Popular Culture and History in Post-Soviet Nation States

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1. The Post-Soviet Condition

Soviet history has been the subject of controversial debates in the spheres of history politics and commemorative culture from the moment the world's first socialist state finally collapsed. When on 8 December 1991 the heads of state of the Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republics Stanislav Shushkevich, Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk left the Soviet Union with the Belovezh Agreement and founded the Commonwealth of Independent States, this was the decisive move towards its end. A few weeks later Mikhail Gorbachev formally stepped down and dissolved the USSR. With this turning point, a radical revision of history began. Already in the final years of perestroika and glasnost, the previously taboo and bloody aspects of the 'red dictatorship' had been intensively examined and discussed. Now, an uncompromising renunciation of the failed state socialism and an unsparing reckoning with the crimes of communism were proclaimed. Boris Groys once described this turning away from the Soviet Union as a "post-communist condition", which resembled a "return from the future to the present" of the nation state. The utopian project of communism became once again an evil "spectre" for which nobody wanted to be blamed and that was imagined as an interruption of the natural cause of things, demonically supressing and destructing one's own nation and its allegedly essential development (Groys 2005: 35–49).

At the same time, the three countries, which actually had never existed as nation states for any length of time, set out in the early 1990s to search for an independent national history, for a 'national idea'. Particularly anti-communist narratives from the Cold War era circulating among the Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian diasporas in the West, who then longed for a 'liberation' and 'rebirth' of their 'supressed' nations, became very popular among the new elites of the young post-Soviet countries. However, due to the close historical interconnections of the three newly founded states, this almost inevitably led to conflicts: To whom did the medieval feudal principality of Kyivan Rus' belong – Russia or Ukraine? Who had a claim to Crimea? Was the Tsarist Empire a colonial state of great-Russian dominance or a common heritage? Could Ukraine exclusively rely on the Habsburgian Galician period as a cultural heyday, or should it be understood as a multireligious, multicultural post-national state? (Hagen 1995) And which events,

myths and figures could Belarus integrate into its self-image from the long history of the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth and later Tsarist rule, to which its territory belonged for centuries?

Yet, besides these debates among the political and cultural elites of how to construct their respective invented tradition, there was also a vivid interest among ordinary people in how to cope with the disruptions and upheavals of history, whose object and subject they themselves had become in the preceding years and decades. And they found possible answers in the then flourishing commercial mass culture, which developed particular appeal in Eastern Europe during the 1990s as a previously unknown phenomenon. Accordingly, in its widely consumed formats like evening talk shows, documentaries, feature films, nonfiction or fiction books and journals, it was not the search for a 'national idea' or pre-Soviet history that dominated, but all possible aspects of the Soviet past were the major topic. And the images and narratives distributed in these popular media very often sufficiently departed from what the respective official state history claimed in its new schoolbooks or at national curricula.

However, this history boom in popular media formats underwent significant transformations in recent decades. Not only the political circumstances changed, but also the increasing digitalisation and globalisation of all spheres of life transformed the forms and formats of popular culture sufficiently. The internet, mobile phones and social media enabled people even in the most remote provinces to easily create their own 'glocal' imaginary links to transregional events, histories and communities beyond centralised power structures. Thus, in the beginning of the new millennium, various imaginary "scapes" (Appadurai 1990) and affective affiliations arose, some of which ran counter to the state's contested attempts to establish a national history, while others reinforced it. This was by no means a phenomenon particular to Eastern Europe (cf. Korte/Paletschek 2007; Groot 2015), but within the context of the complete breakdown of the formerly canonised dogmatic Marxist conceptualisation of history, such tendencies developed their own specific dynamics of appropriating the formerly common past. A mass of mainstream films, novels, comics, television series, computer games, and music videos appeared, which generate, revise, perpetuate, dismantle certain notions of the past, and thus contribute to their affectively charged visualisation and virtualisation. And exactly these dynamics of 'appropriation' in Belarusian, Russian and Ukrainian popular culture are the subject of the essays collected in this volume. Their authors explore this changing tension between state history policy, popular historical myths and globalised entertainment culture in different media formats and art forms, particularly in the first two decades of the 21st century.

2. Popular Histories of the 1990s: Concealed Truths and Alternative Claims

When the Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991, this was not just a departure towards new nation states. It was also the so-called transformation period, when a chaotic privatisation of state property, Manchester capitalism, corruption and lawlessness prevailed, with all its enormous social and economic upheavals. Instead of prosperity and freedom for all, capitalism brought increasing economic inequality and the collapse of the social

security systems (Ther 2014). Accordingly, the new political leaders – who mostly arose out of the old socialist *nomenklatura* – elected for the first time in free elections, quickly lost support. This disappointment about the promised better world of democracy and market economy also affected the common picture of history. The partly disastrous personal situation quickly led many people to long for the allegedly grey, but materially and in terms of everyday life reasonably secure stability of late socialism. 'Nostalgia' for the old days arose (Boym 2001).

