

# The Power of the Unburied: Quasi-Indigenusness, Limited Citizenship and Collective Responsibility of Russians in Mongolia and China

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# THE POWER OF THE UNBURIED: QUASI-INDIGENOUSNESS, LIMITED CITIZENSHIP AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY OF RUSSIANS IN MONGOLIA AND CHINA<sup>1</sup>

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Using the experience of repatriates from Inner Asia as an example, this article examines the specifics of Soviet practices of suspicion, fixing the border population in a situation of inevitable political and racial impurity. Despite the gradual withdrawal of the state from the mass persecution of people in border areas after 1953, the emotional experience of living near the border is relevant, not only in new post-Soviet contexts but also as a way to understand the past. This experience will be considered in two aspects: (1) the citizenship regime for repatriates as it, to a greater or lesser extent, related to the community and (2) the specifics of the community's responsibility for armed resistance to Soviet power. The narrative shift in the study of Stalinism and Soviet citizenship has provided a broad theoretical view of the value system and epistemology of the Soviet subject. It should be noted that this theoretical generalisation can be filled with empirical content thanks to anthropological studies of the border communities from the eastern part of the USSR (Transbaikalia). To write this article, material was used from field research conducted in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and the Chita region in the autumn of 2012, 2016 and 2021.

KEYWORDS: Inner Asia, suspicion, border regions, citizenship

Armed resistance to power is a challenge to any political theory (Agamben 2015). Moreover, if the uprising against a neighbouring tyrant is viewed favourably enough,

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in the European tradition, by political philosophy, then, when it comes to one's own home, the situation becomes more complicated and ceases to be unambiguous. From the Greek *stasis* (Loraux 2002) to Hobbes's war of all against all, we are faced with a negative perception of civil conflict as a moral and cultural catastrophe, the blame for which is transferred to external factors. In the case of the Russian Revolution (as well as with other revolutions), the situation was complicated by the problematic nature of basic concepts such as citizenship, disloyalty or loyalty to the motherland. What is the basic political order in the era of performative declarations and temporary political structures? The participants in the ensuing civil war did not feel like members of the same community and did not perceive their opponents as representatives of the state order, loyalty to which would become the basis of moral and legal assessments. These problems did not disappear with the collapse of the USSR. The legal assessment of the civil war participants takes place in a complex cultural context, which often distorts the legal foundations of decommunisation adopted by the state: the complex relationship of the Russian Federation with the Russian Empire and the USSR, the disappearance of the state that won the civil war and the imperial reading of Soviet history, creating new contradictions and, most importantly, a lack of clear criteria for reconciliation. All of this results in efforts to reinterpret the events and establish new forms of legitimacy for those involved in the Russian Civil War. The revolution is seen as a tragic transformation of one empire into another, which leads to an unexpected perception of the Lenin Guards as destroyers and Stalin as the restorer of the country. This approach, solving the problem of the glorification of the White Guard while maintaining the legitimacy of Soviet institutions, paradoxically complicates the assessment of many participants in the war. The ideological conflict becomes a betrayal of the motherland and the political struggle with the USSR after 1921 (especially the 1939–1945 period) an inhuman crime. Despite the rather indifferent attitude of the state, this context makes it impossible to make non-political statements on many historical topics, actualising the events of the long civil war as an element of the political life of modern Russia (Peshkov 2012).

The beginning of the second (full-scale) phase of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has sharply aggravated issues related to decolonisation and the involvement of Indigenous and remote groups in imperial and anti-imperial projects as well as accentuated moral dilemmas surrounding armed resistance to state power. From this perspective, the long-term moral tension arising from the public revelation of a mythologised past and the imagined non-communities (Zahra 2010)<sup>2</sup> of Transbaikalian Cossacks

- 2 Using Zahra's idea of imaginary non-communities as a starting point, I would like to shift the context of her application slightly. If the main focus for her is on the zone of indifference in national discourse, then my main focus is on the ability of modern societies to create imagined communities of strangers. These communities are often created without the members being aware of each other's existence.

with Russian, Buryat and Evenki origins<sup>3</sup> can tell us a lot about how Russian society perceives the concept of a “wrong choice”. Additionally, it shows how Soviet history returns as a moral reference point for the “community of war”. This example is quite interesting for several reasons. First and foremost, the unique class status of the Cossacks leads to an expected tendency towards anarchy and the use of violence. Just as importantly, the mix of culture in the community – Russian ideas about wildness projected onto the inhabitants of Transbaikalia – is equally significant. Most importantly, the location of history in a remote frontier eventually turns it into a legend that plays freely with both space and time. The blend of Cossack heritage, Asian characteristics and a distant border almost eliminates the moral responsibility of the participants, instead turning them into irreconcilable enemies of peace and frontier predators, with whom dialogue is, by definition, impossible. The purpose of this article is to present the experience of an imagined non-community that was created by retrospective projections of Soviet society and the complex work of memory in border regions, as well as the moral dilemmas involved in armed resistance against authoritarian power. The specificity of this situation lies not only in the resonance created by mass fears of anti-communist resistance networks, but also in the simultaneous intersection of racial and political impurities within the imagined non-community, transforming its members into luminous predators on the frontier. It was this ability of legends to mix temporal and spatial modalities that made it possible for grassroots practices of mass protection against members of the non-communities to emerge, which were practically unsupported by the state. Despite the state’s gradual retreat from mass persecution in border regions after 1953, the emotional experiences of living near the border remain relevant, not only in the new post-Soviet context but also as a way of understanding the past. This experience will be considered in two respects: (1) the citizenship regime for repatriates as it, to a greater or lesser extent, related to the community and (2) the specifics of the community’s responsibility for armed resistance to Soviet power.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this story did not end. The sudden rise of cross-border political mythologies, from unofficial political folklore to state propaganda, shows the mimetic nature of re-Sovietising, where real memory replaces the “memory of memory” and real communist ideology replaces the “memory of life with ideology” (Oushakine 2013). In this complex context of retrospective Sovietisation, border legends become an “empirical” experience of the Soviet border as

3 The Transbaikalian Cossacks was a military organisation composed of mixed Russian, Buryat, Evenki members, along with Cossackised peasant communities. The hostility towards them displayed by the Communist authorities (‘de-Cossackisation’, ‘dekulakisation’ and deportations) provoked radical ethnic and social changes in Transbaikalia. Following 1917, they dispersed as a result of Red terror actions, emigration, as well as their active resistance to Soviet authorities (Peshkov 2012).

a permanent transit point. The connection of this with the new idea of movable borders and the constant search for enemies cannot be overestimated. In addition, the Transbaikalian fragment of Soviet political demonology, considered in this article, touches on the problems of moral assessment of active forms of resistance and may be useful for understanding the general mechanism of militarisation among residents in Siberia's border regions.

