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Jihad as Passionarity: Said Buriatskii and Lev Gumilev

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses Russian elements in the texts of Said Buriatskii (1982–2010), who in the late 2000s was one of the main ideologists and symbols of the internationalist Islamist resistance in the North Caucasus. Trying to explain the importance and validity of jihad, Buriatskii referred to the concepts of the famous Soviet historian and anthropologist Lev Gumilev and brought Islamic radicalism closer to a Russian-speaking audience by using Gumilev's terminology. Indeed, he found some appreciation among Russian radical journalists, and even among oppositionists from a background close to the Russian Orthodox Church. This article therefore argues that, in spite of his Islamic rhetoric, Buriatskii can also be understood as aspiring to achieve the status of a Russian public intellectual, particularly as a representative of a broader movement that emphasizes values such as sincerity and passion.

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Introduction: jihadism, Russian style

One of the best-known representatives of jihad in Russia's North Caucasus was Said Buriatskii (1982–2010), a convert to Islam with a mixed Russian-Buryat family background. Buriatskii has been a central personality in many Western and Russian accounts of the jihad movement in the Northern Caucasus, which are mostly written from a security perspective. While most observers classify Buriatskii (as well as other jihadists, such as Shamil Basaev, 1965–2006) merely as a propagandist of radical Islamic teachings imported from the Middle East (Hahn 2009; Roshchin 2003; Evdokimov 2010), this article argues that Buriatskii is better understood as a post-Soviet phenomenon, and as a mediator: his many videos, messages and texts are a translation of Islamic thinking into a specifically Russian discourse ('Russian' in the sense of *rossiiskii* – i.e. pertaining to the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional Federation). I argue that Buriatskii's texts and video messages – all in the Russian language – are framed in a way that makes them distinctly Russian, especially through a multitude of references to Russian literature and to popular anthropological models.

This Russian/post-Soviet background of Russia's jihadists has so far largely escaped scholarly attention; their thinking is usually depicted as just being a copy of what is

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offered on the market of global jihadism. The academic scholar of Islam, Alexander Knysh (2012), for example, considers that the Caucasus Emirate's 'rhetoric of insurgency' does not differ markedly from what is preached by foreign Salafi and fundamentalist authors. This view is shared by US military analyst Gordon Hahn (2012), who writes that the ideology of the North Caucasian jihadists is in full conformity with that of al-Qa'ida. These observations are certainly true when it comes to ideological texts, which often contain a significant amount of Arabic loanwords to demonstrate the authors' Islamic authenticity; opponents are denounced as *kāfirs* (unbelievers) or *munāfiqs* (hypocrites), and the organizational structures of Islamist cells are described in the classical terms of Islamic state law, with *shūrās* (councils), *amīrs* (leaders), and *qāḍīs* (judges). A certain pool of such basic terms has become a major marker of the militants' discourse, some of them even entering the lexicon of Russian mainstream media (Kemper 2012).

However, the prominence of this distinctly Arabic-Islamic rhetoric of universal Salafism/jihadism conceals another layer in the public discourse of the jihadists, one that is distinctly Russian, and that may be equally, if not more, important for understanding the attraction of militancy in Russia. One of the first scholars to draw attention to this phenomenon was Dmitry Shlapentokh, who observed that the influence of Russian cultural and political traditions has so far gone unnoticed. According to Shlapentokh (2011), in the first stage of the Russian–Chechen conflict, the jihadists of the North Caucasus made statements that reflected influences from Eurasian ideas, Russian Marxism and even Russian messianism. However, in the second stage of their struggle, according to Shlapentokh, Russian jihadists fully conformed to the imported standards of Islamist jihadist ideology.

Similarly, Vladimir Bobrovnikov has drawn attention to the use of Russian and Soviet patterns in Islamic polemics in the North Caucasus, and in particular in film documentaries on Sufism and 'Wahhabism'. This genre has been heavily influenced not only by the Islamic missionary tradition of *da'wā* but also by Cold War Soviet propaganda, incorporating its anti-Western and anti-Semitic stereotypes and terminology. In addition, Bobrovnikov (2011) has noted the influence of (post-)Soviet pop culture in internet clips on *shahīds* ('martyrs', suicide bombers), including in clips about Said Buriatskii.