It was at this specific moment of failing social 'transformation' and economic and political crises, that all kinds of alternative histories became extremely popular. Because official history politics had already been discredited under the communists for a long time, when in the name of Marxist historical dialectics only one ideologically reliable version was accepted, the newly established national 'mythologies' (Barthes 2006 [1957]) were soon disregarded as similar state propaganda. Furthermore, civil society activism, which focussed on a critical reconstruction of the past, had little to offer in the way of practical solutions for daily life. Against this background a new commercial popular culture quickly emerged that promised to provide all the answers that could not be found elsewhere. So-called New Chronologies, Eurasian genealogies and manifold conspiracy myths about secret powers behind the scenes attracted the broader public (Schwartz 2009; Suslov 2017).

Private television channels, tabloids, para-scientific periodicals or voluminous fantasy sagas were the media that fascinated the audience in the first post-Soviet decade. Among them were the "true story" of Stalin's crimes, "uncensored truths" from the Kremlin, "secret documents" from the KGB archives, "unbelievable stories" from the Gulag, but also sex and crime, love in concentration camps and scandals in the cosmos as well as Satanism and astrology, light and dark forces, puppet masters and masterminds. What really happened in the October Revolution? Who was to blame for the *coup d'état* in 1917: Russians, Germans, or the Jews? Was Lenin actually a spy? Did Stalin want to starve all Ukrainians to death? Was the Soviet Union the real aggressor in the World War II? What was the Space Race actually about? How many lovers did Gagarin have, why did he have to die? What are the real reasons for the Chernobyl accident? Would the Soviet Union have survived if Andropov had not been murdered? (Schwartz 2009) There has been no historical event, no famous personality, for which there have not been scandalous and voyeuristic revelations.

What these stories of the 1990s had in common was their scepticism towards official narratives. They looked for the plausible explanation behind the contradictory and the inconsistencies behind the seemingly self-evident: where the guilty party was established beyond doubt, they discovered unknown accomplices; where the perpetrator had long since been convicted, they found new evidence to the contrary; what was written in the Soviet or post-Soviet textbook had to be re-examined. Yet this popular cultural history writing was by no means always emancipative and rebellious; it was often deeply reactionary and xenophobic, following anti-Semitic conspiracy myths and nationalist resentments. However, they achieved their popularity less due to such sometimes radical political views but rather because of their distance, inherited from the late Soviet era, to any kind of official, generally accepted historical truths. And although this makes them eminently political, they have received little attention from political science, nor have lit-

erary and cultural studies taken much notice of the dynamics and pitfalls of these appropriations of history.

3. History Politics: Nationalising and Disintegrating a Common Past

With the turn of the 21st century, the political and technical conditions of history politics changed. Vladimir Putin won his first presidential election in 2000 in the Russian Federation, Aleksandr Lukashenko [Aliaksandr Lukashenka] in Belarus in 2001 started his second term as president, while Ukraine in 2004 underwent its first major political upheaval and mass pro-democracy protests with the Orange Revolution. The persistent 'nationalisation' of history policy, but also new media developments and the gradual establishment of authoritarian rule in Belarus and Russia have shifted the context for popular cultural activities massively. In the Russian Federation, the consolidation of Putin's power was accompanied by a change in official history politics (Kalinin 2011). Now a rehabilitation of the Red Army, the secret services and strong leadership found its symbolic expression in the renewed glorification of the victory in the 'Great Patriotic War', but also in the praise of supposedly great Russian statesmen and strong personalities as glorious forerunners of the president's own rule. Although it was not taboo to portray the darker sides of history in the media, such as the terror of the Cheka in the civil war or the crimes of the Stalin era, with increasing frequency at least since the 2010s they have been narrated as avoidable, if not excusable, excesses of a statehood in crisis (Scharlaj 2017; Weiss-Wendt/Adler 2021). This emerging new official narrative suggested that precisely in order to prevent such turmoil in the future, a strong hand was needed. At the same time, the Russian Federation was represented as a global political superpower following on from the Soviet Union, whose geopolitical interests outside its own country and especially in the 'near abroad' and vis-à-vis Ukraine have to be recognised (Saunders 2016; Szostek 2018; Borenstein 2019). State actors frequently saw Ukraine and Belarus as an integral part of the Russian multinational and multicultural empire since the 18th century.