This paper discusses the deep-seated grassroots practices that reproduce the Soviet cultural and legal order: the ability to recognise the enemy, the presence of the past and the perception of the border as a meeting place with the unknown and the terrible. The narrative shift in the study of Stalinism and Soviet citizenship has offered a broad theoretical overview of the profound influence of Soviet ideology and the influence of the institution of Soviet citizenship on the value system and epistemology of the Soviet subject. It should be noted that this theoretical generalisation can be filled with empirical content thanks to anthropological studies of the border communities of the eastern part of the USSR (Transbaikalia). This article, drawing on interviews, archival research, literary texts and memoirs, seeks to explore the reasons behind the widespread fascination with frontier phantoms. It examines how the experience of engaging with these phantoms, and the meaning of a negative legend, are extensively utilised in modern pro-military propaganda in Russia. To write this article, materials from field research were used which was conducted in Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and the Chita region in the autumn of 2012, 2016 and 2021.

#### THE BIRTH OF NON-COMMUNITIES FROM THE PRACTICES OF THE SOVIET BORDER

In the Soviet worldview, the border was “more than a border”, as it was perceived as a source of imminent danger and a space of violent confrontation with a hostile world. The border population fell into the trap of the border mystery, in which the premonition of the enemy turned sterile Soviet spaces into places of resistance and danger inhabited by the enemy population. The fact that the neighbouring countries were political opponents of the USSR legitimised the militarisation of border regions and fuelled the civil war atmosphere limitlessly. The most popular mythologems in the collective imagination of the Soviet people were those concerning three areas of political and ethnic confrontation: Bandera's Ukraine, Semenov's Transbaikalia<sup>4</sup> and Central Asia, with its omnipresent Basmachi bands. Despite the differences

4 Grigory Mikhailovich Semenov (b. 13 (26) September 1896, d. 30 August 1946) was a leader and a controversial symbol of the anti-communist Transbaikalian Cossack uprising. As a leader of a frontier quasi-state, he supported the project of the Great Mongolian State. After the collapse of the White

in time, place and culture, their dark legends served an important role as tools for border management. These stories acted as disciplinary narratives within the framework of frontier socialism. When discussing the traumatic experience of the spread of Soviet lifestyle models, these legends served as a way to experience cultural hierarchies, fears and a subconscious inner need for the tangible presence of an enemy, all at once. Culturally close and politically remote, outside and inside the country, dangerous and pitiful, strong and weak, these imagined non-communities did not disappear along with the USSR and its aggressive border regime. Soviet mythologems of frontier disloyalty continue to exist, adopting new forms and serving new functions in the post-Soviet situation.

The historical prototype of the imaginary non-community in Inner Asia was a part of the community of Transbaikalian Cossacks, who supported White statehood in Transbaikalia and continued the struggle against the Soviet government until the end of World War II with varying intensity. The unique characteristics of the culture and the origins of the community are directly linked to the intricate racial systems established during the Russian colonisation of Siberia (Peshkov 2012). The Russian conquest of the Transbaikalian region resulted in the development of new forms of ethnic and cultural identity based on the cultural syncretism and mestisation of the members of the analysed groups with the inhabitants of the region. These mixed communities are referred to as the “old settlers” (*starozhily*). These quasi-Indigenous communities need to keep the balance between Russian culture and the elements of their Indigenous one. This balance is maintained by their ability to integrate themselves into a narrative that is universally understood and that justifies their connection to their Indigenous culture and territory. The specificity of Transbaikalia was the overlapping quasi-Indigenous and Cossack statuses as regards most of the population. In that context, the hostile attitude of the Communist authorities towards the Cossacks (de-Cossackisation, dekulakisation, deportations and conscious provocations of malnutrition and famine in agricultural areas) and the new socialist border regime provoked destructive consequences for the everyday life of the local community. The fate of the Cossacks of eastern Transbaikalia is directly related to the border status of the territory. The role of the border management regime is key here: on the one hand, the community was created, together with the border to protect it, on the other hand, the change of the border regime after

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movement, he was forced to abandon Siberia in September 1921. Soviet propaganda connected him to all forms of resistance against the Communists in Transbaikalia and Inner Mongolia. According to the Soviet model of political criminalization, first the followers of Ataman Semenov, and then the entire Transbaikalian Cossacks began to be called Semenovites (Semenovtsy in Russian). It was an external term projected onto various communities related and unrelated to the Ataman. Later in the article, I will use the terms “semenovtsy” and “semenovite” as synonyms.

the victory of the Bolsheviks became the main factor in the destruction of Cossack Transbaikalia. The events of the civil war left the Transbaikal Cossack Army (ZKV) in a deep crisis. The community of Transbaikal Cossacks was a conglomerate of communities united by common models of socialisation and class identity, but extremely disunited by their origin, economic situation and even cultural base. Indigenous Cossacks (Buryats and Evenks) and descendants of exiled Poles, peasants forcibly enrolled as Cossacks and mestizos, creatively connecting different cultures – all this diversity determined the variety of reactions to the political crisis. Unlike traditional Cossack regions, the connection of Cossack communities with the peasantry is more complicated. The poorest part of the Cossacks practically feels like peasant communities, whereas many peasant communities in the region (for example, the Karyms in Transbaikalia) see themselves as descendants of pioneer Cossacks and are wary of “state Cossacks”.

