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## Some New Terms in Dystopian Studies

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**Abstract:** This article brings two terms of political sciences, “state of exception” and “clash of civilizations” to dystopian studies. These terms help us to understand the hybrid nature of the dystopian genre. Almost in every Russian postcommunist dystopia we meet various kinds of state of exception. The concept of “clash of civilizations” convincingly describes many aspects of Slav-Muslim dialogue in Russian dystopia. Russian military invasion of Ukraine had been predicted in dystopian novels the decades before it happened. The prophetic nature of the dystopian genre dictates the necessity of new analytical tools.

**Keywords:** State of Exception; Clash of Civilizations; Slav-Muslim Dialogue; Dystopia; A Torn Country; A Cleft Country; Orwellian Principles.

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In this article I explore the linkages between postcommunist dystopias and life under what Carl Schmitt (and later Giorgio Agamben) called a “state of exception” – a condition in which authorities manipulate alleged emergency conditions to justify extra-legal exercise of power. For example, Andrei Makarychev, a political scientist, writes that “Russia’s military offensive in Chechnya... clearly created a state of exception uncontrolled and unregulated by any law”<sup>1</sup>. This is a typical usage of this term in political studies. At the same time, it is close to our understanding of dystopia as a hybrid genre in its nature. I am bringing this new term to dystopian studies borrowing it from the political sciences. Usage of ‘State of exception’ is necessary to analyze the specific spatiality and ideological conflict in dystopian fiction. I argue that the dystopian literature serves both to critique realities of their own society and to posit alternative visions of the future that are themselves predicated on the same states of exception and provoke resistance.

The scholars usually consider dystopia either as a pure literary genre (Fredric Jameson: *Archaeologies of the Future*, 2005<sup>2</sup>; Tom Moylan: *Becoming Utopian: The Culture and Politics of Radical Transformation*,

2020<sup>3</sup>; Steve Shahbazian: *Century of Dystopia*, 2019<sup>4</sup>; Aaron S. Rosenfeld: *Character and Dystopia: The Last Men*, 2020<sup>5</sup>) or as a metaphorical investigation of totalitarianism (Gregory Claeys: *Dystopia: A Natural History*, 2017<sup>6</sup>). Slavic postcommunist dystopia doesn't take much attention in the latest dystopian studies. I am trying to fill in this gap and to bring some new analytical tools into dystopian studies.

Until the collapse of communist rule, the Soviet state banned publications under utopian and especially dystopian tags and prohibited scholarship on these genres. Since 1990s dystopian novels have become mainstream popular reading in the former Soviet Union and the genre has been included into the national school literature curriculum. It is hard to calculate the exact number because more than 700 SF and utopian/dystopian books have been published every year in Slavic languages since 1993.

It is obvious that dystopia concentrates on the tragedy of the individual forced to live under totalitarian pressures. This fate of the individual subsequently reveals the lie of the utopian project. Dystopia starts at the point where the protagonist rejects the utopian Ministry of Truth and its Orwellian principles: "War is peace", "Freedom is slavery", and "Ignorance is strength". Dystopian thinking increases in times of rapid technological change and intense social stress, such as during epidemics and/or pandemics. Consequently, our recent international predicament with Covid-19 renders this topic particularly relevant, I aver.

I investigate the evolution of dystopia from a literary genre into a provocative political prognosis. For example, Evgenii Zamiatin in his novel *We* criticized

"Fordism", not communism. Postcommunist dystopian literature has transformed into a sort of psychological Freudian couch, where contemporary intellectuals pour out their fears and neuroses. In the process, the authors have developed dystopia from a literary phenomenon into a method of modeling reality and depicting the near future. I analyze this evolution in the context of the "state of exception", a strategy of power employed by authoritarians to transform democracies into totalitarian states. Giorgio Agamben insisted: "The fact is that in both the right of resistance and the state of exception, what is ultimately at issue is the question of the juridical significance of a sphere of action that is itself extrajudicial"<sup>7</sup>.