Conversely, in Ukraine following the successful Orange Revolution in 2004 and especially after the so-called Euromaidan in 2013/2014, and in reaction to the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the war in the Donbass, a national historiography increasingly distanced itself from the overpowering neighbour (Kasianov 2022). The Ukrainian Institute for National Memory, founded in 2006, monitored the allegedly correct understanding of history and promoted, for example, the international recognition of the famine in the early 1930s caused by forced collectivisation as a genocide of the Ukrainian people, the so-called 'Holodomor'. Everything Soviet and Russian became designated negatively as alien influences of the centuries-old coloniser, occupier and aggressor from the East. The so-called decommunization laws banned nearly all Soviet names, symbols, legacies from the public space as a totalitarian criminal heritage. In contrast, the Western periods of rule from the Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom to the Habsburg-Hungary monarchy tended to be reinterpreted as positive, if not as periods of prosperity. Especially since President Viktor Yushchenko in 2010 officially declared Stepan Bandera a "Hero of Ukraine", for many he turned into an icon of the anti-Russian struggle for independence and liberation, whereby his collaboration with the Nazis and the anti-Semitic or anti-Polish

pogroms committed by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army UPA were relativised as historical marginalia (Dubasevych/Schwartz 2020; Yekelchyk 2022).

While this extreme politicisation and polarisation of common Ukrainian-Russian history reached its tragic climax in Vladimir Putin's two speeches in February 2022 shortly before Russia's massive military attack on Ukraine, in which he attempted to justify this step with long historical digressions, the politics of history in Belarus is primarily based on domestic politics. National history became a contested subject in the conflict between President Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has reigned in an increasingly repressive and brutal way, and the opposition, which nowadays has been largely crushed, imprisoned or driven into exile. In order to justify its authority, the regime draws strongly, also symbolically, on Soviet historical narratives, but also uses national myths to distinguish itself from Russian influence (Goujon 2010; Rudling 2017). At the same time, the opposition tries to legitimise its actions partly by referring to the same everyday myths, but also seeks non-Soviet points of reference in history (Bekus 2017, 2018; Lewis 2017). A symbol for these different attitudes to history is the flag. While the official red-green state flag is clearly based on that of the Belarusian Soviet Republic, during its anti-government protests the opposition usually uses white-red-white banners originating from the Lithuanian Noble Republic. Soviet history has thus been moved back to the centre of power politics of the three newly formed independent states and is 'nationalised' in different and antagonistic ways.

These large-scale attempts at 'nationalising' history took place very much on a symbolic and ritual level, whereas the everyday experiences of people in late socialism are hardly represented here (Rutten et al. 2013). Yet, they went along with a change in the media formats to distribute und popularise these narratives: Print products play only an increasingly marginal role, and television has also largely lost its monopoly on audio-visual opinion-forming, at least among the younger generations. In contrast, various digital formats and genres are becoming more important. Digital search platforms, news portals, social media, messenger services or chat rooms, but also computer games, television shows and series are shifting the popular historical and alternative-historical discourses into virtual worlds, thus moving them from the local subcultures of fanzines and specialist circles into the mainstream of multiply linked communication spaces and discussion forums. This goes along with a gradual blurring of the boundaries between scientific and pseudo-scientific, journalistic and populist communication. Ordinary users have the potential to create their own niche on the World Wide Web, regardless of the language barriers that are becoming increasingly irrelevant thanks to AI translation programmes. But usually, the overall monitoring, commercialisation and surveillance of the digital sphere also channel users within their blurbs and target groups, which attracts state institutions that try to regulate this allegedly borderless information flow by IP addresses, national laws and ethical norms.

4. Popular Culture and History: Recoding, Normalising, Adjusting a Contested Past

In this field of tension between political nationalisation and media regulation, popular cultural appropriations of history are currently taking shape. They give history alternative affective and imaginary form and content, meaning and significance by transforming current fascinations and fears, desires and problems of the present into a historical guise. If one tries to grasp this phenomenon more accurately in theoretical terms, it is in particular the term 'popular culture' that has ambivalent connotations. Since modern times, popular culture has primarily been a term with negative connotations, functioning above all as a contrast to bourgeois high culture and classical art. The 'uncultured' peasants, soldiers and proletarians, in this view, were considered primitive, backward, barbaric, savage and tasteless.