The revolution split the Transbaikal Cossack Army into two irreconcilable camps, turning representatives of the Cossack class in the region simultaneously into one of the most prominent groups in the construction of the nominally independent and socialist Far Eastern Republic (Sablin 2018) and a symbol of counter-revolution (Peshkov 2014). It was the “great Cossack catastrophe” that affected almost every family, which led not only to long-term bitterness but also rather effective ways of experiencing the history of the civil war in the region as the last and decisive battle of good against evil. After the victory of the Communists, a significant part of the Transbaikal Cossacks perceived the new government negatively. Relying on the Mongols of Russian and Chinese citizenship, Semenov overthrew the pro-Soviet government and, simultaneously, tried to implement two models of political power: a temporary military dictatorship with a declaration of a return to a republican form of government and a pan-Mongol theocratic state aimed at uniting all the Mongolian peoples of China and Russia (Vasilevsky 2007). After the defeat of White statehood in Transbaikalia, the most politically active segments of the emigration continued to fight against the Soviet government with varying support from the Chinese and Japanese military. In 1945, all areas with concentrated populations of emigration fell under Soviet control (Perminov 2008), after which the political activity of the Cossack emigration practically ceased. However, the defeat of the remnants of the Cossacks led to attempts to resurrect the community as a symbol of the danger threatening Soviet Transbaikalia and its residents from the outside world.

Semenov’s rule has become the primary official trauma of Transbaikalia, with all regional memorial sites dedicated to honouring its victims. Both the real and fictional crimes of the Semenovites have become significant components of Soviet Transbaikal identity, fostering an image of a bloody orgy that continues to shape perceptions of the region’s past. After Stalin’s death, stories about the ataman and his followers

take on the character of a collective retro-hallucination about the presence in the region of a cross-border network of anti-communist resistance threatening every Soviet person. Soviet specialists in the Mongolian People's Republic, soldiers of the Transbaikalia Military District and the Soviet contingent of the republic, migrants to Transbaikalia from other parts of the USSR and even KGB officers were so captured by the semi-official legend of the presence of Semenovites that they began to recognise Semenovites in marginal groups of Russian old-settlers from Inner Asia, weakly or not at all connected with the Cossacks of the rebellious ataman. It should be noted that this recognition, while undoubtedly a discriminatory practice, was still a form of symbolic exclusion, practically unsupported by the repressive apparatus of the Soviet state.

#### SEEING AS A BOLSHEVIK: ANATOMY OF A BORDER PHANTOM

If the change in narrative in Stalinism studies drew our attention to the practice of "speaking Bolshevik" (Kotkin 1997), then studies of myth creation in the borderlands show that an equally important skill of the Soviet person was the ability to see non-obvious things. This negative legend, a phantom or spectre, arose in the mid-50s at the junction of regional cultural policy, radical changes in the demography of the region and fears associated with the return of former Semenov residents from camps and exile. Initially, it covered newly arrived specialists, military personnel and prisoners, giving the act of staying in a remote province the features of a dangerous and educational adventure. Gradually, this mythologeme was transferred to Mongolia and China, where the presence of Russian refugees served as proof of the plausibility of the phantom.

The primary source of the soldiers' version of the myth were training units in Transbaikalia, from which soldiers were frequently transferred to Mongolia, contributing to the sense of realism and the global nature of the phenomenon. My respondents called Semenov omnipresent, showing the constant and all-encompassing presence of the legend in the soldiers' lives (Peshkov 2012). Myths about the existence of a culturally close but politically distant group living next to "normal Soviet people" in the border area often had no real basis at all but solved the internal problems of Soviet society. In the context of the Semenov legend, people in the late USSR began to think of alternative and less prestigious models of Russian culture that existed outside the USSR, as well as connections between ethnic and political solidarity. Being something of his own (representing a lost subculture), the mythical Semenovite, acting as a semi-criminal anti-Communist, was an absolute stranger. The issues of mestisation, anti-communism and the existence of islands untouched by the changes in Russian life were raised within the framework of this discourse

in the ideological context of absolute evil (Peshkov 2012). The real and fictional crimes of the Semenovites (largely constructed on the basis of the timeless legitimacy of socialist institutions) were presented as the legitimate cause of the “excesses” and anti-Cossack phobias of the Communists. The Semenov myth did not just unite everyone against a common enemy, a semi-real being, it created unity within regional and institutional conflicts – a Soviet specialist in both Mongolia and China; a resident of Lithuania or Latvia, forced to serve on the periphery of Transbaikalia; a convict remaining in a settlement in the region, his former guard dying of boredom in a remote zone; soldiers in their first and last years of service, united in relation to “people from the past” – as an insoluble conflict with them escalated or minimised real contradictions and conflicts. According to a unique discursive logic, the practice of forgetting entirely alters the context of events, portraying repression as a means of defending society against a stigmatised group.

The answer to the question of why they see something that does not exist refers to the logic of the border situation. Paradoxically, the opportunity to see islands of the non-Soviet in the sterile zone of the border areas was associated with a widespread perception of the border area as passable and partially uncontrolled. Its perception as a place where the state ceases to map social and political reality created the possibility of anticipating places not only remote from Soviet life, but also hostile to it. In this perspective, the border area is a network of Soviet and non-Soviet places controlled by different temporary regimes. It is only by symbolically losing control of an imaginary territory that one can see and feel the enemy everywhere. The virtual loss of control over the border area (the description of sterile areas in terms of imminent political danger) led to real efforts towards the endless securitisation of the areas. Here, the hostility of space merges with the projection of disloyalty among the border population: the danger of the anti-place becomes a reflection of the presence of enemies, which in turn can only be recognised thanks to the imaginary geography of the Soviet frontier. The spatial effects of fiction make it possible to imagine a cross-border zone as a place of eternal repetition. In addition, the inevitability of meeting with the enemy creates the imperative of a new development in the territory: the drama of a constant effort to turn the territory into a safe zone.

The power of this legend was so great that it touched the hearts of some of the “negatively recognised” communities. Soviet Transbaikalia, destroyed by the bloody fratricidal war, the deception, and the policy of sterilising borders, not only responded to the call to see the enemy on its territory but went further, recognising him in itself (Peshkov 2012). The reason for the deep resonance of this seemingly negative projection was the combination of the locality of the main antiheroes and the paradoxically Soviet interpretation of the image of Semenov: instead of a young Cossack trying to implement mutually exclusive projects, an image of a determined and ruthless leader comes to mind, ready to do anything to achieve his goals. In addition, Semenov

becomes a symbol of an act unthinkable for a Soviet person: bringing terror down on the heads of Communists. The evolution of the idea of an acceptable level of violence after the victory of the revolution is interesting. If, during the civil war, the terror of White statehood was presented to the local population as too radical and unacceptable a form of struggle, then after that, it is its very possibility that attracts attention and a desire for identification.

