Chapter 3:

Narrating Russia's Multi-Ethnic Past

The Historical Novels of Guzel Yakhina

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> Honest novels about Soviet times are needed today in order to squeeze out the Soviet, even if only a drop at a time, and to finally leave it behind.
> *Guzel Yakhina (Iakhina 2021a)*

1. Guzel Yakhina: Success and Controversy

Within the space of a few years, the novelist Guzel Yakhina [Guzel' Iakhina] has achieved critical acclaim and great popularity among Russian readers. Following the tradition of the historical novel, Yakhina brings crucial and traumatic moments from the first two decades of Soviet power back to the public's attention. At the same time, Yakhina has been drawn into heated public debates on multiple occasions, which further raised her visibility. It turned out that criticism has been launched from opposing sides: Whereas conservative circles ranging from patriots to communists condemn her novels as a denigration of national history, liberal intellectual elites criticise her for romanticising and idealising the most traumatic moments of the Soviet past. The main question that inspired this article and therefore will be discussed in the following is what has made Yakhina one of the most widely read and publicly debated authors in Russia within just a few years. This question will be approached by focussing on the strategies Yakhina pursues in order to transform traumatic moments of the Soviet past into a contemporary reading experience that is as informative as it is entertaining.

In her historical novels, Yakhina draws on key elements of popular literature, such as protagonists who evoke empathy, conflicts that create tension, or the incorporation of popular genres by making use of melodramatic plotlines and adventure stories. At the same time however, Yakhina offers her readership more than mere divertissement. Besides being entertaining, historical novels have always opened up the possibility of pre-

senting historical events from a critical distance and enabled reflection on the past from the perspective of the present. By fictionalising time and space, Yakhina recalls and reframes past realities and feeds them into present public debates. As will be shown, in her approach to history Yakhina attempts to balance opposing and conflicting ideological positions. She particularly addresses the egalitarian dimension of Soviet ideology and draws the readers' attention to questions of ethnic and cultural identity. This recognisable configuration on the level of content correlates with an equally recognisable form or style, which has been referred to as the 'cinematic quality' and which will be discussed hereafter in the context of realistic narration in mainstream literature and cinema.

Since personal identity and self-representation are significant factors of the mediated image of an author, some biographical information about Yakhina shall be provided prior to discussing her literary texts. Born in 1977 in the Tatar capital of Kazan' with a Tatar family background, Yakhina received her education from primary school to university in Russian (she holds a degree in foreign languages – in German and English). In 1999, she moved to Moscow, where she undertook a training course in screenwriting at the private Moscow Film School. As Yakhina has stated in numerous interviews (cf. Surikov 2021), she found the form for the story she had already had in mind by writing the screenplay for a full-length feature film. Out of the screenplay Yakhina finally developed her debut novel *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*, 2015),[1] which was published by AST, one of the leading and largest publishers on the Russian book market, in 2015. The novel immediately received the major Russian literary prizes – the Iasnaia Poliana Literary Award and the Big Book Award. From this moment on, the book's circulation figures rose from an initial 3000 copies to more than 600.000 to date. However, this impressive publicity was not gained by the literary text alone. Five years after its publication the story about a young Tatar peasant woman who fell victim to the so-called 'dekulakisation' of the 1930s was adapted as a TV miniseries for the Russian TV channel *Rossiia 1*. When the series premiered in April 2020, it garnered record-high viewing numbers and caused controversy across the political-ideological spectrum. The sudden media outrage came from different sides. Representatives of the Tatar community complained about the lack of a positive ethno-cultural Tatar identity and took particular offence at a brief sex scene in a mosque. The criticism from this side was particularly harsh regarding the two women involved – the author Guzel Yakhina and the actress Chulpan Khamatova, who were denigrated as traitors to Tatar culture. The Russian side raised no less vehement accusations of insult and slander. National patriots felt that the portrayal of history in the series offended their national pride, while communist sympathisers condemned the film as anti-Soviet. Above all, the sudden media outrage caused by the miniseries[2] demonstrated that Soviet history remains a contentious issue and a highly contested terrain in today's Russia.

1 *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* was translated into English by Lisa C. Hayden and published as *Zuleikha* in 2019, *Children of Mine* (*Deti moi*) was translated by Polly Gannon and published as *A Volga Tale* in 2023. All other translations from Russian are mine, if not stated otherwise.

2 For a close examination of the controversial debates cf. Anisimova 2020.

Figure 3.1: Film poster for the TV series Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes *(2020)*

Besides Yakhina's highly successful literary debut, the two novels that followed also managed to achieve a remarkable record on the book market. Her second novel *A Volga Tale* (*Deti moi*), which was published in 2018 also by AST, has a circulation figure of 260.000 copies. Her latest novel *Train to Samarkand* (*Ėshelon na Samarkand*) hit the market in March 2021 with an initial circulation of 75.000 copies (cf. Surikov 2021), and thereby exceeds the first edition of Evgenii Vodolazkin's *Laurus* (*Lavr*, 2012) or Zakhar Prilepin's *The Monastery* (*Obitel'*, 2014) fivefold, just to cite two of her well-known and critically acclaimed male colleagues.