With the emergence of industrial mass production, an additional difference has been made between a commercial and often state-controlled "culture industry" (Adorno/Horkheimer 2002 [1944]) on the one hand, which is shaped by the term 'mass culture'. and on the other hand, the much older notion of 'popular culture' of the lived and practised cultures of the common people, which goes back to fairy tales and folklore. While 'mass culture' stands for manipulation, propaganda, brainwashing, dumbing down and delusion 'from above' as modern 'opium of the people', 'popular culture' in contrast is associated with a rebellious, seditious, subversive, carnivalesque component of resistance 'from below' against the authorities. It is precisely the approach of the Birmingham School of Social Studies that has questioned such a schematic dichotomy between manipulation by the "state block" and resistance by the working classes and instead made strong the ambivalent and contradictory nature of urban, proletarian and youth subcultures (Hall 1981; Storey 1996).

Thus, further social and cultural research showed that instead of a simplified juxtaposition of above and below, manipulation and emancipation, reactionary and rebellious, a more dynamic and multidimensional understanding of popular culture is needed. Urban youth cultures 'from below' could also be reactionary, like the skinhead or hooligan scenes, just as, conversely, commercial Hollywood blockbuster movies 'from above' could certainly spread emancipatory and even rebellious narratives. In addition, in a globalised and media-networked world, there can be very different local appropriations of cultural and consumer products that turn the possibly intended function of artworks into its opposite in practice. For instance, during late Soviet times, entertaining TV series, soaps or melodramatic film comedies from India or Latin America with no political ambitions shown on state television developed an enormous cultural impact on the political imaginary. A completely different dynamic was taken on by the rebellious style and habitus of African-American hip-hop music that spread from New York across the globe at the end of the 20th century, which found many nationalist and even xenophobic adaptations in Eastern Europe without any emancipatory attitude (Oravcová 2016; Schwartz 2019). This means that popular culture today often constitutes its popularity not so much through their production sites (commercial vs. independent, state vs. dissident) but rather through the different forms of appropriation in specific cultural-political contexts.

However, the post-Soviet experience of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine also shows that this partly idiosyncratic appropriation and recoding by no means always has to happen with a clear political agenda, but that it is rather a kind of adjustment to given social and cultural conditions. Initially scandalous or tabooed topics and figures under different circumstances can lead to the normalisation of conventionalised narratives or images (Rosenfeld 2014), whereas apparently harmless youth cultures can suddenly become extremely political. This is especially true in times of war, when divergences in general are less tolerated and cultures tend to homogenise and erase ambivalences (Ugrešić 1998). In Ukraine, for example, this applies to the way in which the dark realm of Mordor and the malevolent Orcs from J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy novel *Lord of the Rings* have become colloquially synonymous with Russia and its soldiers (Szczerek 2013; Yekelchyk 2022: 237–238). Conversely, in Russia, the so-called "popadantsy literature" about fantastic time travels to World War II, advertised by large commercial publishers, but read before the war only by a modest number of male lovers of military fantasy (Zabirko 2018; Galina 2021) prepared the ground for the imaginary commitment of many volunteers at the front, who see the attack on Ukraine as a decisive battle for the salvation of Russian civilisation.

But it would be premature to conclude from these examples that certain popular-cultural formats do have a somewhat predictable or even controllable effect on specific appropriations of history. Rather, the two examples show that popular culture develops its imaginary and affective power situationally. The fantasy boom in the decades before prepared the ground for an extremely heterogeneous and widespread reservoir of images and narratives open for subversive as well as for conformist notions (Schwartz 2016). Only through the Russian-Ukrainian war, the fantastic histories of Light and Dark forces fighting against each other gained a definite political meaning. Similarly, in Russian popular culture, alternative histories about World War II enabled diverse subcultures to articulate and constitute their personal "patriotism of despair" (Oushakine 2009: 2013) which only through Russia's military aggression gained its uncanny topicality (Noordenbos 2018; Makhortykh 2020).

In this way, popular appropriations of the past operate through various state and unofficial, commercial and independent media channels, constantly recoding, normalising and adjusting official narratives, alternate and fantastic histories and imaginary belonging (Brouwer 2016). They affect everyday routines, local subcultures and imaginary communities and gain political topicality within specific political and social conditions. It was probably not quite by chance that the role of a fictional history teacher becoming president in a popular commercial TV series called *The Servant of the People* (*Sluga naroda*), directed by Oleksii Kyriushchenko, paved the way for Volodymyr Zelensky to actually be elected as the real President of Ukraine in 2019 with an overwhelming majority.