While it is certainly true that influences from the Middle East have increased over time (with the expansion of the Islamic internet and Islamic education), the distinctly 'Russian' and post-Soviet components are still persistent; so much so that even Russian intellectuals have begun to perceive the Russian Islamic 'scene', including the jihadists, as no longer completely alien to the Russian intellectual tradition.

As scholars of late-Soviet and post-Soviet cultural and ideological transformations have noted, we find a broader tendency among contemporary Russian intellectuals and artists to reconsider the post-Soviet situation by appealing to the values of honesty, sincerity and openness. This sincerity is a reaction to what is described as the 'post-modern' post-Soviet styles of irony, sarcasm and cultural relativity. As Alexei Yurchak (2008, 257) has argued, while 'the late 1980s and early 1990s were dominated by the aesthetics of absurdist irony and *stioḅ*, in today's scene sincerity has become the dominant aesthetic form'.¹ This sincerity is defined by idealism, romanticism and humanism, a search for friendship and partnership, and a readiness for self-sacrifice (258). According to Ellen Rutten (2008), this return to honesty and integrity established itself in Russian literature as a broad 'new sincerity' movement, a term coined by writer Dmitry Prigov, and then elaborated upon from a theoretical perspective by literary critic Mikhail Epstein (1992). Defining

‘new sincerity’ as a departure from post-modern radical irony, Rutten (2008, 206–207) identifies three important characteristics of this trend: a return to the reader, a revivification of the author’s figure, and the use of simple, broadly accessible language. This return to personal and individual aspects of literature stands in opposition to post-modern ideas about the ‘death of the author’ (as formulated by Roland Barthes).

In what follows, I shall try to use this framework to understand the discursive strategies of Said Buriatskii. After a brief sketch of his trajectory to media jihadism, I shall discuss how he has been taken as a positive example to emulate by some non-Muslim authors, including Russian anti-fascist oppositional writers. What constitutes Buriatskii’s appeal, and which media strategies has he employed to raise sympathy among Muslims and non-Muslims? I shall then analyse one particular text in which Buriatskii explains the concept of *istishhād* (the Arabic term for ‘searching for *shahāda*’, that is, going out to fight on Allah’s path and seeking martyrdom). In this text, Buriatskii employs not only the traditional Islamic rhetoric about God’s reward for a fighter who dies on the battlefield but also typical Russian and Soviet *topoi*. Against this background, Buriatskii’s violent death in 2010, at the hands of the Russian security services, only completed his self-declared mission of martyrdom.

Conversion: finding the straight path in a mixed environment

Said Buriatskii (or Abu Sa’d Sa’id al-Buriyati) was born on 10 February 1982 in Ulan-Ude (Buriatiia, Siberia) as Aleksandr Tikhomirov. His father was reportedly of mixed Kazakh and Buryat origin; his mother, who raised Aleksandr, is Russian. There are several narratives, published online, about how Aleksandr Tikhomirov discovered Islam and became Said Buriatskii. His mother claims that he embraced Islam at the age of 17, after he read a Russian translation of the Qur’an (Umm Said 2010). Other sources claim he converted at the age of 15 (Bobrova 2010).

After Aleksandr/Said finished attending the local school, probably in 1999, the imam of the central mosque in Irkutsk persuaded him to pursue Islamic studies at the Rasul’ Akram Madrasa in Moscow. This Islamic school was founded with support from Nafigulla Ashirov, an important mufti of Siberia, who is also a co-founder of the Council of Russia’s Muftis (the umbrella organization headed by Mufti Ravil’ Gainutdin of the Muslim Spiritual Administration of the Russian Federation in Moscow). In the 1990s, when the Islamic administrations in Russia still enjoyed financial and technical aid from Middle Eastern countries, the Rasul’ Akram Madrasa also obtained support from Iran, and reportedly had Shi’i elements in its programme. Said left this madrasa before it was closed down in 2002 (after allegations that it was fostering extremism) (Rasul Akram 2010); he then went on to study at the staunchly Sunni Al’ Furkan Madrasa in Buguruslan (Orenburg region), which was run by teachers from Medina (Saudi Arabia). This was one of the largest and most popular Salafi schools in post-Soviet Russia. He graduated in 2002, and was included in a group of Al’ Furkan graduates who were sent to further their studies in Egypt, reportedly under the guidance of Muhammad Yusri, a functionary in an Egyptian Islamic foundation. Al’ Furkan was closed down in 2004, also on allegations of spreading extremist propaganda.