Dystopian literature holds a mirror that limits these states of exception place on access to information. For example, in Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* (2000) and Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (2006), the central conflict of Ray Bradbury's classic *Fahrenheit 451* becomes digital: the authorities in these fictive states of exception – like those in today's Russia and Belarus – "burn" and close digital media that oppose the state's pro-regime federal TV channels. The New Yorker's reviewer writes that "Tolstaya's radioactive world is a cunning blend of Russia's feudal and Soviet eras, with abuse of serfs, mandatory government service, and regulation of literature. The looming dangers, however, feel more contemporary: to the south, Chechens; and to the west a civilization that might hold some promise, except that its members 'don't know anything about us'"<sup>8</sup>.

State of exception dissects the centrality of two issues in dystopias: how the past is remembered, and what the truth is

in depicting the past. Struggles over memory and forgetting are at the core of the dystopian battle for truth. Let me add that the borders in dystopias are not confined to geography; they are also dividing different beliefs, civilizations, and state orders like empires and democracies. Sometimes imaginary borders are much more restrictive than physical ones.

A special case may be called "Crimea and the State of Exception". This is a case in which literary imagination anticipated a "real world" state of exception. Vassily Aksyonov's 1980 dystopia *The Island of Crimea* and Andrei Stoliarov's 1999 dystopia *The Skylark* imagined Russian military occupation of the Crimean Peninsula, anticipating Russia's actual invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014.

These two dystopias predicted further events, and served as a "provocative prognosis." Russia's use of military force against Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea upended the rules of the post-World War II European order, yet were supported by the majority in the Russian Federation and in Crimea. Top Russian officials openly lied that there were no Russian soldiers. This case enforced the state of exception and eventually a dictatorship in present-day Russia.

Since the 1990s, authoritarian political elites in the former Soviet sphere have created states of exception that entail utopias of different types, all of which are built of frameworks of lies – from the imagined Islamic utopia of the Republic of Chechnya to the quasi-Soviet patriotic nostalgia of Putin's Russia. Lewis is absolutely right when he insists that "although there is unpredictability in the way that violence is deployed, it remains within the bounds of

what is understood by the Russian military to constitute a form of order, albeit one that is brutal and abusive in the extreme. There may not be clear legal rules, but there are multiple informal practices that produce new forms of order within the zone of exception. A form of order still prevails, even in the exceptional case".

Some scholars noticed that under Putin, Russian society has regained some sense of self-confidence and sometimes arrogance but remains deeply insecure about truth. Recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has foregrounded the dystopian struggle for truth by casting a stark light on ways the state of exception limits access to the accurate and truthful information. Even before the outbreak occurred, politicians increasingly could not assuage fears of being confronted by the disjuncture between the truths of lived reality and the claims of "truth" on which the regime has constructed its state of exception. Dystopian fictions give voice to these anxieties by presenting alternative futures that, strikingly, are themselves based on alternative states of exception. This tautological construct now disturbingly can be seen outside of Russia as well.

Authors of fiction have used fundamental genre elements of dystopian literature, in particular, the individual's struggle for truth and happiness, both to describe and critique realities of their own society and to posit alternative visions of the future that are themselves predicated on the same states of exception. The states of exception fight the idea of globalization. Utopia initially was an island. Dystopia, as George Orwell proves, turns the whole continents into islands. There is no land for globalization under dystopian ideology. Mobility

of people and goods is brutally restricted. The troubles in Vladimir Makanin's *The Hole* (1991), in Vladimir Voinovich's *Moscow 2042* (1986), in Vladimir Sorokin's *The Blizzard* (2015) occur when the protagonists start their journeys. Isolationism becomes the way of depriving people of their human rights.

Dystopia helps us to formulate Russian identity because of the tradition of "negative identity formulation": Russian identity is not positive, it is about "Who we are not?". If somebody asks a dystopian state "What you are not?", the answer will be "I am not a democracy, I am not liberal, I am not humane, I am not honest, I am not joyful". The Quasi-dictator in a dystopian state of exception can be characterized by Schmitt's aphorism: "Sovereign is he who decides on the exception"<sup>10</sup>.

Postcommunist dystopias actually give a comprehensive account of life in the country where the action takes place. The actual state, in whatever form it exists at the time of writing, is an active participant in the dystopia, generally through its functionaries or ideological spokesmen. Still, it includes both natures, combines both literary and political roots, and is developing as a genre of Russian mass culture based on Islamic-Slavic Dialogue.