The compensatory function of the myth not only provided meaning to the catastrophe of Cossack Transbaikalia, but also portrayed it as a formidable event on a national level. The positive interpretation of the negative projection contrasted Soviet society with an active understanding of trauma as the outcome of a worthy defeat in an unequal struggle. From this perspective, everything was reversed: the fears of the enemy (Soviet society) regarding the declining power of their community enabled a calm acceptance of discriminatory practices. Now Soviet memorials, history lessons at school and even Soviet films about the civil war became a means of overcoming feelings of confusion and helplessness. Understanding this way of experiencing the past requires abandoning black-and-white oppositions: the main motive for Semenov's popularity was resentment at the portrayal of Red partisans in Transbaikalia. Soviet upbringing aided in the adoption of Soviet cultural memory models and elements of Cossack culture broadcast in the family made the position of victim impossible. The first factor (resentment) was the key here: in the "great Cossack catastrophe of Transbaikalia", the actual and perceived victories were divided. If nominally the victory of the Bolsheviks is not disputed by anyone, the battle for memory (even in the case of the children of the Red partisans) was undoubtedly won by the ataman and his formidable associates (Perminov 2008).

The community chooses the path of constant problematisation of the boundary between the past and the present, as well as the use of Soviet historical policy for its own purposes. Attention should be paid to the rather noticeable gender dimension of memory in Transbaikalia. If women's memory gradually politicises the private and local, then men's memory goes in the opposite direction, turning political confrontation into an element of the local landscape<sup>5</sup>. In male narratives, Semenov plays the main role: the very appearance of his name makes the absolute character of Soviet power relative. The main role in the transmission of memory is played by women: they create the conditions for the normalisation of the disaster and the restoration of communication with the vanished world. Women's stories circumvent confrontation but, at the same time, definitively legitimise participation in it as an "enemy".

5 Generalisation based on a series of unstructured interviews taken from residents of Transbaikalia in different years. These are mainly residents of the region born in rural areas during the 1935–1955 period. The respondents emphasised the role of family, relatives and the madness of the civil war as well as the exploits, danger and key role of the ataman in the very ability of the community to resist.

A typical story may be the words of the respondent, who said, “What were they [Cossacks] to do? Go to the Reds? Kill your own? Of course, not all the saints were there either, but everything the Communists say about them is not true. Simple, normal, ordinary guys. It was all their ‘fault’ that they couldn’t see everything, that they were trying to defend themselves” (E.P., 84 years old, Chita, 01.08.2014).

By imposing the “women’s perspective” on the dominant community and emphasising their own right to alternative memory, residents of Transbaikalia turned an insoluble conflict about ideologies into a tragedy of the personal, local and rooted. First of all, women emphasised the contrast between the happy, religious and Cossack Transbaikalia and its Soviet version, clearly devaluing the achievements of the Soviet government. By emphasising the strength of neighbourhood and family ties in the region through the shared experience of the war of all against all, in many ways, they negated the imperative of political solidarity, reducing political conflict to a struggle between fanaticism and normal life. The locality of the main character led to the appearance of numerous stories about friendship with the Semenov family, transforming images of the inhuman crimes of the Semenov people into a local drama inscribed in the system of kinship and friendship. Thus, one of my relatives told me in the late 80s, “Ataman Semenov’s mother was a very good person. Everyone treated her well. Our family sold them groceries and we lived very amicably”. In these stories, Semenov’s cruel Cossacks become “our boys”, drawn by external forces into a senseless conflict, but who have shown themselves to be dashing Cossacks. Instead of the watershed proposed by the state between the dark past and the increasingly bright present, in their stories the bright past was destroyed by the gloomy Soviet present. The confrontation itself in this context becomes just a transition into an empty time of destruction and decline:

[Under the tsar] they lived well, with dignity. Then “they” came and began to take and rob. The guys were outraged and went to Semenov. And there was no place for ours here anymore. They just wanted order and a peaceful life. That’s why they hate us so much. After all, nothing worked out for them [the Communists]. They can’t do anything but kill. (T.S. 75 years old, Chita, 2.10.2014)

The lack of a recognised world for the losers is compensated for by the devaluation of the winners’ world. This position turns the civil war into a battle between a local and a stranger, in which all participants make mistakes in their own way, but their mistakes are clearer and more excusable. Under Soviet conditions, this means disagreement over the disappearance of unburied enemies. They deny the authorities the right to leave their opponents unburied, returning their dignity and the right to make mistakes to the fallen: “Whatever they are, it’s still ours... In this meat

grinder, everyone turned the handle. But where are their graves now? The Reds have monuments, flowers, and we have... It was blown away by the wind. It's not right, it's inhumane. Not a single grave was left" (T.P., 84 years old, Irkutsk, 09.08.2014).

By substituting the perspective of political conflict with the discourse of historical injustice, these practices dramatically change the image of repression. Despite the absence of direct political statements, this kind of memory largely undermined the foundations of the Soviet world order. Without using a political lexicon, the respondent directly interfered with the foundations of the Soviet world order. In a country where, after years of bloody war, not a single enemy cemetery remained, recalling the memory of the unburied was undoubtedly a political act. The strength of this model lies in its ability to be reproduced under any conditions. Unlike samizdat and dissident circles, it did not require courage and a break with Soviet life – it was enough to talk to one's own grandmother. Without directly affecting the world of ideology, this prospect decisively destroyed confidence in the foundations of the political order.