Apart from the remarkable popularity of Yakhina's historical novels on the Russian book market, the author has attracted considerable attention from outside the country. According to Yakhina, by 2021 *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* has been translated into about 40 languages, her second novel *A Volga Tale* into about 14 languages, out of which half had been published by 2021 (cf. Surikov 2021). Due to its topic – the fate of the Volga Germans from pre-revolutionary time to World War II, her second novel received particular

attention in Germany where in 2020 Yakhina and her translator Helmut Ettinger were awarded the prize for most promising work by the German Culture Forum for Central and Eastern Europe.

2. Diversity Beyond Postcolonial Discourse

In the three novels Yakhina has published so far, the author draws attention to the first two decades of Soviet power and the radical political and social changes the country and its population were subjected to. The dramatic and traumatic moments at the core of the narration are the 'dekulakisation' (*raskulachivanie*) of the 1930s (*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*), the tragic failure of the so-called Volga German Autonomous Republic (*A Volga Tale*), which existed from 1923 until 1941, and the famine in the Volga region after the civil war (*Train to Samarkand*). Apart from the historical time, the three novels share the geographic region in which the stories are set or which serves as a starting point for the journey within the plot. Yakhina's choice of the Volga region – in Russian Povolzh'e – can be regarded as a successful branding strategy. First, it fosters the public image and identity of the author who, by writing about the region she has been familiar with since her childhood, is seen to express her "love for the homeland" "(Pakhomov/Sadikov 2021). Second, Yakhina puts forward a geographic region that in public discourse tends to receive less attention than the imperial centres on the one hand, and the remote, culturally different peripheries of the country, such as Siberia or the Caucasus, on the other. Third, by highlighting the multi-ethnic population of the Volga region, Yakhina recalls the Soviet formula of the multi-national family and, at the same time, brings ethnic diversity in the present Russian Federation to the public's attention. As research on Russian mass media has shown, ethnic diversity appears to be, for various and complex reasons, not a major issue in public discourse (cf. Anisimova 2020: 110), although ethnic minorities constitute more than 20 per cent of the population of the Russian Federation (Protsyk/Harzl 2013: 2). Departing from ethnic diversity at the core of the narrative, Yakhina opens a perspective on cultural and social diversity in general by representing voices that in Russian public discourse are less audible than others. This can truly be said of women (*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*), children (*Train to Samarkand*) and of people whose voices were silenced and suppressed in the Soviet past, as is particularly the case with the German minority (*A Volga Tale*) after the Volga German Autonomous Republic was abolished in 1941.

The geographic and symbolic space of Yakhina's novels is determined by the Middle and Lower Volga – a region that is home to Volga Tatars as well as other numerous ethnic minorities and small languages. Accordingly, the city of Kazan' as one of the region's cultural and urban centres forms the point of departure for two of Yakhina's novels. As a member of the 'kulak' class, the pejorative Stalinist term for landowners, the heroine of her first novel is forced to leave her Tartar village Iulbash, and, together with the other deportees, is deported from Kazan' to the Siberian city of Krasnoiarsk and from there to the banks of the river Angara. In a similar way, the plot of *Train To Samarkand* is framed by Kazan' as the point of departure and a destination that is thousands of kilometers away from the central Russian Volga region. In Yakhina's third novel, 500 starving orphans are taken to the Central Asian city of Samarkand – "to the sun and bread" (Iakhina 2021c:

38), as it says in the novel. The journey is conducted under the surveillance of the young Red Army soldier Deev and the severe female commissar Belaia. The individual stages of this declared 'travel novel' (*roman-puteshestvie*) thus provide the structure for the narration with regard to place and (historical) time. The voyage along the railroad is outlined in the chapters' titles, as for example "Sviazhsk – Urmary" (chapter 2) or "Sergach – Arzamas – Buzuluk" (chapter 3). But although the geographic locations are real, the route itself is as fictional as appears to be the time – the year 1923. This obvious deviation from historical facts in *Train To Samarkand* – commonly the years 1921 and 1922 are regarded as the period of famine – made Yakhina, a year after the public outrage over the TV series, once again the target of media-fueled criticism. When the novel was presented in spring 2021, Grigorii Tsidenkov, a local historian from Samara, launched a harsh attack against the author, accusing her – besides historical inaccuracy and a lack of historical investigation – of plagiarising his own texts that he had published previously on his *LiveJournal* blog (cf. Samigullina et al. 2021).[3]