5. Appropriating History: Entertainment and Estrangement

It is precisely these ambivalent and occasionally powerful aspects of popular culture that this book aims to address in focussing on its ways of dealing with the Soviet past. The editors have deliberately chosen the verbal noun *appropriating* in relation to history as the title. After all, the term 'cultural appropriation' in social and cultural studies signals a

thoroughly problematic procedure in which, especially in (post)colonial power relations, a 'major' group or an institutional collective 'appropriates' and claims for itself styles, cultures, art forms of 'minor', often defeated societies, often against their will and without their consent. The term thus describes a cultural relationship of exploitation, where the 'appropriated' is powerless or at least inferior against the will of the expropriator (Young/Brunk 2012).

In our case, however, it is not a question of culture, but of history, and not that of appropriating something from another, foreign, 'exotic' culture, but of one's own history, which is, however, a divided and contested one: the common Soviet past of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. This 'appropriation' process is on an affective and imaginary level a thoroughly violent and intrusive one, constantly splitting the past into what is one's own and what is alien, what belongs and what is rejected, what is approved and what is fought against. In this context, the term *appropriating* does not refer so much to a hierarchical, exploitive power relationship between different groups or societies (as in 'cultural appropriation'), but rather focuses on the competition of political and cultural actors for a contested 'heritage'. At the same time, in using the term in a more general understanding, we also want to emphasise the banal but significant fact that 'history' is not simply given, but is always made, questioning thus any form of naturalisation and essentialisation of 'national history'.

In this respect, the chosen approach focussing on appropriation of history also differs from a conceptualisation of dealing with the recent history of the 20th century that is widespread in memory studies. Memory studies often conceptualise 'collective memory' or 'cultural memory' as something that has existed within a specific community (a nation) for centuries, maintained by certain institutions, rituals, symbolic places that allow the inhabitants to reassure themselves as a collective and eventually to process traumatic events. In such a concept, Soviet history is often understood as an interruption of 'national' memory culture, forbidding and tabooing certain collective traits and traditions. Accordingly, Soviet history itself with its violent revolution, civil war and Stalinist terror is occasionally viewed as a process of permanent traumatisation and simultaneously tabooing everything divergent from its own ideology. "Warped mourning" (Etkind 2013) and unprocessed (national) traumata (Lugaric et al. 2017; Drosihn et al. 2020) are the consequence of this allegedly failed, false policy of memory (Schwartz et al. 2021). Through the gerund, "Appropriating History" emphasises that the alleged collective memory of such a 'nationalised' understanding of history is always an active, intentional process of construction that does not simply happen, but must be deliberately implemented and produced in order to be successful.

And it is precisely this active, productive appropriation of the Soviet past that characterises popular culture and essentially distinguishes it from alternative conceptualisations of collective cultural memory and state history policy: Popular culture never wants to permanently anchor a 'cultural memory' of certain historical events in the collective or enforce a specific 'national' understanding of history against other versions and views among the population, but constantly seeks alternatives, deviations, estrangements. Videogames are not about reenacting history, but about making well-known episodes and images enthralling and thrilling. Popular TV series are not about conveying official points of view, but about confronting individual fates with the un-

known sides behind the façade. And bestselling literature does not aim to enlighten, but to shock and shake, to touch and comfort (Lovell/Menzel 2005; Borenstein 2011).

In doing so, popular culture reconstructs and varies the discontents and longings present in society, casts them in entertaining and exciting narratives and images and thus makes history accessible and transferable to daily life experiences (Shumylovych 2019). Thus, there is also a large number of state-sponsored, expensive, lavishly produced and widely promoted blockbuster films that fully correspond to the national-state view of Soviet history in Belarus, Ukraine or Russia, that never became popular culture. Like the widely promoted Canadian-Ukrainian melodramatic historical drama *Bitter Harvest* (*Hirki zhiva*, 2017, directed by George Mendeluk) about the 'Holodomor' or the Russian biopic about the heroic life of the first cosmonaut *Gagarin. First in Space* (*Gagarin. Pervyi v kosmose,* 2013, directedy by Pavel Parkhomenko), which both were a flop with viewers at the box office as well as on TV screens. In contrast, sometimes entertaining low budget movies that ridicule melodramatic and heroic narratives became a huge audience success, like historical comedies mocking Napoleon's Russian campaign *Rzhevsky Versus Napoleon* (*Rzhevskii protiv Napoleona*, 2012, directed by Marius Vaisberg), carnivalesque Cossack musicals *Like the Cossacks* (*Kak kazaki…*, 2009, directed by Igor Ivanov) or slapstick films about Hitler *Hitler Goes Kaput!* (*Gitler kaput!*, 2008, directed by Marius Vaisberg) or the film parody of the partisan myth *Party-Zan* (2016, directed by by Andrei Kureichik).