In modern Russian literature the dystopia is turning into a provocative prognosis of the political and cultural development based on the clash of civilizations. I accept Mark Lipovetsky's idea that "any attempt to reflect on recent cultural phenomena cannot help relating – directly or not – to the political context surrounding the works under analysis"<sup>11</sup>. Here we have to get another political term involved: the clash of civilizations.

The term "Clash of Civilizations" was coined by Basil Mathews in his 1926 book *Young Islam on Trek: A Study in the Clash of Civilizations*, then we can find it in Albert Camus' speech in 1946 but it became a buzz phrase in 1992, after Samuel P. Huntington's lecture at the American Enterprise Institute. Then it was turned into a 1993 Foreign Affairs article titled "The Clash of Civilizations?" This article was a counter-argument against his former student Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. In 1996 Huntington expanded his ideas in the book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

In Russian dystopian novel, we can see both kinds of Huntington's intercivilizational conflicts. The fault line conflicts occur between different states of exception that belong to different civilizations or within the state of exception where the population is divided between different civilizations. Usually it leads to civil wars that we can see in *Jewhad* (2006) by Dmitrii Bykov, and *Liquidation* (1999) by Oleg Divov.

After two Chechen wars Russia intensively seeks various ways to improve relations with Muslim population. These efforts are hardly explored in dystopian literature, probably, because of the specifics of the genre. Islamic-Slavic clashes are existing in wide cultural context now. In utopias and dystopias of the turn of the millennium various models of future are being realized, and we can explore them in *The Masarwa Mecca* (2003) by Andrej Volos and *Notre Allah de Paris* (2005) by Elena Chudinova.

Utopian and dystopian writings vary both in social ideas and genre features. In the Soviet time a dystopia was, as I have

already mentioned, a half-dissident genre, and dystopian works were published in the émigré publishing houses or waited for better times in samizdat.

Another type is core state conflicts that happen between the states that represent different civilizations, like in Victor Pelevin's *S.N.U.F.F.* (2011) and *The Third Empire* (2007) by Mikhail Yur'ev. The concept of "the Global Empire" needs to be described in finer detail. We can give a typology of various borders of the future world according to utopian writings that have been published in Slavic post-Soviet countries since the collapse of the USSR. The borders changed at that time, and the present and future shapes of the country are being discussed more in utopian writings than in political debates. For example, Mikhail Yur'ev's utopian novel *The Third Empire* (2003) became a manifesto for geopoliticians eager to redraw the borders of the world. In this novel, set in 2050, the world is divided between a few "civilization-states" and the clashes between these states are a theme of this novel. If an unknown prose writer said this in his relaxed chat, nobody would pay any attention to his delusory dreams. The touch of bitter irony (and certain danger) lies in the fact that when this book was published Mikhail Yur'ev was an active politician who was serving a term in the State Duma of the Russian Federation as vice-speaker! By the way, we can see that core state conflicts aroused here from the fault line conflicts after the global states' involvement.

The clashes in Russian dystopia don't happen between "The West and the Rest" but between the Russia and the whole world. Now the dystopian conflict expanded upon Russian-Ukrainian war.

For Huntington, Russia was "a torn country" because it hadn't obtained its civilizational identity fully, while Ukraine was a "cleft" country. Huntington explained that Ukraine was "cleft" between Orthodox east and Eastern Rite Catholic west, and Russia is a "swing" country that has to balance between local Sunni people and foreign Shia countries, like Iran and Syria. *Hurramabad* (2000) by Andrej Volos, *Dzabannam* (2005) and *Nyaz-bek* (2005) by Yuliia Latynina along with previously mentioned Elena Chudinova's novel illustrate this "swing" nature of Russian civilizational trends.