By fictionalising historical places and events, Yakhina ascribes symbolic significance to space and time. This becomes most obvious in the fictitious German village of Gnadenthal, where her second novel *A Volga Tale* is set. With its figurative name that can be rendered as "Valley of Mercy" in English, the village of Gnadenthal serves as a model of the historical German settlements on the Volga River (cf. Silant'eva 2020). In contrast to the other two novels, *A Volga Tale* is focused on a single place and a single male character: on the German schoolteacher Jacob Ivanovich Bach, who, due to the turmoil of the post-revolutionary years, falls silent but still manages to raise Antje, the baby left to him by his love Klara. The symbolic space in *A Volga Tale* is based on the dichotomy of the German colony on the right bank of the Volga River and the solitary homestead on the left bank where Bach lives. Here, the Volga functions as a border between a realistic and magic world (cf. Nabiullina 2019) or between a world of rapid historical changes (the village of Gnadenthal) and a world where time stands still (the solitary homestead). The river itself is presented through embellished descriptions that facilitate visualisation in the reading process, as the following quote illustrates: "[T]he Volga was so broad in these parts that, from the right bank, even the impressively large Gnadenthal houses looked like a smattering of colorful buttons, in the midst of which the belfry stuck out like a pin." (Yakhina 2023: 60)

Yakhina evokes the historical territory of the Soviet Union by combining fictitious places and travel routes with factual topography. Besides serving as a reference to the historical world, the accumulation of toponyms in the text stimulates the process of imagining space. Thereby, the toponyms themselves may take on a clearly marked poetic function by being displayed visually as words and phonetically as word sounds. The visual and acoustic effect these signifiers create is due to both their familiarity on the one hand and their non-Russian, foreign exoticism on the other. In her essay *The Garden on the Border* (*Sad na granitse,* 2016), Yakhina reflects upon the mere sound of non-Russian toponyms together with her subjective perception of space as a child:

3 For Grigorii Tsidenkov's attack on Yakhina including the untenable accusation of plagiarism see in particular: Shikhman 2021, 12:05-15:11.

> It is 800 kilometres from Kazan' to the Ural Mountains, just like to Moscow. When I was a child, I had this strange feeling: Siberia always seemed within reach, but the capital seemed infinitely far away. Siberia – that sounds familiar, similar to the Turkic languages: Ienisei, Baikal, Surgut, Kurgan; […] the same wind-battered taiga as not far from Kazan', in Mari Ėl – the "Land of the Mari". And Moscow? Only the Kremlin smelling of printing ink as in school textbooks and the black-and-white pictures on television. Siberia is tangible and familiar, whereas Moscow is abstract and foreign. (Iakhina 2016)[4]

Besides the sound quality emanating from the place and river names from different languages the perception of space is intensified by sensory impressions and references to media representations. In *A Volga Tale*, one of the narrative digressions that feature Stalin describes how the great leader perceives his country from the air during his flight over the riverscapes of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia, which provides the reader with a fictitious bird's eye view on the huge land mass of the Soviet Union. The scene is reminiscent of visual representations of space from the time in which the novel is set. Points of reference appear to be the numerous maps in political posters, as for example the 1951 poster *In the Name of Communizm* (*Vo imia kommunizma*), or the avant-garde cinema of the 1920s in general and Dziga Vertov's travelogue documentary *A Sixth Part of the World* (*Shestaia chast' mira*, 1926) in particular.

By making use of ostensive comparisons of the rivers with golden threads, white maines and blue ribbons, Yakhina merges the sentimental, subjective perception of space by a character, in this case by Stalin, with the objective perspective of cinematic and cartographic technologies. In addition, the accumulation of non-Russian toponyms intensifies the process of imagining the vast Soviet Empire:

> And *He* understood: under him was not one river, but dozens, hundreds of Soviet rivers, merging their waters together, and advancing forth. The Kura and Aragva, the Inguri and Khobi shone like finde golden threads in the current. The Katun and Karavshan and the Irtysh shook their white manes. The Enisei and Lena entwined their blue ribbons, and the Argun and Kolyma entwined their black ones. The varicolored streams ran at different paces – some rapidly, some more slowly. Some hardly crawled. […] Breathless, *He* looked down at this incredible dance of the waters, at this symphony of hundreds of Soviet rivers. And, for the first time in many years, *He* felt the thrill of ecstasy in his chest, as *He* had felt long ago in his youth, listening to the poetry of Rustaveli and Eristavi. (Yakhina 2023: 280–281)

4 Yakhina's essay was published several times. It first appeared in print in the journal *Snob*, April-May 2016. In 2021, the text was republished in its Russian original together with a translation into German in the edited volume *Kulturen verbinden – Connecting Cultures – Sblizhaia kul'tury* (Fuchsbauer et al. 2021).

Figure 3.2: Viktor I. Govorkov: In the Name of Communizm *(1951)*

Besides imagining the space of the Soviet Union, Yakhina recalls the Soviet model of the 'friendship of peoples' and multi-national family in a positive egalitarian notion. The utopian conflict-free coexistence of different ethnic groups becomes most evident in the newly formed community of deportees in Yakhina's first novel. When the small group of those who survived the six-month-long deportation journey arrives at the desolate banks of the Angara River, we share, through internal focalisation, the perspective of the OGPU officer and camp commander Ivan Ignatov on the people who are now left to his sole surveillance and responsibility:

> As he peers into their faces, Ignatov recalls the names of everyone working in the camp. He finds them on the list, circles them with the charcoal, and counts again. There are twenty-nine people, including the Leningraders, Russians, Tatars, a couple of Chuvash, three Mordvins, a Mari woman, a Ukrainian man, a Georgian woman, and a German man whose mind is gone and has the fanciful and sonorous name Volf Karlovich Leibe. In short, an entire international organisation. (Yakhina 2019: 234)

Despite the ironic tone through which Ignatov's view of the group is rendered and which is particularly expressed in the phrase "polnyi internatsional"[5], the labour camp is presented here as an ideal type of Soviet microcosm of people with different ethnic backgrounds and from different social strata, ranging from the Leningrad intelligentsia (the so-called 'former people') to craftsmen, farmers and criminals.

