

In Search of the Prestige Ancestors: Ethno-Nationalism and School Textbooks

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Recent sociological surveys have demonstrated that collective views of the deep past become more important for the Russian identity in the 1990s (Dubin 1996: 28-29). Literate people are involved whose knowledge comes out of school textbooks, belles-lettres, and mass-media. That is why it is worth analysing what image of the deep past is cultivated by the school curricula and for which goal.

People are interested with their deep past, including ancient state formed by their ancestors, not only for curiosity. In fact, an image of the "Golden Age" has to provide them with self-respect, to unite them and to provide them with creative energy in order to overcome hardship. Besides, the intellectual leaders of ethno-national movements make all the attempts to mobilize historic or pseudo-historic resources in order to legitimate their claims for political autonomy or independent state. Sometimes an ancient state is invented which has never existed. In brief, a myth is built in order to confirm some ethno-national claims. Extreme examples of this sort of myth are characterized with open xenophobia. Indeed, while building a myth of origin and glorious deeds of the ancestors, the myth-builders usually use folklore or historic sources about deep or not so deep past, and restore old prejudices, suspicions and hostility towards neighboring people. What is mostly alarming is that these myths began to enter the school textbooks. Hence, a threat of formation of aggressive ethno-nationalism and xenophobia among the youth which can draw the country into endless ethnic conflicts and encourage separatist movements (Stobart 1995: 38; Rotershtein 1996: 14-15; Filippov 1996: 3).

How is a myth of the past built and for what aims? Nowadays, ethnic Russians suffer a serious crisis caused by the collapse of the USSR and emergence of the new Russian diaspora. Under this environment, some ethnic Russian nationalists turn to the deep prehistoric past. They are excited with an image of an integrated original "Rus-Slavic" community occupying vast territory and having their own original ideology ("Vedic worldview") uncorrupted with later admixture like Christianity most of all (Shnirelman, Komarova 1997; Shnirelman 1998d). They refer to the "Book of Vles" fabricated by the Russian emigrees by the 1950s. Its admirers claim that a study of the "Vedic worldview" should be introduced into school curricula (Vasil'ev 1994). In their view, the textbooks should include the "truth" about the "Rus-Slavic union of peoples" as if the latter really existed in the Aegean region in the Late Bronze Age, played a crucial role in the Trojan war, devastated Egypt and East Mediterranean under the name of the "Sea peoples", and was memorized with a mysterious story of the mighty Atlantis (Grishakov 1998).

It seems that these wishes achieved their end. Recently, the "Prosveshchenie" (Enlightenment) Publishing House, Moscow, has published a book of a popular writer Vladimir I. Shcherbakov (1995) intended for high-school students. The book develops the ideas which are common for the myth in question, i.e. on the close relationship between the ethnic Russians, and

the Etruscans and Thracians; and on the Slav-Veneds as if they lived from India to Western Europe and provided local inhabitants with writing systems and states. Moreover, the myth is implicitly inserted with an Antisemitic idea that the "Vans-Veneds" have built a primordial state in "Vanaan (Canaan)" (Shcherbakov 1995: 80, 159).

The "Aryan myth" is being revived under this umbrella, and an idea of the Aryan origin of the Slavs is advocated (for this see: Shnirelman 1998a). It has some profile in the children books and modern school textbooks (see, for instance, Bogdanov 1994: 31, 51; Butrameev 1994: 6-9). For example, a spirit of the "Book of Vles" is flying over an experimental high school textbook which has come out two years from now. Its author, a professional historian, enthusiastically narrates a mythical story of the Slavs in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages and forces pupils to learn these fictions (Bogdanov 1996: 25-30). Recently, some young intellectuals have established an Institute of the Russian Vedic Culture in Tiumen' and Yekaterinburg and received a license from the local Departments of Education for teaching voluntary courses in a few schools on the "basics of the Vedic Culture". The courses are based on the Book of Vles (Shnirelman 1998d: 6-7).