Buriatskii studied in Egypt for one year, or maybe even three. Formally, he was enrolled at the famous Al-Azhar University, but we must assume that he mostly took courses from

private teachers. The Russian *Wikipedia* site claims that he studied with several famous Islamic TV preachers (Wikipedia 2015), but this is unconfirmed. Rinat Kazakhstani (Zainullin), a well-known Salafi-minded Tatar preacher from Kazakhstan who is probably some five years Buriatskii's senior, claims that Buriatskii took Arabic language lessons from himself and from his younger brother at Al-Azhar University (Kazakhstani 2011). The Egyptian secret service reportedly forced Buriatskii to leave the country. According to his mother, Said returned to Moscow in 2003, but then he left for Kuwait the following year (Umm Said 2010); other sources say he went directly to Kuwait, and perhaps to Saudi Arabia (Kavkaz-uzel 2009).

In 2005 or 2006, Said worked as an Arabic translator for the Islamic publishing house *Umma* in Moscow. *Umma* is directed by the ethnic Chechen Aslambek Ezhaev, an Islamic activist with public Salafi credentials, who is not, however, in opposition to Gainutdin's state-backed Muftiate in Moscow. Said also worked for *islamnews.ru*, one of the major Islamic information agencies in Russia, well-known at that time for its Salafi positions. It is in those years that Said Buriatskii published his first video sermons and lectures, mainly on *musulmanin.com*, a site run by *Umma*. Many of these had an educational content, more in the style of lectures than classical sermons; they dealt with narratives about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, on standard topics such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, the afterlife, faith and fasting. *Musulmanin.com* also posted productions by many other Salafi preachers, including Kamal al-Zand (an Arab from Kazan), the Azerbaijani Elmir Kuliev, Abu Iakhia Krymskii, Muhammad Karachai, the Daghestani Bagauddin Magomedov and Rinat Kazakhstani. In 2007, Buriatskii went on hajj.

This brief overview of his early career demonstrates that Buriatskii received his Islamic knowledge from a very fragmented and volatile system of private Islamic education; under Putin, most of these schools, agencies, publishing houses and sites have been either closed down or forced to remain within political parameters acceptable to the Russian state. Buriatskii's wanderings brought him into contact with various other Islamic activists, from many regions of the former USSR, who were all busy establishing a name for themselves by developing a public stance. And Salafism was almost mainstream. Interestingly, while the rather peripheral Buguruslan madrasa was the only place where he received education for a long period, it was in Moscow that he found the infrastructure and the media that made it possible for him to gain fame among a wider audience. Kazakhstani (2011), in one of his attacks on Buriatskii, calls *musulmanin.com* the 'star factory' (*fabrika zvezd*) of Russia's Salafi scene – hinting at the commercial implications of the nascent Russian Islamic media industry, and at the provenance of the donations that keep the site alive.

Furthermore, it seems that Buriatskii did not attach himself to one specific group or teacher. Rather, his education was a mixture of what he received where he studied, and perhaps what he read for himself, and what he accepted from video and internet sites from around the Muslim world. His lectures generally do not reveal concrete references to individual Islamic authorities, political or spiritual. Buriatskii was nobody's disciple; he was, in fact, as much a product of the all-Russian Islamic scene as he was influenced by Islamic groups from the Middle East.