The title Vladimir Sorokin's dystopian novel *Day of the Oprichnik* has two meanings: oprichnik's day is a one of Komyaga's career towards the top of "oprichnina", old-and-new Russian special forces, and a "day" as a professional holiday, like Miner's Day. Just look how many remarkable events happened with Komyaga during that endless day: he strangled, raped, approved a concert program, took part in a group sodomy in a bathhouse, had breakfast with an almost naked her Majesty the Tsarina, was bribed by a ballerina, played with drug fishes, drove to the border and made some illegal money on the Chinese businessmen. Isn't it a nice holiday? He operates within the closed borders of the country. This territory is ruled by his will, not the laws. Since the closure happened this territory became damned and doomed.

The society in Sorokin's novel has many dystopian features: an empire, where the citizens "voluntarily" burnt their passports "refusing" travelling abroad, only temporarily can keep them within the borders.

It's a *warm* fire. It was even warmer eighteen years ago when people

burned their foreign-travel passports on Red Square. Bow that was an enormous fire! It made a strong impression on me, since I was an adolescent at the time. In January there was a deep freeze, but at His Majesty's call people brought their foreign-travel passports to the main square of the country and tossed them into fire. They kept bringing them and bringing them. From other cities they came to Moscow, the capital, to burn the legacy of the White Troubles.

They came to take an oath to His Majesty. That fire burned nearly two months...<sup>12</sup>.

The Ich-Erzählung of the main character establishes new, "state" look at Russia here. Doggish devotion and wolfish grip is a biological base of the regime. "Geldings"- "Mercedes" limos with the brooms and the wolfs' heads attached to the bumpers are visible realization, a material result, and a heraldic symbol of the wolfish grip.

The empire keeps existing because of "heroic deeds" of Komyaga, his associates and Batya, who is per se the chieftain of the non-controlled state gang. The gallop the length and breath of the country on their "Geldings"- "Mercedes" with brooms and wolves' heads and cast horror on their nationals, and this horror makes Komyaga proud. He is happy in the country, where the law was transformed into a broom on his car. But anti-utopian characters inhabit just every page of the novel. "Problems", which Komyaga solves for some bribe, are the illustrations of social heterogeneity of the empire and of the rising protest, and of inadmissibility of Oprichnina for many common citizens. Komyaga meets them

every hour and this is just his usual day! Critic Lev Danilkin sarcastically noticed: "Sorokin's Russia of 2020-s looks like realized Dugin's fantasy about 'new oprichnina' and authors of project 'Fortress Russia'"<sup>13</sup>. In Sorokin's book conventionalized language and brilliantly written funny details cover the image of computerized, pseudo-contemporary and doomed for changes empire.

Pelevin's novels manipulate with the consciousness, borders, subjectivity and identities. In his *S.N.U.F.F.*, the space is divided into upper world, *BigByz*, digital heaven, and underground debris, *Urkaina*, populated by rude, poor and dirty people. This vertically oriented space model is typical for anti-utopia, opposite to horizontally oriented utopian world. The very existence of these people is the basis for identity of *BigByz* people.

Later, in Sorokin's *Telluria* (2013), this country and the whole world are disintegrated. Russian borders in the dystopia separate country from the whole world. Russian identity fully exploits negativity and juxtaposition: sometimes it is not the USSR though sometimes doesn't look like contemporary Russia, it is not a Muslim country, it is not medieval though sometimes is not modern, too, it is not Asian though is not European as well.

In Sorokin's case, the dystopian fiction becomes a prophetic prediction that is transformed into brutal reality. It makes his novels, as well as some other Russian dystopias, the predictions that came true.

Genre of dystopia became not just a genre of mass-culture but also of so called "actual art": The mission of the "actual art" is to react on-the-fly, to give names to the not-exposed things and the phenomena, which are not popular yet...<sup>14</sup>.

Talking about the clash of civilizations in Russian dystopia one shouldn't forget its aesthetic ground. They all contain visible features of state of exception, protagonist's revolt, symbolic and spiritual more than physical borderlines, vertical space model (unlike horizontal space model in utopia), pseudo-carnival that is based on total fear, the Benefactor that keeps everything under his brutal and annoying control, tragic love story and many other features of classical dystopian novels. Popular modern writers become the voice of "collective unconscious". They offer truisms and become

idols for an hour, and express odd ideas in paradoxical and attractive packages. Applying the terms from political studies for analysis of this type of dystopia seems to be logical and fruitful.

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## NOTES

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