One can observe the similar trends in the Republics within the Russian Federation. The "Bulgar myth" is long developed in Tatarstan which claims that the Kazan' Tatars are the direct descendants of the pre-Mongol Volga Bulgars rather than of the Golden Horde population, and the myth of the "Great Past" is forged for the former. The myth is developed by Fargat Nurutdinov, a leader of the contemporary "Bulgar" movement, who teaches local history in some Kazan' school (for the details see: Shnirelman 1998b). He teaches teen-ages with the "Bulgar version" of history aimed at integration of the Turkic population of Tatarstan, and invents a self-name "Bulgar-Tatars" for this end. In his view, the "Bulgar people" have never disappeared and survived up to nowadays among other local Turkic groups. He emphatically protests against the Soviet "falsifications of history" which he identifies with the Golden Horde and Kazan' Khanate histories. It is clear for him that the independent Bulgar state developed continuously in the Middle Volga region from the 7th to the 16th centuries. The students are recommended to read some fabricated manuscripts as if they are authentic historic documents (Nurutdinov 1995).

These manuscripts narrate that the "glorious Bulgars" spread out over Eastern Europe as well as Balkans and the Near East many thousands years ago; they have built Troy, established the Sumer state, and settled Italy under the name of the Etruscans. It is claimed that Rus was integrated into the Bulgar state in the 7th-9th centuries, and Kiev was built by the Bulgars. Moreover, it turns out that some Bulgar groups were the first-comers in Americas! In brief, the "Great Bulgar myth" is entering a system of education in the Republic of Tatarstan. One can observe similar trends in the Northern Caucasus as well.

For a long time, the North Ossetia's authorities support a version of history which relates the Ossetians directly to the early medieval Alans and deeper up to the Scythians and Sarmatians, and even to the Koban archaeological culture which emerged in the central part of the Northern Caucasus in the Late Bronze Age. A language continuity from the "Scythian language" is emphasized. The school textbooks both in North and South Ossetias are permanently based on these ideas (Bliev, Turgiev 1990, 1994; Bzarov 1990; Chibirov 1990). Moreover, the Ossetian scholars like to emphasize a crucial contribution of the medieval Alans

into formation of the European culture: "the Alan cultural influence established military-technical and spiritual foundation for the European knighthood" (Blied, Turgiev 1994: 12) - this has to upgrade the Ossetian image in Western Europe. The Alan state is especially glorified as one of the oldest in the Northern Caucasus which had its own writing tradition.

The Scythian roots of the Ossetians are taken as a challenge by other North Caucasian peoples. Thus, the Kabardinians construct even more ancient past for their ancestors and search for their roots in the Maikop archaeological culture of the 3rd Mill.B.C. They are proud of the past relationships with the Hattians of Asia Minor, and with ancient Mediterranean peoples of the pre-Roman time (Basques are especially emphasized) (Kerefov 1995). The Kabardinians do not want to lose the "Koban ancestors" as well (Kerefov 1995: 20, 35). The direct genetic relationships with the Meotians who lived in the North-Western Caucasus in the 1st Mill.B.C., are even more important to them. The contemporary Sindians of the Taman' peninsular are included into the Meotians without any reserve and are treated as the founders of the most ancient local state of Sindica (Kerefov 1995: 41-42). It is worth noting that relationships between the Sindians and the Meotians are still unclear, and an independent status of the "Sindian state" is questioned by professional historians.

The Kabardinians are stick with this version for two reasons. First, it confirms their status as the people who have built an ancient state. Second, the Adyghs (the Kabardinian ancestors) are depicted not only as an old significant political agent in the North-West Caucasus but also as indigenous inhabitants who occupied vast territory from the Black and Azov Seas to the upper Kuban' river valley already a thousand years ago if not earlier (for instance, see: Kerefov 1995: 46; Kerashev, Chirg 1991: 47-48).

This hurts the Balkar intellectuals who for long have a land dispute with the Kabardinians. Both Turkic-speaking the Balkars and the Karachais do not agree with the Ossetian version of history as well which treats their ancestors as offsprings of mixed marriages between the Iranian-speaking Alans and the Turkic newcomers (see, for instance, Chibirov 1990: 61). The late Balkar archaeologist I.M.Miziev occupied himself with provision of the historic legitimations for the Balkar claims. He provided the Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans with the Turkic language which, he thought, was a mother tongue of the earlier nomads who established all the archaeological cultures of the Eurasian steppe belt. He believed that the Turks came to the Northern Caucasus as early as the 4th Mill.B.C. This can seem a bizarre, but an aggravation of the Kabardinian-Balkar land dispute at the turn of the 1980s makes everything clear.