5 In the English translation the irony expressed in the phrase "polnyi internatsional" which is rendered as "an entire international organisation" unfortunately gets lost, whereas it is well persevered in the German translation of "eine echte Internationale" (Jachina 2017: 266).

Figure 3.3: Film still from group of ethnically different people in the TV series Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes *(2020)*

Much later in the novel, which covers a time span of 16 years from 1930 to the post-war period, this idea of the multi-ethnic community recurs, this time with reference to the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944. Here again, the multi-ethnic community is viewed from the derogatory perspective of the OGPU (which by this time had already been renamed to NKVD). Thereby, the narrative technique of internal focalisation allows for ironic distance and functions as a marker for Yakhina's critical position towards the represented historical events:

> In the spring of 1942, Kuznets makes a sudden appearance out of nowhere, as always. He's brought with him a barge packed with emaciated people who have dark-olive skin and distinct profiles: Crimean Greeks and Tatars. 'Ivan Sergeevich,' he says, 'these outsiders are to be taken into your charge. And provide security measures. After all, they're a socially dangerous element in large numbers and of excellent high quality.' He laughs. Non-natives were being deported from southern territories in case the region should be overrun with occupiers and minority nations, giving such people the opportunity to desert to the enemy. This measure was, as they said, a precaution. Well, Greeks are Greeks. Even if they're Eskimos with papooses, they're no strangers to Ignatov. Out of curiosity, he once counted up all the nationalities residing in Semruk and came to nineteen. This means there are two more now. (Yakhina 2019: 438)[6]

6 The English translation of this passage is in fact erroneous. Therefore, a version that corresponds to the wording of the original shall additionally be provided here: "The Muslim southerners were deported from the southern territories as a precaution, not waiting until the territory was occupied by the invaders and the minoritiesand ethnic groups would take the chance to defect to the enemy – as they say, to avoid this. Well, the Greeks are the Greeks. But even if Eskimos and Papuans, Ignatov could not get used to it." (Cf. Iakhina 2015: 457)

In Yakhina's first novel, ethnic and social diversity is not only a central element for describing the scenery, but also determines the three main characters upon which the plot and narrative perspective rest. There is, first, the naïve perspective of the Tatar woman Zuleikha, whose sole narrow point of view defines the first chapter so that the readers perceive the degrading patriarchal world she inhabits. The hegemonic position is marked as male and Russian and is represented by the OGPU officer Ignatov, the murderer of Zuleikha's husband and her later lover. However, in the course of the plot Ignatov, who escapes the party purges only by being transferred to Siberia, becomes a victim of the Stalinist system himself and is thus transformed into a positive character with whom readers can sympathise. Third, there is the figure of Volf Karlovich Leibe who, as "a third-generation professor at Kazan University" (Yakhina 2019: 102), is reminiscent of the crucial role German scientists played in Tsarist Russia.

Whereas the plot as a whole rests upon the multi-ethnic triangle of Tatar, Russian and German, only the female character undergoes a fundamental personal development, which echoes the Soviet model of education, modernisation and cultural assimilation. This development is not only brought to the fore by realistic descriptions of the character's psychology, but is most concisely and densely rendered in the book's title, which is also the sentence with which the novel begins. Zuleikha opening her eyes describes both the literal everyday action of waking up and the personal growth of the female protagonist, who leaves patriarchal subjection and religious superstition behind and achieves inner freedom at the end. When Zuleikha opens her eyes for the first time, it is "as dark as a cellar" around her (Iakhina 2015: 9), and the reader is, as it were, trapped with her in an archaic peasant world. Until the end, this sentence recurs four times, and each time the world around Zuleikha or rather Zuleikha's perception of it appears brighter. Finally, she is surrounded by glaring sunlight: "Zuleikha opens her eyes. The sun is beating down, blinding her and cutting her head to pieces. The vague outline of trees all around her are quivering in a sparkling dance of sunbeams." (Yakhina 2019: 479)

Stepping out of the darkness into the sun and light is one of the most frequently invoked images of communist enlightenment. With regard to the supposedly backward nationalities of the Soviet East, this notion is rendered most vividly by the image of the Muslim woman casting off her veil. In this sense, Zuleikha opening her eyes functions as an icon, which in its form is reminiscent of the expressive close-ups of the Soviet film avant-garde[7] and in its meaning appears as a perfect metaphor for the liberation, emancipation and modernisation of the woman of the Soviet East. From a contemporary postcolonial perspective, however, Zuleikha's personal development very much resembles the colonial and imperial cultural logic, according to which universal subjectivity can only be achieved by discarding the traditional ethnic and religious identity. This logic was an integral part of the Soviet empire, although the Soviet nationalities policy was at the same time aimed at decolonisation and the formation of national identity among the non-

7 The close-up of Zuleikha's eyes, which is also rendered on the book cover of the English translation, most closely echoes Dziga Vertov's film *Three Songs about Lenin* (*Tri pesni o Lenine*, 1934/35), in which the pioneer of documentary cinema presented an impressive montage sequence of pairs of eyes and women's faces.