In summary, popular culture is formed in a dynamic process between producers and consumers, state and population, above and below, which constantly recodes, normalises and adapts historical narratives and images to the respective condition. These appropriations gain their attractiveness through the deviation from the norm: they make boring school knowledge or ideology exciting and entertaining by shedding new light on it, estranging it. Estrangement and entertainment succeed whenever they capture certain moods, discomfort, a *zeitgeist*, and turn them into catchy stories or plots, memes or icons. The specific characteristic of appropriating history in the post-Soviet countries of Belarus, Russia and Ukraine is that in 1991 there was no firmly consolidated official historiography or historical knowledge here. Thus, in all the three countries history became a subject of large-scale nationalisation and ideologisation on the part of the state. At the same time, since the 1990s there has been a mass of very heterogeneous, partly speculative and counterfactual interpretations on offer. Popular culture is a key player in this development because it generates dispositives that may become politically effective by reinforcing and radicalising emerging socio-political developments or, conversely, by undermining and recoding widespread notions of history. However, there is no automatism or determinism here according to which certain popular cultural tendencies inevitably lead to war or certain subversive practices necessarily result in revolt. Rather, the appropriations of history through popular culture are indicators and gauges of moods and resentments, they channel fears and desires, give them form and shape, but also offer imaginary escape routes and attractive alternatives to reality.

6. Outline of the Volume: Places of Longing, Combat Zones, Sites of Trauma

The present volume deals with works and phenomena of popular culture from the period before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Initial ideas for its conceptualisation were discussed at the workshop *"History Goes Pop?" On the Popularization of the Past in Eastern European Cultures* organised by the two editors at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) in December 2019. Accordingly, most of the essays collected here were written long before the war and partly impacted by the Belarusian protests in 2020 and 2021, although many were revised and, in some cases, supplemented afterwards. The aim of the volume is not to cover all areas of popular culture in all three countries equally, which would not be possible. Many formats of popular culture – like festivals, sport events, subcultures or religious movements – are not represented at all, others – like social media or popular music – are present in the individual contributions, but are not the subject of separate essays. The focus is on a literary, film and media studies analysis of audio-visual and textual formats, mainly fiction, comics, film, series and computer games.

The first part of the volume is dedicated to **Places of Longing**, events and periods of history with positive or negative connotations that are receiving new attention in popular culture. The emotional relationship to these places can hardly been described as nostalgic; popular culture engages rather with the conflict-laden aspects of the past in an immersive and empathic way, thus reinterpreting it for the present. While in the Russian Federation the reconstructive tendencies clearly predominate, fitting the Soviet into their own multinational and imperial self-image, the examples from Belarus and Ukraine demonstrate a more ambivalent imaginary relation to the socialist past, which often is imagined as contradictory to national identity. What all these reconstructive and wishful relations have in common is that they do not represent the past as something gone and distant, something irretrievably lost, but deal with Soviet history as something having continuous impact on the current reality. ***Mark Lipovetsky*** analyses the Russian television series *The Thaw* (*Ottepel'*, 2013), *Black Marketeers* (*Fartsa*, 2015), *Our Happy Tomorrow* (*Nashe schastlivoe zavtra*, 2016) and *Optimists* (*Optimisty*, 2017) to show how the rebels and outlaws of everyday Soviet life are presented here as heroes for the present. The series thus recode the fears and desires of contemporary viewers in a kind of retro-utopia with the aim of "symbolically protecting the viewer from the dangerous future and offer an escape from the present" (chapter 1). ***Eva Binder*** focusses on Guzel Yakhina's bestselling novels *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*, 2015), *A Volga Tale* (*Deti moi*, 2018) and *Train to Samarkand* (*Ėshelon na Samarkand*, 2021) to demonstrate how dramatic historical events such as the civil war, famines and the Gulag are brought to a contemporary readership in an exciting and entertaining way. Binder argues that this mainstream literature, which is committed to humanist values, follows a global popular realism in its style, but in contemporary Russia also has critical and enlightening impulses (chapter 3).