Miziev emphasized, especially, that the Kabardinian territorial expansion took place as late as the 15th-16th centuries. Before that time, the Turkic-speaking ancestors of the Balkars and Karachais lived at the North Caucasian plain for millennia, he claimed. That is why he refused to recognize any local Iranian sub-stratum and rejected an idea of the Kypchaque component in the Balkar ethnogenesis - the latter did not seem to be a prestige one for him. Different case was a Bulgar sub-stratum which made possible to provide the Balkars with great history, old statehood and, especially, vast territory. True, there was a gap in this glorious history after Great Bulgaria of Kurbat-Khan disintegrated (7th century). However, Miziev was not discouraged with that and called the Alans and Asses the direct ancestors of the Balkars and Karachais. In this way, the latter became heirs of both Great Bulgaria and the Alan Kingdom. To

put it other way, a long past territorial and state continuity was broken only by the Mongol conquest, after which the Kabardinian expansion followed (Miziev 1991: 114-130, 136; 1995a: 53-54, 66, 79).

Thus, the Kabardinian domination turns to be as a temporary phenomenon as the Mongol one was, and it is senseless to compare that to the glorious Turkic past in the Northern Caucasus. In order to seem well-founded, Miziev structured his book on the "peoples of Kabarda and Balkaria" respectively where dozens pages were devoted to the Turkic ancestors of the Balkars. In contrast, three pages were quite enough for him to prove that the Adyghs had not any ancient past at all (Miziev 1995a: 48-50). It is worth noting that the books with all the ideas in question were published by the Ministry of Education of the Kabardinian-Balkar Republic as the standard textbooks for teachers and students. Strikingly opposit approaches push public education into a deadlock. In 1995, a school textbook came out in Nal'chik (a capital of the Kabardinian-Balkar Republic) which was written by the Kabardinian and Balkar authors together. At the beginning, the Scythians were identified with the Iranian-speakers, and the founders of the Maikop archaeological culture - with the Abkhazian-Agyghe ancestors of the Kabardinians (Kerefov 1995), but in what followed afterwards, both the Maikop culture and the steppe inhabitants from the Bronze Age through were identified with the Turks without any reserve, the Turks were called the builders of the Sumer civilization and the bearers of both Scythian and Alan cultures (Miziev 1995b).

This sort of manipulations with the past are not innocent. Being politicized, they force closely related peoples to struggle for the same ancestors, for shared past legacy (Maikop, Koban', Scythian, Alan, and the like), which by no means contributes to development of friendly relationships between neighboring ethnic communities. It was noted above that an idea of the Volga Bulgars' ancestry of the Kazan' Tatars is popular in Tatarstan. Some school textbooks published there recently emphasize an importance of the Bulgar legacy for the contemporary Tatars (see, for instance, Miftakhov, Mukhamadeeva 1995). At the same time, the neighboring Chuvash consider the Volga Bulgars their own ancestors and have no plans to share this valuable heritage with the Tatars. It is already for many years that the Bulgar version of the Chuvash origin is taught in the Chuvash schools (see, for instance, Skvortsov 1995; Danilov, Pavlov 1996).

Since recently, the ethnogenetic myths which are flourishing in Russia mobilize some restored archetypes which are dangerous in respect to interethnic relationships. These archetypes reproduce a pattern rooted in "we-group"/"out-group" opposition where everything "our" is praised and idealized, and what is not "our" is loaded with quite opposit traits. One of the most popular archetypes deals with an image of the neighbors among the highland and lowland peoples. The highlanders consider that the lowlanders have lost original high cultural values and are morally corrupted; in contrast, the lowlanders treat their neighbors as primitive people who need to be civilized. This stereotype which is widespread in the Northern Caucasus underlays the Ossetian-Ingush conflict. While presenting the Iranian-speaking Scythians and Alans as the great conquerors and civiliziers, the Ossetian mass-media depicted the Ingush and other highlanders as original aggressive barbarians (Bliev 1993; Khestanov 1996). At the same time, a Chechen high school textbook presented Iranians as savage nomads who, for centuries, wanted to enslave the highlanders and violated peace in the Northern Caucasus (Akhmadov et al. 1991).