Russian minorities.[8] As Anisimova has shown, Yakhina's approach to ethnic identity is most obviously rendered in the storyline of Zuleikha's son Iusuf, who grows up in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the camp:

> […] 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. (Anisimova 2020: 118)

Whereas in *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* the particular constellation of the Tatar and Russian nationality sparked considerable criticism from the Tatar community, Yakhina's comparable approach to identity in her second novel passed unnoticed. In *A Volga Tale*, the author follows the same principle of positioning the universal model above the national(istic) mode of particularity and even goes a step further by promoting a hybrid model of cultural identity. The analogous character in *A Volga Tale* is Antje who was conceived in an act of rape and therefore is not the main protagonist's biological daughter.[9] Since the schoolteacher Bach fell silent, he cannot pass on his language – German – to the next generation. Instead of being endowed with the cultivated German language of her non-biological father, Antje learns to speak from Vasia, a vagrant boy who turns up at the homestead one day. Vasia is a typical representative of the so-called *besprizorniki*, the orphans and waifs produced by war and famine. The language Vasia, also called Vaska, speaks is "foreign", "unknown" to Bach (Yakhina 2023: 399) – not only because it is Russian, of Bach knows only a "few hundred words", but also because it does not correspond to the standard language:

> However, Vaska's words and phrases so diverged from the few hundred words of standard Russian Bach knew that they probably belonged to some unfamiliar language. *Shamat', kipishnut', shnyrit', styrit', xapnut', shibanut', kanat', volynit'* – clearly all words for pinching, or stealing, carousing, guzzling food and drink, etc. – but what kind of words were these? (Yakhina 2023: 398)

A still closer look shows that the language Antje learns from Vasia is not only substandard, but also a mix of numerous languages, just as Vasia himself is ethnically unidentifiable, of an unknown origin – whether from "a Kirghiz or Kalmyk yurt, or a Bashkir or Tatar peasant hut" (Yakhina 2023: 350). Vasia's language is expressive, emotional, inventive and

8 The numerous contradictions inherent in the Soviet approach to nationality are well described by the term "Affirmative Action Empire" which was introduced by the Canadian historian Terry Martin (2001). Martin sums up the tension between national identity on the one hand and the anti-national Soviet approach on the other as follows: "The Bolsheviks attempted to fuse the nationalists' demand for national territory, culture, language, and elites with the socialists' demand for an economically and politically unitary state. In this sense, we might call the Bolsheviks internationalist nationalists or, better yet, Affirmative Action nationalists" (15).

9 This shift from biological to social parenthood can already be observed in *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*, when Ignatov forges Iusuf's birth certificate and makes Iusuf his official son in order to give him the possibility to leave the camp.

thus diametrically opposed to the cultivated language Iusuf learns from the Leningrad intelligentsia:

> And it didn't matter whether Vaska was glad, angry, or afraid. The curses were always magnificent, of the highest order. He usually swore in Russian, but he was perfectly capable of swearing in Kirghiz, Tatar, and Bashkir. He knew abusive oaths in Mordovian, as well as Udmurt, Mari and Kalmyk. The epithets and the languages stuck to him like burrs to socks. Often, Vaska's lips scrambled all the idioms and dialects he knew, and the result was such an intricate mesh of curses that they astonished not only his interlocuters, but Vaska himself. (Yakhina 2023: 348)

To draw a first conclusion, we can say that Yakhina's notion of identity on which her novels rest echoes contemporary, liberal attitudes and thus does not conform to the system of conservative cultural and social values which has emerged since Vladimir Putin's third term as president and which, according to Katharina Bluhm, aims at "an authoritarian consolidation of national unity on the basis of social conservatism with repressive features" (2021: 13). Central elements of this conservative ideology are the invocation of the nation's "thousand-year history", as it says in Article 67 after the constitutional amendment of 2020, and the preservation of traditional family values and gender roles. At the same time, Yakhina's notion of ethnic identity does not correspond to postcolonial conceptions of identity but rather recalls the progressive and egalitarian tendencies within Soviet ideology and politics. In this way, Yakhina tries to find a balance between different ideological positions and strives for compromise, which is not only true for her understanding of ethnic identity, but also for her general attitude to Soviet history. The latter goes hand in hand with a clearly marked emotional distance to the Soviet past that in her literary texts is conveyed by irony and by switching the narrative perspective. In a commentary for the online platform *RBK Stil'*, Yakhina emphasises the need to face the Soviet past and to actively deal with it in order to finally gain sovereignty over it:

> Enough of watching – enough of being observers of our own country's history and our own lives. The Soviet is not an object, it is a subject: it lives in us and governs us, no matter how much we want to deny it. In our relationship with the Soviet past, we are the objects. As long as we are not aware of this. (Iakhina 2021a)

Yakhina clearly distances herself from any form of Soviet nostalgia and sees a possibility to gain critical distance by recognising what was achieved through Soviet modernisation. She views the secular and urban society of the present day as a direct result of Soviet education and enlightenment, of the struggle against religion as well as of the "then imposed scientific view of the world". At the same time, Yakhina clearly calls for the crimes and the perpetrators to be named:[10]

10 According to the historian and journalist Sergei Medvedev (2016), the sore point of dealing with the Soviet past is that violence has remained anonymous until the present day or, in other words, that with a few exceptions the Soviet perpetrators have never been named.

> We – as society as a whole and not just a small part of it – can already afford to call monstrous things monstrous (e.g. the mass famine of the 1920s). Crime a crime (e.g. the Great Terror or the deportation of peoples). A criminal a criminal (e.g. Joseph Stalin or Genrikh Iagoda). (Iakhina 2021a)

It is undoubtedly to Yakhina's credit that some of the crimes committed by the Soviet regime are named and fed into public debate. In doing so, she is successful by the mere fact that thousands of people read her books and millions of viewers have watched the TV series based on her novel *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (cf. Revizor.ru, "Skandal rabotaet"). The public outrage the series sparked in 2020 can be explained – as paradoxical as it may sound – precisely by Yakhina's attempt to seek balance and compromise.[11] An answer to this paradox is provided by Alexander Etkind and his notion of the "multi-historical" condition in contemporary Russia. According to Etkind, historical memory in Russia is de-centred, deprived of social and political consensus: "Historical memory in Russia is a living, de-centered combination of symbols and judgments which are experienced simultaneously, all at once […] deprived of consensual anchors or reference-points" (2009: 190). In contrast to the persistent official complaints that young people had no or little knowledge of history, Etkind argues that "it is not the historical knowledge which is at issue but its interpretation" (ibid.: 193). In the past ten years since Etkind published his article on post-Soviet 'hauntology', which was followed by the book *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (2013), official as well as the people's interest in history has not decreased but rather increased. The interest of particularly young people in Soviet history is indicated, for instance, by the high viewing rates of Iurii Dud's documentary *Kolyma – Birthplace of Our Fear* (*Kolyma – rodina nashego strakha*, 2019) that has gathered more than 29 million views on YouTube. Although definitely more modest in numbers and reach, Yakhina's novels are both an expression of and a driving force for public interest in the country's recent history.

3. Camera-stylo Reversed: The "Cinematic Quality" of Yakhina's Novels

What the French film critic and filmmaker Alexandre Astruc claimed for cinema back in 1948 – the *camera-stylo* as a new auteur based, non-commercial direction in filmmaking – reappears in Yakhina's approach to literature in a laterally reversed way. The much-acclaimed "cinematic quality" as *the* attribute of Yakhina's writing style (cf. Anisimova 2020: 111) is literally placed at the beginning of her success as a writer. Her first novel was published with a preface written by Liudmila Ulitskaia, the grande dame of contemporary Russian literature. In her preface, Ulitskaia recalls the Soviet "pleiade of bicultural writers" from the Caucasian Fazil' Iskander to the Kyrgyz Chinghiz Aitmatov and regards the "young Tatar woman Guzel Yakhina" as someone capable of continuing this lineage. Ulitskaia highlights Yakhina's "somewhat cinematic narrative style" (Iakhina 2015: 5–6) as a

11 Due to the political and cultural situation in Russia since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Yakhina's attempt to seek balance and compromise is doomed to failure and further publications in Russia are called into question.

stylistic feature. Since then, literary scholars and critics (c.f. Abasheva/Abashev 2016) as well as the author herself have tried to comprehend the 'cinematic quality' and its implications.

When Yakhina's third novel *Train To Samarkand* hit the market in March 2021, some critics noted a change in her writing style and praised the use of language that appeared simpler and clearer in comparison to her first two novels: "But the language has changed. It is simple, clear and lucid. The reader does not have to fear the viscosity of metaphors and comparisons of the previous book" (Bashmakova 2021).[12] In the numerous interviews that accompanied the release of the novel, the author stressed that she felt the need to mitigate the "horrifying material" (Surikov 2021), to "lighten up the heavy narrative" and to "balance the grievous subject" by using artistic techniques that provide a serious counterweight (Pakhomov/Sadikov 2021). Yakhina herself associates these techniques with cinema, and invoked, first of all, the importance of genre: the genre of adventure (film), a series of minor adventures along the way, an integrated love affair, the children's world and children's playful, creative use of language with rhymes and nicknames (cf. ibid.). Besides genre, Yakhina refers to questions of narrative structure and gives priority to short and action driven scenes, to dialogues based on conflict or to the mimetic over the diegetic (cf. Kostiukovich 2021). Correspondingly, the sources Yakhina consulted are, besides dairies, memoires or letters, not the literary works of the avant-garde of the 1920s, but rather the works of artists and cinematographers, which means that her main reference points are visual rather than textual:

> And of course, there is another view, which I would call the view of the artist who lived in that era. Important to me is: the artist – not the writer. I try to avoid reading literary texts with regard to what I'm writing about, simply because their influence might be too strong. I'm particularly talking about related arts such as cinema. While working on "Train to Samarkand", I watched newsreels. This is not really an artist's perspective. But still, we can certainly call documentarians of that time, like Dziga Vertov, artists. (Surikov 2021)

With regard to textual structures and formal techniques, a better understanding of the much-acclaimed 'cinematic quality' of Yakhina's writing style can be achieved by taking a closer look at the way the author constructs narrative scenes. Yakhina works with visual effects by dynamically switching between distant and close views on what is happening. The technique of altering the perspective from distant views to close-ups works together with vivid descriptions of movement within the scene. Two scenes shall be singled out here in order to illustrate Yakhina's transmedial use of camera angles, camera movement and montage with which cinematic effects are achieved within the literary text. The first example is a hunting scene in *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*. The first winter in the taiga has come to an end and the deportees together with their commander Ignatov are starving. Ignatov goes hunting with the last remaining cartridge and can barely keep himself on his feet. In the following scene, we first follow the audio-visual perception of the hunter and, together with him, capture several details of a squirrel before it scurries up a tree.

12 The comment by Elena Kostiukovich for BFM.RU (2021) goes in the same direction.

Then we see his movements from an objective point of view and return to his subjective perspective, which now is a worm's-eye view of the sky and the treetops spinning faster and faster:

> There's a sudden rustling beside him. A squirrel is on a branch right next to Ignatov's face: it's thin, dirty gray, with scanty white fluff, yellow cheeks, and long scampish tassels for ears. Meat! A shining brown eye darts and – zoom! – it's up the tree trunk. Ignatov's shaking hand reaches upward with the revolver but it's instantly way too heavy to hold. A shabby tail like a miniature broom flashes mockingly up above, teasing as it blends in with brush-like branches, layers of bark, and needly sunbeams, before disappearing. The sky suddenly starts spinning faster and faster, and then everything's spinning, the treetops, the clouds […]. (Yakhina 2019: 303–304)

Ignatov's gaze up into the spinning sky, which points to the danger that he may lose his consciousness at any moment, recurs several times while he moves, or rather crawls, up the cliff. At the top of the cliff, he is about to put an end to his life, but suddenly he looks up, the sky stops spinning and he sees "the long brown spot of a barge" in a perfect cinematic extreme long shot: "He looks up. In the distance, dark against the bright blue Angara water, is the long brown spot of a barge and a bold black dot alongside it. It's the launch." (Yakhina 2019: 305)

Figure 3.4: Film still from Dziga Vertov's reference to the Soviet avant-garde in the opening frame of his film Three Songs about Lenin *(1934/35)*

The recurring view up into the spinning treetops well deserves closer examination because it has a distinct reference point in photography and cinema. The image crystallises the Soviet avant-garde from the moment it was celebrated as a new art form to its obliteration in the 1930s and rediscovery in the 1950s. The genealogy of the gaze up

into the branches of (pine) trees can be traced back to Aleksandr Rodchenko's photography "Pine Trees" ("Sosny", 1927). In the film *Three Songs about Lenin* (*Tri pesni o Lenine*, 1934/35) it takes the form of an implicit aesthetic and political statement, by which Dziga Vertov reaffirmed his avant-gardist approach.

Figure 3.5: Reference to Aleksandr Rodchenko's photography Pine Trees *in the film* The Cranes Are Flying *(1957)*

Finally, it recurs in the most prominent film of the Thaw – in *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*, 1957) – as an explicit visual citation (cf. Stiegler 2009). Yakhina's reference to the spinning treetops as a sign of near death is formally and thematically most closely linked to the scene in *The Cranes Are Flying*, in which the positive hero Boris looks up at the treetops while he falls to the ground, having been hit by a bullet. In this moment, the image of the treetops literally starts to spin and other images of the melodramatic hero's projections of a happier future are superimposed onto it. In Yakhina's hunting scene, the gaze up into the treetops functions on several levels: it contributes to the cinematic style, enhances the melodramatic mode of the narrative, and – together with other references to the history of cinema such as the recurrent close-ups of Zuleikha's eyes – indicates the transmedial character of intertextuality in Yakhina's writing.

