mukhametova 2018). Following the film's release, Russian Muslim religious leaders demanded an apology from the authors and producers of the series, because they were unhappy about a sex scene in the mosque and the fact that many of the secondary characters were named after contemporary Muslim religious leaders (Metsel' 2020).¹⁷ Members of the Tatar parliament similarly demanded the banning of the series (Bronstein 2020). This absence of sensitivity to Tatar culture in the TV production exposed the relative lack of representation of non-Russian ethnic identities in contemporary Russian media. Media coverage corresponds to the broader sociocultural status of the Russian ethnic minorities: During the ongoing processes of recentralization, ethnic regions lost many of their rights, especially in the sphere of language and education. From 2017, the titular languages of the RF ethnic republics lost the status of obligatory subjects in schools, while the number of teaching hours has dropped significantly (Chapman 2020). In the 2020 amendments to the Russian constitution, there is a controversial amendment acknowledging the "special role" of ethnic Russians and Russian language in the formation of the Russian state. This amendment institutionalized the priority of Russian identity over non-Russian minority cultures. The discourses on ethnic differences are characterized by continuities with the Soviet or even pre-revolutionary traditions. The media representations often emphasize "perceptions of fixed, unchanging ethnic characteristics transmitted from generation to generation" (Hutchings & Tolz 2015, 7). This

17 Bustaev points out that the mosque that appears in the series has a deep cultural meaning for Tatar history (2020).

focus on fixed and traditional ethnic identities corresponds to the ethnic politics of Iakhina's novel and the subsequent series, where the protagonists have to discard their ethnic identities in order to become modern subjects.

In addition to the questions of history and multiculturalism, the debate surrounding the film is complicated by the gender dynamics, which became especially evident in the attacks on the series' leading actress, Chulpan Khamatova, a well-known ethnically Tatar actress, who told of hate mail and abuse on social media (Pankina 2020). According to Khamatova, she was accused of "defiling the memory of [her] motherland. Meaning not only Tatarstan, but the history of modern Russia." (Costa-Kostritsky & Shcherbina 2020). Khamatova found herself in the paradoxical status of an ethnically Tatar star with a close connection to the state with its centralizing policies. The liberal press also contributed to the debate, by accusing the majority of the series' critics of Islamic fundamentalism and Stalinist views.

The comments of Twitter users further reflected this social split: the viewers accused the film of being "propagandistic shit," [«пропагандистское дерьмо»]. Many users called the film anti-Soviet and Russophobic, accused it of blackening Soviet and Russian history, of national betrayal, and of being a production of the State Department (Rudina 2020).¹⁸ Other users stated that the film instigated hatred and was a "sabotage of Victory Day" (диверсия накануне Дня Победы). Tatar users described the film as colonial, anti-Tatar and anti-Muslim (Rudina 2020). The Twitter storm is well summarized by the following ironic comment of a Twitter user:

Зулейха... Лента просто рвёт и мечет. Серил не понравился русским патриотам, так как он русофобский, коммунистам за то что антисоветский, татарам за то что татарофобский и оскверняет национальные традиции и семейный уклад, мусульманам за надругательство над исламской святыней (по оригинальной задумке авторов постельная сцена уполномоченных ОГПУ снималась на полу закрытой мечети), ценителям прекрасного в искусстве за примитивные диалоги, посредственную игру и подбор

18 For anonymity reasons, I cite Twitter comments reprinted in the article by *Radio Svoboda*. The traditional press, for example, *Novaia Gazeta*, *Revizor*, *Rosbalt*, and *Radio Svoboda*, summarized and widely discussed the social media comments on the series.

актеров и всякие киноляпы. Прямо заинтриговали. Посмотреть что ли? (Rudina 2020)¹⁹

The intensity of this debate suggests a certain intolerance in contemporary Russian society. While the Internet and social media have a tendency towards outrage, this trend is similarly cultivated by the official Russian media, where outrage and a combative tone have replaced genuine engagement and freedom of expression. In her recent analysis, Vera Zvereva notices that the language of Russian officials in the media has “become so rich in street language, non-diplomatic idioms and elements of trolling that what officials say is no longer clearly distinguishable from the speeches of less respectable media actors.” (Zvereva 2020). The style of scandal and outrage dominates the official media channel and then reappears in communications online. In contemporary Russian society, discussions about artistic productions seem to play a more prominent role than in other cultures, due to the lack of “western-style parliamentary democracy and a strong ‘fourth estate’” and of “a public sphere united around consensual values” (Hutchings & Tolz 2015, 6). The intensity of the discussion surrounding the otherwise unremarkable miniseries illustrates the absence of social and political discussion on such topics as the significance and ramification of the Soviet past, especially as it relates to the multi-ethnic experience. The Russian state is increasingly invested in constraining circuits of societal debate (Wengle, Monet & Olimpiewa 2018, 1000). These discussions do not take place in the traditional spaces of academia or the mainstream media; as a result, cultural products have to replace this absence in the public sphere.

Conclusion

While the multiple controversies surrounding the TV series illustrate the multi-dimensionality of contemporary Russian views on history and identity, the combative style of these debates is indicative of the preva-

19 “Zuleikha... The blogosphere has just exploded. The Russian patriots did not like the series as it is Russophobic, the communists for being anti-Soviet, the Tatars for being Tatarophobic and denigrating national traditions and family life, Muslims for desecrating a mosque (according to the original idea of the authors the sex scene of the ОГРУ officers was filmed on the floor of a closed mosque). The connoisseurs of fine art did not like the production for primitive dialogues, mediocre acting, the casting, and all sorts of bloopers. I am really intrigued. Should I watch it?”

lence of the style of outrage in Russian public discourses. At the same time, the discussion of the series provided the opportunity to express opinions that seldom appear in print and social media. This was especially true of Tatar historical accounts. Fatykhova suggests that the discussion became an opportunity to demonstrate the polyphony of contemporary Russian society (2020). *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* was broadcast in prime time on one of the main federal TV channels and on YouTube. This broad distribution created a media event and a rare shared cultural moment that brought together diverse social groups and facilitated intense debate over unsettled social issues.

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