The cases in question demonstrate attempts to infuse students with an ethnocentric worldview. A "patriotic" approach to history developed by Lev N. Gumilev and infused with doubtless racism (Yanov 1992; Shnirelman 1996: 20-37; 1998c) plays an important role in this sort of education. It is no secret that his views were picked up and advocated by many textbooks and education workers (see, for instance, Kapustina et al. 1996). A Gumilev's history textbook for high schools was published recently. It reproduces an anti-Semitic version of the emergence and development of the Khazar Khanate and its external relationships (Gumilev 1996: 34-46. For criticism see: Shnirelman 1996: 24-34); there are other Judophobe passages there as well (see, for instance, Gumilev 1996: 86-89, 272). Gumilev saw nothing positive in the Jewish culture and did not want to recognize persecutions against the Jews in the Middle Ages. Instead, he did not lose a chance to blame the Jews with usury and slave-trading as if for the sake of these goals the Jews tried to enslave pre-Mongol Rus and drew it into wars against neighbors. Logically enough, Gumilev kept silence about the Jewish slaughter arranged by Bogdan Khmel'nitskii's cossacks in the mid-17th century.

Unfortunately, Gumilev's case is not a unique one. In 1996 another history textbook for 8th grade was published in Moscow (Rybakov, Preobrazhenskii 1996). It depicts the Khazars only as oppressors who took tribute from the Slavic Polians, robbed the Russian merchants and were fairly destroyed by prince Sviatoslav. For home reading the students are recommended a novel "Rus the original" (Rus' iznachal'naia) where Judaism is called the "misanthropic religion", and an establishment of the world supremacy is stated to be the crucial goal of the Khazar Khaqans. One of the textbook editors was academician Boris A. Rybakov who also consulted the author of the novel.

Simultaneously the textbook demonstrates a clear primordialist approach. It puts the formation of the peoples ("narodnosti") as far back into the past as the Bronze Age, and one of these "peoples" is identified with the Slavs who are depicted as the closest relatives of the same Scythians. Besides, a hint is made that one should look for the roots of Christianity among the bearers of the Tripolye archaeological culture of the 4th Mill.B.C. (Rybakov, Preobrazhenskii 1996: 17-18, 25).

Fortunately, many different textbooks are published in Russia nowadays due to democratic environment. Many of them are free of the ideas in question. Nevertheless, it is obvious that in some Russian schools the students are taught xenophobic rather than humanist values. This conclusion is confirmed with special surveys made in 1995-1997 among ethnic Russian teachers and students in five regions of the Russian Federation. An intensity of xenophobic and chauvinist views among them turned to be pretty high: of 835 students 20% regarded ethnic Russians as the superior people, and about 70% demonstrated anti-Semitic feelings. About a third of 72 teachers expressed chauvinist views (RSS 1998: 14-15).

These xenophobic and chauvinist feelings are obvious results of education which makes emphasis on the myth of great ancient ancestors, their glorious deeds and their outstanding contribution into the world culture in contrast to other neighboring peoples. As a rule, this myth is based on the fabricated written documents or uncritical interpretation of historic or archaeological evidence. If it is still impossible to find the great ancestors, the myth encourages an appropriation of the alien historic and cultural heritage. In this case, the roots of any particular people are sought among the Sumerians, Egyptians, or Etruscans, and due to these

deliberate manipulations with history, several non-related peoples are forced to struggle for the same falsified heritage. Besides, the myth restores the obsolete archetypes which establish an image of an enemy and provide neighboring people with negative attributes. History is abused in such a way.

As a rule, all these constructions are instrumental - a struggle is waged for territory, for an access to vital natural, economic or financial resources, for upgrading political status up to complete separation and establishment of own national state. It is not infrequently that the myth contains an idea of a superabundance of the "others" and demands for getting rid of them in some way up to ethnic cleansing. It is no surprise that the textbooks inserted with these myths bring up students infused with intolerance, racism and anti-Semitism. It seems that a special project should be launched in Russia aimed for an exclusion of aggressive ethno-nationalist myths out from school textbooks.

Abstract

A view of the past is an important element of ethnic identity in the contemporary world. Nowadays, it plays also a crucial instrumental role in a struggle for political, financial, territorial and cultural resources and benefits. This struggle is especially intensive under unstable political environment which is used by various ethnic elites in order to upgrade their status and to get an access to some privileges. The myths of the past are often forged and disseminated as an important part of the ethno-national ideologies which are aimed at ethnic solidarity.

An image of the enemy is an integral element of the ideologies in question which have xenophobic connotations as a result. A place of these sort of myths and ideologies in the contemporary Russian education system is analysed. It is demonstrated how they manifest ethnic strifes and conflicts in various regions of the Russian Federation, and how they infuse students with intolerance, chauvinism and racial moods which seems alarming.

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