The second scene that will be discussed in order to illustrate Yakhina's use of cinematic techniques demonstrates how action and movement are conveyed by means of parallel montage. The scene from *Train to Samarkand* is placed at the end of the first chapter, when the train with the 500 orphans finally leaves the station of Kazan'. The commander of the train Deev is standing on the open steps of the carriage and looking back at the crowd of women, when, through the thick white steam of the engine, his gaze suddenly falls on a running figure that tries to catch up with the moving train:

> The wagon shivers underfoot. The rails clatter. The station building, the trees, the trains – everything floats slowly and drifts backwards. Thick clouds of steam fly over the ground, covering the crowd remaining on the platform more and more tightly from Deev. Suddenly a figure emerges out of the white wadding, someone running after the locomotive, headlong, as fast as possible. A woman! Her long skirt is fluttering as she runs, stretching up above her knees and exposing her skinny legs in huge shoes. Her braid, half grey, is flying in the wind. And in the woman's arms – a baby in scarlet. The train is picking up speed, faster by the second. And the woman is running – faster and faster. She stretches out her arms with the baby. […] Her eyes gazing wildly. Her mouth open. She is reaching out the baby to him – with her bony, straight arms: take the child! (Iakhina 2021c: 77–78)

In comparison to the canonical gaze up into the trees, the scene of the departing train and a figure catching up with it does not recall a specific film or image, but rather appears to reference cinema as a whole and its ability to produce visual clichés. Although it can be argued that other contemporary authors make use of cinematic clichés as well,[13] the 'cinematic quality' ascribed to Yakhina's novels can be justified by the accumulation of formal devices that refer to cinema or, viewed from the perspective of reception, that contemporary readers are familiar with from cinema. Thereby, the cinema in question is not avant-garde or auteur cinema with its complex textual structures and formal experiments, but rather the technically well-made mainstream cinema based on realistic narration.

4. Conclusion

If we approach the question put forward at the beginning from the angle of Yakhina's cinematic style, then one answer to the question of Yakhina's popularity in present day Russia is the particular way the author narrates her stories. Yakhina's realistic narration can be illuminated by the notion of "popular realism" put forward by the German literary scholar Moritz Baßler (cf. 2011; 2021). According to Baßler, popular realism in contemporary literature implies a writing technique through which the reader is presented a diegetic world that practically anchors itself in space and that the readers perceive without being confronted with a complex literary form: "One reads. And understands." ("Man liest. Und versteht."), as it says in a teaser for the German novelist Bernhard Schlink (cf. ibid: 91). The characteristic features of popular realism include a language that is easy to comprehend – in contrast to the difficult, impeded language of literature in Viktor Shklovskii's concept. Furthermore, popular realism provides comprehensible plots, conflicts that create suspense and characters the readers empathise with (an effect that is achieved by, among others, the narrative perspective of internal focalisation (cf. ibid: 147; 2011: 101). However, popular realism provides both, a reading experience that is touching and profound at the same time (ibid: 137). For this tendency, Umberto Eco back in 1964 referred to Dwight MacDonald's stratification of high art, mass and middlebrow culture.

13 As Abasheva and Abashev (2016) have argued, also the novels of Aleksei Ivanov, another well-known and popular contemporary Russian author, show a certain *cinematic quality*.

Eco characterised MacDonald's "Midcult" as the interaction of form and content in order to sell the effects of art and "satisf[y] its consumer by convincing him that he has just experienced culture" (1989: 192). A characteristic feature of today's midcult or mainstream literature is, according to Baßler, the integration of "difficult" or "heavy" signs ("schwere Zeichen") in the text (cf. 2021: 145). For German culture such signs are provided by "the Nazi and Stasi period" (ibid. 2011: 100), with the Oscar-winning film *The Life of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006) as one prominent example. At the same time, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's highly successful feature film of 2006 demonstrates how popular realism as the dominant method of telling stories affects cinema and literature alike.

Viewed from this perspective, Yakhina's historical novels and the way they are received by literary critics in Russia clearly show that the general attitude towards mainstream literature has changed under the conditions of the globalised market economy of the last decades. Significantly, Galina Iuzefovich (2021) may criticise *Train to Samarkand* as "highly comfortable for the reader", rewarding the reader with "universal love", "compassion" and "the unity of all good people", but at the same time may stress the novel's necessity and relevance. Above all, Yakhina's novels themselves as well as the author's self-representation in the media bear witness to the fact that today's mainstream literature declares itself openly as popular and entertaining, on the one hand, and as profound and honest, on the other. At the same time, Yakhina's novels need to be assessed against the backdrop of a society, which is deprived of a consensual interpretation of Soviet history. In this context, Yakhina's Chekhovian aim to "squeeze out the Soviet, even if only a drop at a time" (Iakhina 2021a) appears as reasonable as it is courageous.

Filmography

The Cranes Are Flying (*Letiat zhuravli*), dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, USSR 1957.
The Life of Others (*Das Leben der Anderen*), dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Germany 2006.
Three Songs about Lenin (*Tri pesni o Lenine*), dir. Dziga Vertov, USSR 1934/35.
Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*), dir. Egor Anashkin, Russia 2020.

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Figure 3.3: Film still from the TV series *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (*Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*), dir. Egor Anashkin, Russia 2020, (2019), https://www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/131459/foto/ [30 September 2023].
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Figure 3.5: Film still *The Cranes Are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli*), dir. Mikhail Kalatozov, USSR 1957.

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