#### THE RETURN OF THE ANTIHEROES: LIMITED CITIZENSHIP FOR "SEMENOV'S FOLLOWERS"

The dangerous past of the border regions caught up with the communities of repatriated Cossacks and "local Russians" from Mongolia in an unexpected form of symbolic exclusion, almost unsupported by the repressive policy of the state. Both communities were not ready to understand, much less accept, the projected collective blame for the events of the civil war, representing typical refugee farming cultures. The lack of Soviet socialisation in the first case or basic stigmatisation in the second led to practices of self-preservation through family histories and the avoidance of political language. In both cases, communities try to get away from politics, constantly emphasising the difficult fate of refugees, love of work and loyalty to Russian culture. Their attempts to obtain Soviet citizenship ended in failure, and not just because of the doubts and fears of Soviet people when confronted by strangers. At first glance, the situation looked rather simple: the lack of a verifiable past and the general fear of people who left the USSR on their own led to exclusion and distrust. Most post-war repatriates faced similar problems to a greater or lesser extent, and their path to their homeland was not always strewn with roses. But not everything is as simple as it seems at first glance. From this perspective, the decision to repatriate, which causes distrust and alarm, is a convenient marker for the inclusion of local political folklore in the conflict between ethnic and political solidarity in Soviet society. The status of a repatriate greatly enhanced the power of the legend, including it in general fears towards people without a verifiable past.

In this context, official documents were not only a reservoir of personal archives useful to the state (containing information about people's ethnic and social origin, confessions, behaviour during the civil war and party debates, etc.), but also the potential basis of the new social identities created by it (that is, of an enemy, a prisoner, an exile, someone who had been forgiven, an enemy's child or a forgiven enemy's child). The lack of personal archives and socialisation in the USSR required creating a common archive for new citizens (by the Soviet state) and provoked hostile mythologisation of the groups in question (both political and racial), which resulted in the appearance of new "ex-émigré" communities showing selective or minimal adaptation to Soviet society. In this context, we can ask about the limits of power of Soviet citizenship and its entanglement in the wider context of the official and non-official conceptualisation of "ordinary Soviet people" as well as the complicated relations between external and internal state policy regarding Russians born outside the "motherland of the proletariat".

Citizenship is a concept with multiple dimensions and meanings depending on the basic features of a given society. As Jacqueline M. Miller (2002, 2) writes, "All manner of state policies can influence identity formation, but citizenship policy is crucial. Citizenship is the key delineator of the political community. It defines who enjoys the rights and undertakes the obligations of being a member of the state. It is also widely seen as an indicator of national community."

The relationship between the political and national communities was highly complicated in the USSR, since the state had dual status as an international political community of Communists<sup>6</sup> and an ethnopolitical structure that gave special status to Russians (Vishnevsky 1998). From the international perspective, the USSR enjoyed its status as the successor to the Russian Empire, selectively and arbitrarily continuing its obligations to former Russian citizens. The key feature of socialist modernisation was the routine use of violence, both as a tool to eliminate the existing sociocultural structures and as a basic mechanism of social regulation. The core of this policy was the use of the personal archives of citizens in the mass production of "public enemies" and strong ethnic and social segregation between Soviet citizens. The processes of state intervention in family life and the nuclearisation of families among urban Russians also played a crucial role (Vishnevsky 1998). The resistance to state family control and the preservation of traditional family values were perceived by the Soviet Russians as oriental (backward) cultural features. That cultural transition created the possibility of perceiving non-Soviet village communities as examples of backward and half-oriental subcultures.

The internalisation of Soviet propaganda and the development of useful habits of self-discipline provoked radical changes in the norms of Soviet personhood

6 The term "the USSR" did not contain geographical and ethnic designates.

and standards of normality in social life (Fitzpatrick 1976). The consequences included strong barriers to taking in new citizens born outside the USSR, stemming from the special role that official personal archives played in the designation process of the candidates' social status and their opportunities concerning social mobility. The key role of private history stemmed from the state's heightened focus on people's social records (the social status of their parents), their ethnic records (their origin) and their biographical records (their behaviour and political attitude) as a basis for verification and stratification. The "lowborn" or those having "poor biographies" were automatically separated from others and their rights were limited (Vishnevsky 1998). Personal archives also reflected the conflict regarding the conceptualisation of movement in Soviet society (both official and unofficial). Unofficial contact with hostile state regimes (emigration, living in pre-socialist territories, living in occupied territories) constituted a strong barrier to social mobility and full-rights status in Soviet society (Ablazhej 2007). In 1989 an elderly lady in Irkutsk told me, "I cannot be a member of the Communist Party, because I spent my childhood in the occupied territories."

Under conditions of mass paranoia, the attitude towards official (Humphrey 2002) and unofficial personal archives (based on people's unofficial living beyond the USSR) was extremely distrustful not only from the perspective of the state but also ordinary Soviet citizens. In that context, a conflict could be observed between the internalised official norms and the subjective personal narratives of ex-emigrants (not legitimised by the state) about the non-Soviet parts of their biographies. In the case of Russia, the transition of decisions concerning truth from the private level to the level of institutions of the socialist state provoked radical changes in ethnic solidarity (the politicisation of the ethnic sphere) and perception of Russian diaspora as "ours" in the cultural sense, but "strange" in the political sense. Therefore, the ethnically based transition from diaspora members into Soviet citizens could be carried out in the form of "negative inclusion" with temporary limitations regarding their rights and their status as "ex-enemies".

The lack of people's personal archives and their socialisation in the USSR required making a common archive for new citizens and provoked hostile mythologisation of new society members viewed as ex-bandits, collaborators, spies, etc. From that perspective, the Soviet passport-granting practices were only the first step on the long road to one's being included in Soviet society. It was not a matter of a conflict between the external and internal policies of the USSR, or between the state policy of ethnic solidarity and the state policy revealing the lack of confidence. It was, in fact, a logical system that gradually created citizens by means of the official interpretation of their personal histories and the translation of their outer biographies into Soviet categories. Their passport records (regarding place of birth) were the state legitimisation of official and unofficial exclusion practices regarding new citizens.

From an anthropological perspective, real citizenship status was based not only on the official decision (granting a passport and the official interpretation of one's personal archive) but mostly on the subjective mass imagination concerning categories of one's being "like us" or "like them". Soviet mass imagination and collective memory were based on state propaganda, but they adapted ideological patterns to their own needs. Radical changes in the official canon of history and the perception of the external world resulted in the inertia and disparity of some patterns and the diversity of Soviet identities (Humphrey 2002). From the perspective of Soviet people, a White émigré symbolised the old order and was stained by his or her collaboration with Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire. Immigration symbolised the right for people's free mobility, without state control, and the right to defend family life. That interpretation of movement and family rights was very strange to the isolated Soviet society, with a blurred line between family and social lives. In that situation, the alternative "Russianness" provoked aggression and attempts to disqualify it as politically hostile. There was a conflict between two models of "Russianness" (Soviet and non-Soviet), between two models of privacy, between two models of movement rights, between two ways of evaluating the past and tradition. The clear advantage of the Soviet version changed the potential dialogue into a hostile monologue and transformed the "alternative Russianness" into a special feature characteristic of backward and antagonistic communities.