Olga Romanova, on the other hand, demonstrates through four Belarusian films about the consequences of the Chernobyl disaster, *The Wolves in the Zone* (*Volki v zone*, 1990), *The Atomic Zone Ranger* (*Reindzher iz atomnoi zony*, 1999), *I Remember*/*Father's House* (*Ia pomniu*/*Otchii dom*, 2005) and *Exclusion Zone* (*Zapretnaia zona*, 2020), how a critical and subversive impulse of repentance in the course of time gave way to a resigned retreat

into the personal, a development that directly resonates with the political sphere in the country (chapter 4). In contrast, ***Svitlana Pidoprygora*** analyses dozens of Ukrainian comics and graphic novels from the last decade and concludes that in most of these works the Soviet past is largely made invisible and simply overwritten dominantly by fantastic alternative histories. Here, all kinds of superheroes, cyborgs, mythic warriors defend their nation against external enemies, which often resemble stereotypes about the Soviet Union and Russia. However, in particular graphic novels in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbass since 2014 increasingly also emphasise the tragic and dramatic consequences of such violent conflicts for the own presence (chapter 2). These texts, films and series thus offer very different representations of Soviet **Places of Longing**, in which mythical fighters, cheerful rebels and melodramatic lone fighters provide often nationalised images and narratives for their own audience. Appropriated history here rarely displaces differentiated and educating aspects of the past, rather it adjusts it to present needs and demands.

The second part, **Combat Zones**, is not so much concerned with the structures of longing expressed in the appropriation of the past, but rather with the different types of protagonists and their function in the respective historical episodes. ***Maria Galina*** and ***Ilya Kukulin*** analyse Russian alternative histories of the Soviet Union, focusing on soldiers and fighters who are primarily concerned with avoiding the collapse of a mighty statehood. While in the 1990s the main subject of interest was to remove taboos from certain topics, more recent counterfactual works increasingly deal with an imagined revenge and a deep resentment against external enemies (chapter 5). ***Daniil Leiderman*** also analyses alternative histories, albeit in computer games such as *74* (1980s, 2017), *Red Land* (*Krasnaia zemlia*, 2011), *Atom RPG* (2018), and *Disco Elysium* (2019). These games, equipped with typical paraphernalia and landscapes of Soviet provenance, give players the opportunity "for examining and coming to terms with the complexities and contradictions of historical experience." This allows gamers to playfully reconsider and revise their own understanding and memories of the Soviet past (chapter 6).

Nina Weller looks at a special combatant figure from World War II, namely the partisan, who enjoyed enormous popularity in post-Soviet Belarus, both in official circles and among the artistic and political opposition. His tactics and strategies of subversion were appropriated and reinterpreted for the post-Soviet present in a wide range of media formats and genres, from large historical films to small forms of street protest (chapter 7). ***Roman Dubasevych*** discusses two recent Russian films about the *stiliagi* subculture of the 1950s and the Leningrad rock underground of the 1980s to exemplify that artistic and political reconstructions of Soviet heroic figures do not always aim at an active intervention into current conditions, but can also have the reverse effect of mummifying and depoliticising individual protest. Although the two sensational music films *Hipsters* (*Stiliagi*, 2008) and *Summer* (*Leto*, 2018), clearly focus on rebellious young people as likeable characters they are not staged as antagonists of a repressive dictatorship, but rather the plot and the visual aesthetics bring about an identification with hegemonic power (chapter 8). Thus, all four contributions demonstrate that the **Combat Zones** of history for popular culture function mainly as playing grounds for their protagonists to test various ways of action and behaviour that range from resentful imaginary revenge to playful

and performative forms of negotiation and protest to an entertaining silencing of the historic conflict.

The last part of the book **Sites of Trauma** demonstrates that violent traumatic events in history have become an extremely successful and favoured topic in popular culture, which can be appropriated and narrated in very different ways. ***Lidia Martinovich*** discusses how "cultural trauma" has become an important medium for narrating national history in Belarus in recent times, analysing popular novels of the last decades. The "suffering Belarusian" has become a central figure to confront readers with different options for action and survival strategies in a historical guise, sometimes in a ridiculous, sometimes in a frightening way (chapter 9). ***Valery Vyugin***, on the other hand, shows that the treatment of extreme violence is a thoroughly ambivalent phenomenon in Russian prize-winning literature nowadays. He argues that the depiction of traumatic events in Soviet history is increasingly losing its critical and enlightening function and is becoming more and more akin to non-political "recycling" for the purposes of entertainment, resulting in an increasing gamification of the past (chapter 10).