The specificity of the "political" in the USSR resulting from the overmilitarisation of social life (Scocpol 1988, Alexandrov 1999) broadened the boundaries of political action to an extreme extent. In that context, political vocabulary referred to ethnic and racial debates and the evaluation of people's cultural status. The lack of possibility for friendly inclusion provoked complex exclusion discourses combining political, social and – when possible – cultural differences (orientalisation in Said's sense). In the case of Transbaikalia, the discourse about the "descendants of the wild Ataman Semenov's Cossacks" (the *Semenovtsy*) living in the Soviet, Chinese and Mongolian border territory was a typical example of a complex exclusion stereotype combining aspects which were political (bandits), social (Cossacks as archaic village people) and racial (Mestizo communities).

The quasi-Indigenous groups were destroyed both in Mongolia and China. Emigration lost its status and mixed marriages provoked the appearance of two new ex-old-settler communities: the local Russians in Mongolia and the Three River Delta Russians in China. Those communities differed from Russian immigrants in Inner Asia (i.e., the what are known as Manchurian Russians) with their village attachment, the local character of migration movements, the cultural background of the old settlers and their incorrect identification as "Ataman Semenov's wild Cossacks". This situation provoked the negative politicisation of the groups and the tendency to

perceive both the Soviet state and the citizens statically. The two groups being analysed had different historical experiences and paths to socialisation as Soviet citizens. The Three River Delta Russians experienced a time of cultural and economic domination where they lived (Lindgren 1938), along with the genocidal policy of Soviet military troops and strong repressions after their “liberation” in 1945. In their case, they lived in integrated settlements of immigrants with their own models of self-organisation. Under Japanese occupation (1932–1945) the community was subject to a special passport policy aimed at coercive citizenship granted by Manchukuo. The majority consisted of citizens hostile to the USSR, and they realised all the consequences of that situation: serving in the Kwantung Army and participating in public and cultural life. The community in question was also the object of strong anti-communist propaganda. In the USSR, where millions of people were jailed for simply telling a silly joke, that experience looked dangerous. The Sovietisation policy and access to citizenship did not guarantee political and cultural rehabilitation in the USSR. Members of these groups were treated by the state with a hostile distance. Those who returned to the USSR before 1953 (Stalin’s death) were sent to prison or exile, whereas after de-Stalinisation, they were forced to settle in Northern Kazakhstan. We can observe that the model of citizen recruitment was very similar to the Soviet policy towards the Russians in Eastern Europe and the Balkans: there was a warm invitation to return and a difficult start in the new society. It was called “the way of repentance”.

The lack of verifiable private history and basic social habits (the lack of verbal discipline, another point of view, the experience of an economy without starvation, etc.) resulted in the treatment of the groups as hostile and, thus, in need of earning the right to return through hard work or imprisonment (Perminov 2008). The official common archives of the groups became a substitute for personal history and differentiated the groups from others. That model of negative inclusion created a new group of citizens displaying selective socialisation and adaptation to Soviet culture. Political terms were eliminated from the groups’ vocabulary and thinking. Faith, the old model of family life and a strong social network remained. Thus, the community had some autonomy concerning the circumstances of how the way-of-repentance model of citizenship was used. Regardless of the parallels between private and common archives (collaboration with Japanese military forces, participation in the Cossack resistance, etc.), the group did not accept the Soviet version of reality and avoided the names and terms used by the propaganda (Semenov). Soviet propaganda and the collective imagination of the Soviet people artificially politicised the group, perceiving them as anti-communists and enemies of Soviet society. One of my respondents recalled this as follows:

After returning, we were considered enemies, the White Guard. The events of the civil war were far from us – we just wanted to return to our homeland and work, but the motherland kept reminding us about the sins of our fathers. Needless to say, Soviet stories about the civil war had nothing to do with the memories of our elders. We were chosen as enemies, whether we wanted to be or not. (O.P., 65 years old, Priargunsk, 09.08.2014)

In the case of the People's Republic of Mongolia (PRM), the situation differed significantly. Most of the local Russians in Mongolia found themselves in the country because of the 1928 famine, which was not related to Cossack immigration. After 1971, those people had Soviet passports (with no right to live in the USSR) and generally a Soviet identity (Mihalev 2008). The imagination of the Soviet people resulted in the group being viewed as the mythical *Semenovtsy* who had escaped to hide in Mongolia. The local Russians did not understand the significance of the name and started using it as a proper name. Before 1945 the community of refugees from the USSR in Mongolia were a small group of stateless people (*apatrides*), and the Mongolian authorities had no interest in their situation. The second wave of Mongolian Sovietisation after 1945 complicated the lives of the country's local Russians. The Russification of city life and the massive presence of Soviet specialists provoked questions about the group's status and identity. Based on the non-political (economic) causes of their immigration as well as their participation in WWII, the group expected acceptance from the Soviet state and counted on its slow adaptation to Soviet society. That never happened. The Soviet colonial institution in Mongolia used a mixed policy of preventive segregation and partial inclusion: on the one hand, KGB units warned Soviet specialists about the hostility of Ataman Semenov's wild Cossacks, on the other hand, members of the community were included in basic Soviet institutions in Mongolia (Soviet schools, kindergartens, special shops, etc.). The fantasies (enhanced by propaganda) of Soviet people identified those groups with the *Semenovtsy* based on the mythology connected with their real and fictional features: mestisation, physical aggression and bilingualism. This combination of the term (*Semenovtsy*) and selective elements of the Soviet stereotype was sufficient proof of their hostility. Based on the memories of local Russians and Soviet specialists, it can be postulated that the Soviet specialists never stopped thinking about the local Russians in terms of the Semenov myth.

The discriminatory discourse concerned primarily men: women appeared in memories only as potential sexual objects – they never had names and were only described as the "Semenov girls" (*Semenovki*). Men, in turn, were depicted as aggressive villagers or aggressive boys attacking "Soviet children" at school. The nature of the conflict lay in the connection of the "norms" and the "stereotype": ordinary Soviet people were

confronted with Semenovtsy, regular Russians with people of mixed origin, educated people with villagers. What caused the hostility? The Soviet contingent in Mongolia consisted of men of different ethnic origins. The USSR was a post-agrarian country (Sinyavsky 2003), and physical violence in the peripheral parts of the USSR was a routine way of communication. In the set of behavioural features attributed to local Russians (Stepanova 2008), there was nothing unfamiliar to Soviet people (excluding their strong Mongolian skills). Mongolia was an ideal territory for integration into society – it was isolated, dominated by Russians and had years of documented personal histories. Nonetheless, the Soviet community continued its policy of rejection. The reasons for its hostility stemmed from its altogether different conceptualisation of the right of mobility, from the confrontation between the Soviet community and informal networks of relatives and friends, as well as from political neutrality viewed as a political manifestation (hence the accusation of a non-Soviet lifestyle). We are dealing with the creation of a community as the antipodes of Soviet society and an instrument for introducing discipline. Thus, a regular relationship with the community was impossible. The granting of citizenship in the USSR in 1971 was an interesting demonstration of creating a Soviet citizen from a pariah. What is interesting, is that the date has not appeared as a turning point in the memories of either the local Russians or the Soviets. They never noticed the change.

The discourse concerning the wild Semenovtsy was supposed to mask the repressions against non-Soviet and Asian models of Russianness. It was not based on facts at all. Paradoxically, the groups connected with the Cossack resistance were “forgiven”, but the local Russians, who were never connected with them, remained stigmatised until the collapse of the USSR. The tragedy of the latter lay in the fact that in colonial Mongolia, their role could not change – their political rejection automatically combined with the social and racial one. There were examples of whole nations being persecuted in the history of the USSR. Those local Russians, however, exemplify a group created intentionally for persecution. Even today, the Russian community in Ulaanbaatar is divided into ex-Soviets and local Russians. In the case of the latter, the temptation to use the community’s shared archive to build its identity was so strong that it practically prevented its members from becoming citizens.

The consequences of the policy towards the communities in question need to be analysed, taking into account their reactions and adaptation strategies. We are dealing with the sudden introduction of peasant communities into a generally hostile social reality as well as their separation from ordinary citizens. The groups being analysed had to conform both to their stigmatisation and their inability to adapt their version of history to the official one (shared by everyone else). That situation caused considerable correction in their collective memory and the selective Sovietisation of some private versions of events. A list of terms, names and ideas necessary in their

previous life were eliminated. Instead, they resorted to complaining about their harsh treatment and rejection. The members of the groups being analysed became Soviet people – insofar as it was possible under the given conditions. They approved of socialism, underlined the absurdity of the civil war and avoided dangerous memories. The two communities reacted to the political disciplinary discourse and to their rejection by other Soviet citizens in different ways. The Three River Delta Russians stressed the fact that they were hard-working, and they became closed and religious. The local Russians in Mongolia, in turn, became aggressive towards Soviet citizens and developed their agricultural resourcefulness, which led to profiteering in food and other fields. Their aggression towards the Soviet specialists was a desperate reaction to the constant persecution of the group, as well as its rejection by the PRM. Thus, as a result of propaganda, new groups of negative identities appeared (the *Semenovtsy*) based on the propaganda itself and had nothing in common with the civil war heroes. That new, subjective *Semenov*-style subculture resulted from the reaction of the Transbaikalian old settlers to their marginalisation and to the attitude of the Soviets towards de-Cossackisation. In that context, passports granted to non-Soviets played a role in transforming the analysed groups into local Soviet subcultures more comprehensible to society, and the Three-River-Delta Russians almost became the “forgiven”.

The reasons why those discrimination practices have been so popular until now (after the collapse of the USSR) stem from the hidden aspects of the conflict between Soviet society and the analysed communities: that is, the right of the latter to live outside the USSR, their autonomous family life and their right to interpret their own cultural tradition. The most important of these, however, was their ability to enter Soviet society without credible personal archives. In the case of Eastern European and (urban) Manchurian Russian immigration, the period of stigmatisation ended fairly quickly, unlike in the case of Mongolia. The examples analysed show that entering society through a negative legend created by the state brought a danger that the group would be treated instrumentally by both the state (for disciplinary purposes) and by the other citizens (focussed on their exotic enemies). The tragedy of the analysed groups lies in the fact that their conceptualisation by Soviet society was based on a legend that was crucial to the identity of the region. The legend metaphorically described the reasons for the Cossacks’ physical extermination – it made the victims guilty and confirmed the ethnosocial modernity obtained after the cleansing. The negative legend created by the state and society turned out to be stronger here, not only due to their Soviet passports but also the general mechanisms of introducing new citizens into society through “penance”.

## AFTER THE USSR: WHAT REMAINS IN THE END

The disappearance of the USSR and the closure of the border management regime did not mean the victory of the Semenov myth. After a short euphoria of trying to replace Soviet heroes with non-Soviet ones, the realisation came that it was impossible to continue the mystery. The counter-memory turned out to be “anti-communist in form, but socialist in content”: it transferred Semenov-based Soviet fantasies about the right to violence, about the border area as a space of the impossible (and about the right of “our government” to implement preventive repression). The new situation however has brought new questions. Without denying respondents the right to experience complex forms of temporality and deep involvement in historical events (Maynes 2008), there are no clear criteria for a real “Semenovtsy”. Who now are the fantasy characters constantly present in the practices of memory and counter-memory? Are they the real followers of Semenov; the descendants of Cossack emigration, who retain (or, for the most part, do not retain) a connection with the views of their parents; repatriates and emigrants, forcibly conscripted by the Japanese into the Cossack units of colonel I. A. Peshkov and the “Asano” detachment; or the Transbaikalian people, who perceive the Soviet myth as the “enduring glory of their ancestors”? It can be assumed that, in the crooked mirror of the Semenov myth, the late Soviet border community saw itself: its fear of border territories, hope for the existence of a political alternative, its longing for revolutionary romanticism and the unification of everyone against a common enemy. No less Soviet was the counter-memory, more associated with the trauma of de-Cossackisation than with the civil war. It transferred on the Semenov-based Soviet imaginations about the right for violence, about the border territory as a space of the impossible (networks of Cossack resistance going beyond the cordon) and about the right of “our government” to carry out preventive repression.