Oleksandr Zabirko observes a different phenomenon for the game series *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*, in which the apocalyptic zone of Chernobyl is depicted as an eerie and terrifying world populated by monsters and mutants from which there is no escape. This enormously popular model of reality has taken on a frightening topicality with Russia's attack on Ukraine (chapter 11). In the last chapter, ***Matthias Schwartz*** examines the multi-award-winning television series *The Seventh Symphony* (*Sed'maia simfoniia*, 2021) about the performance of Dmitrii Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 7* in August 1942 during the Leningrad Blockade to analyse how popular formats use traumatic historical experiences for the present as a multi-layered imaginary offer to come to terms with the ever more authoritarian and militarised regime in Russia (chapter 12). So, when in the 1990s the critical encounter with the tabooed and silenced traumatic aspects of Soviet history were highlighted primarily to uncover and demonstrate the failures and crimes of the Soviet system, nowadays **Sites of Trauma** mainly provide imaginary patterns and models for the present on how to act under situations of pressure, misery and danger. The volume concludes with a conversation with the historian and public history expert ***Aliaksei Bratachkin***. In focussing on Belarus from a comparative perspective, he discusses how the use of popular cultural elements in public history has played a crucial role in post-Soviet nation-building since 1991. Historical themes in particular were promoted as didactic and educational tools by the state, but have also been used by opposition groups in competing national narratives, especially since 2020.

'Appropriating history' does not necessarily imply either critically reappraising and adequately remembering the past or, conversely, ideologically trivialising and relativising it; in popular culture, it means above all presenting dramatic episodes, dazzling figures and stereotypical images, which appeal in an entertaining way to the needs and desires, challenges and conflicts of the respective public. Especially in the nascent post-Soviet nation states, these entertaining representations often do more than government institutions, political parties or public educational organisations to shape ideas about how national belonging is articulated. Ideas about history and historical belonging sometimes have a strong effect in situations of political upheaval by fuelling rebellion and in-

creasing bellicosity, as well as by exposing national myths or suggesting a retreat into the private sphere.

List of Games

74. Nastol'naia igra po sovetskoi istorii, produced by Baryshnikova, Natalia/Vorontsov, Roman/Lomakin, Nikita/Starostin, Vasilii, Memorial, Tabletop RPG, 2017.
Atom RPG, produced by Atom Team, PC/Mac/Linux, 2018.
Disco Elysium, produced by ZA/UM (Kurvitz, Robert/Rostov, Aleksander), PC/Mac, 2019.
Red Land (*Krasnaia Zemlia*), produced by Shtab Dukhonina (Borkovskii, Egor/Trofimenko, Konstantin/Shalupaev, Mikhail/Ian'kov, Ivan), Tabletop RPG, 2010–2011.
S. T. A. L. K. E. R. Shadow of Chernobyl' (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Ten' Chernobylia*), produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2007.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Clear Sky (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Chyste Nebo*), produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2008.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. *Call of Pripyat,* (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Poklyk Pryp'iati*) produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2009.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. The Cursed Zone (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Prokliata Zona*) produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2013.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Oblivion Lost, produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2015.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chernobyl (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Sertse Chernobylia*), produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2024.

Filmography

Bitter Harvest (*Hirki zhiva*), dir. George Mendeluk, Canada/ UK 2017.
Black Marketeers (*Fartsa*), dir. Egor Baranov, Russia 2013.
Exclusion Zone (*Zapretnaia zona*), dir. Mitrii Semenov-Aleinikov, Belarus 2020.
Gagarin. First in Space (*Gagarin. Pervyi v kosmose*), dir. Pavel Parkhomenko, Russia 2013.
Hipsters (*Stiliagi*), dir. Valerii Todorovskii, Russia 2008.
Hitler Goes Kaput! (*Gitler kaput!*), dir. Marius Vaisberg 2008.
I Remember/Father's House (*Ia pomniu/Otchii dom*), dir. Sergei Sychev, Belarus 2005.
Like the Cossacks… (*Kak kazaki…*), dir. Igor' Ivanov, Ukraine 2009.
Optimists (*Optimisty*), dir. Aleksei Popogrebskii, Russia 2017–2021.
Summer (*Leto*), dir. Kirill Serebrennikov, Russia/France 2018.
Party-Zan, dir. Andrei Kureichik, Belarus 2016.
Rzhevsky Versus Napoleon (*Rzhevskii protiv Napoleona*), dir. Marius Vaisberg, Russisa/ Ukraine 2012.
The Atomic Zone Ranger (*Reindzher iz atomnoi zony*), dir. Viacheslav Nikiforov, Belarus, Russia 1999.
The Servant of the People (*Sluga naroda*), dir. Oleksii Kyriushchenko, Ukraine 2015–2019.
The Seventh Symphony (*Sed"maia simfoniia*), dir. Aleksandr Kott, Russia 2021.
The Thaw (*Ottepel'*), dir. Valerii Todorovskii, Russia 2013.

The Wolves in the Zone (*Volki v zone*), dir. Viktor Deriugin, USSR 1990.
Our happy tomorrow (*Nashe schastlivoe zavtra*), dir. Igor Kopylov, Russia 2016.

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