From the point of view of local residents, the gradual disappearance of the Semenovites resembled the dramatic moment at midnight in *Cinderella*: a powerful enemy dissolved or turned into an ordinary people associated with the region, differing only in greater religiosity and their attitude towards peasant labour. The imaginary geography of the legend dissolved along with the enemy. The proximity of Russian China made it possible to verify the virtual nature of the White Guard nest (Basharov 2010), and the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the mass emigration of local Russians from Mongolia ended the “Semenov epic” in that country. Moreover, the Transbaikalian villages resembled the Cossack Vendee least of all. For obvious reasons, the alternative past of eastern Transbaikalia did not have its own material representations, being, first of all, a reflection of frontier mythologies. Paradoxically, it is precisely the stoppage of Soviet cultural policy that makes the Sovietisation of the cultural field of the region absolute: the phantom threat of Cossack resistance

could not exist outside the peculiar temporality of the Soviet border regime. The former Soviet Transbaikalia, rapidly turning from a bastion of the Soviet state into a peripheral and poor region, for obvious reasons turned out to be unprepared for the conversion of demons into angels, preserving Soviet mythologems as the basis of the region's identity (Humphrey 2002).

In addition, the transformation of Soviet mythologies from official to private in many ways breaks the accepted models of opposition between local and external. From this point of view, the Soviet and its regional alternative are connected by a common gap with the present time. Only the intensification of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, or modest attempts at spontaneous re-Stalinisation, revive the phantom – both in the form of an external memory of the search for Semenovites in the region and, internally, by glorifying the catastrophe of Cossack Transbaikalia.

The new historical dilemmas of the inhabitants of the Transbaikal province are illustrated in a display in the Museum of Local Lore of Priargunsk. Materials related to the first half of the 20th century are placed according to the confrontation on opposite walls. The visual culmination of this dual order of regional history is the placement of portraits of Stalin and Semenov in binary opposition. History becomes a game of political will and the capacity for violence. It should be noted that the provincial museum breaks from the traditional model of presenting the victims of a totalitarian state as defenceless martyrs of a ruthless state machine. Russian society places the Soviet state and the resistance to power on different moral planes, and attempts to combine them are highly questionable. In the case of Priargunsk, the political mythology of the Soviet state is visually contrasted with the political mythology of White Transbaikalia. In the mass consciousness of the region, both Stalin and Semenov symbolise the will of power and the ruthless extermination of opponents for the sake of a higher goal. In both cases, the imaginary state correlates with a state of emergency: now Semenov becomes a reflection of Stalin – being able to foresee the crimes of the Communists, he punishes future criminals ruthlessly and with foresight. Here we meet with the complete Sovietisation of anti-Soviet memory, and its inseparability from the Soviet history of the region. The two political alternatives are separated exclusively by the point of localisation – Soviet Transbaikalia did not recognise the rebellious chieftain of its heroes in the Cossacks. The predators of the frontier, who break the martyrological canon of Russian culture, arouse respect and fear, but they do not cease to be complete strangers.

The Semenovskiy myth becomes part of the nostalgia for a vanished country, no longer a Cossack one, but a Soviet Transbaikalia. Army folklore, historical novels (Povolyaev 2003), permitted memories of the White Guard and interventionists do not allow this story to disappear, but also deprive it of messianic pathos. After the collapse of the USSR, this part of the collective “experience” was legitimised by the memory infrastructure on the internet and historical journalism.

Under the new conditions, the memory of the tragic events of the Russian Civil War is created within the framework of asymmetric reconciliation, where the key issue remains the attitude towards the USSR. Before our eyes, a mechanism is actually being created for the return and legitimisation of the Soviet past as an integral imperial project and victory over the radical left madness of the revolution and the civil war. This explains the shift of public attention from Lenin to Stalin, as well as the simultaneous glorification of the White and Red armies. It should be noted that this form of justification is very deceptive, since instead of reconciliation, it offers increased confrontation. Introducing the concept of the only possible choice, it outlines most of the biographies of the inhabitants of the region as traitors and collaborators. If we admit that the USSR was a slightly exotic form of the Russian Empire, then the enemies of the Soviet imperial project become the enemies of Russia. In contrast to the collective guilt of phantom disloyalty, the new perspective not only creates the appearance of the individualisation of responsibility, but also new forms of disloyalty subordinated to the imperial reading of Soviet history. This means preserving the memory of memory without changing the established assessments of the civil war.

#### CONCLUSION

The complex temporality (Radu 2010) of the Soviet worldview made the past an arena of political struggle and sharply politicised seemingly neutral reactions: avoidance, silence, misunderstanding or fatigue from the turbulent history of the border areas. In this context, guests from abroad immediately became guests from the past, increasing fears in general as well as those about the credulity of the Soviet state. Unlike the Stalinist period (Scott 2009), when panics and fears were a strictly planned show of loyalty, here we are dealing with a grassroots initiative, only partially, and with great reservations, supported by the state apparatus. In this context, the need for the existence of an enemy can take forms far from the expectations of the state and continues to be the main obstacle to the adoption of political alternatives.

Using the experience of repatriates from Inner Asia as an example, this article examines the specifics of Soviet practices of suspicion, fixing the border population within a framework of inevitable political and racial impurity. The communities captured by this phantom are not able to form any opposition to the language of accusation: they either do not understand the essence of the issue, or they do not know how to speak the language of the Soviet memory. At the same time, all sides of this complex conversation rather clearly perceive the causes of why anti-communist resistance resonates in Transbaikalia. This is the breaking of the martyrological consensus (and the tacit prohibition of armed resistance) over the memory of the right to own

political order, with its own ethics and legal norms. This is a conflict between the local and the general, wherein negative characters are mastered and their actions are not subject to general (official) ethics. We are dealing with an imaginary state order capable of creating its own ethical regimes and imperatives of protection. The transformation of the memory of civil war events into a phantom led to the erosion of ethical responsibility and the localization of resistance in the Transbaikalia region and its border population (Buryats, Evenks and Mestizos).

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