In the spring of 2008, Buriatskii attached himself to the Caucasus Emirate. As he himself explained (Buriatskii 2013b), he had not been thinking about joining the jihadists until he received a written invitation from a certain Muhannad (1961–2010), an ethnic

Arab, deputy of the Caucasus Emirate's military amir (leader). Buriatskii then took an oath of allegiance (Arabic: *bay'a*) to Dokku Umarov (1964–2013), the former underground president of the defunct Republic of Ichkeria (Chechnya), who in 2007 proclaimed the Caucasus Emirate, with himself as amir. In May 2008, Buriatskii travelled to the Caucasus (or to wherever Umarov was hiding at that time), and soon became one of his major propagandists. Before his move to the Caucasus, Buriatskii had not issued any calls to jihad but, after his meeting with Umarov, he began to publish sermons, speeches and video reports on the Emirate's major website. He also found himself in charge of *Riyāḍ al-ṣāliḥīn* (Russian: *Riiāz-us-salikhin*), a terrorist unit that Shamil Basaev had established in 2001.

How much Buriatskii participated in actual terrorist attacks is very difficult to ascertain; Russian media linked him to a number of bomb attacks, including the explosion in the Nevskii Ekspres train near St Petersburg in 2009. From Buriatskii's own video blogs and messages, it is obvious that he participated in violent actions in the North Caucasus; we also see him reporting from training camps, and from meeting places of jihadist groups, wearing a military uniform and carrying guns. In his videos, Buriatskii employs a specially trained voice and speaks in a harsh tone, with impressive facial expressions. These military aesthetics convey the image of a faithful hero – he does not only speak about jihad, he lives it.

His online publications can be divided into several types: video sermons devoted exclusively to religious matters (Buriatskii 2009g), video addresses on current issues of the Caucasus Emirate and jihad (Buriatskii 2013b, 2009g, 2009f, 2009e, 2009d), and video reports in which he comments on specific military operations of the Caucasus Emirate (Buriatskii 2009c). Here he employs a more colloquial style, but he also uses Islamic terminology and quotations from the Qur'an. Taken together, these types are a powerful means to stay connected to his (assumed) audience, to which he demonstrates the sincerity of his intentions and the authenticity of his person. Some clips – including sermons, addresses or reports – were accompanied by a full written text. A fourth category of Buriatskii's media production consists of more lengthy academic/religious discussions; one of these will be discussed in detail below.

Conflicting images of Buriatskii

After his death in 2010, some Russian non-Muslim journalists started to acknowledge that Buriatskii had become popular among parts of Russia's youth. One of these journalists is Vladimir Golyshev, who has a theological background and was involved in organizational work for the Russian Orthodox Church and in pro-Kremlin PR, but who, in 2005, began to be seen as opposed to the Russian government (Wiki.kbanda 2012). In October 2011, Golyshev published a heroic article on Buriatskii, entitled 'The Man with the Knapsack: Said Buriatskii as a Living Rejection of the Spirit of the Zero Years' (Golyshev 2011) (published in Gleb Pavlovskii's internet journal *Russkii Zhurnal*, which can be characterized as targeting an intellectual audience with dissident inclinations).

In Golyshev's view, Buriatskii was 'sincere' (*iskrennyi*) and 'real' (*nastoiashchii*), and he called him a 'real martyr' (*nastoiashchii muchennik*). Golyshev saw in Buriatskii a new Che Guevara;² and he compared Buriatskii to the colourful Russian film actor Ivan Okhlobystin, a clergyman of the Russian Orthodox Church ('a glamor priest with tattoos', in Golyshev's words) who became popular as an actor in modern re-makes of Dostoevskii's *Idiot*,

and who in 2011 spoke in the Russian media about his ambitions to run as a candidate in the 2012 presidential elections.

This is how Golyshev (2011) explained his interest in Buriatskii:

Even for me, as a Christian who is far removed from the details of Islamic theology, one thing was clear: [with Buriatskii] something authentic burst into the world of simulacrum³ (*v mir simuliakrov vorvalos' nehto podlinnoe*). And this world was shaken.

Said Buriatskii was thus constructed as a genuine fighter against post-modern reality whom even non-Muslim intellectuals could look up to. In Golyshev's view, Buriatskii was a martyr: 'He came to Chechnya not to fight but to die.'

It must be noted that this article was published in *Russkii Zhurnal's* section 'Personalities of the 2000s' (*Litsa nulevykh*'), implying that Buriatskii deserves a place among the most prominent personalities of that period, where he stands beside influential journalists such as Oleg Kashin, Sergei Dorenko, Mikhail Leont'ev and Il'ia Oskolkov-Tsentsiper, some, though not all, of whom are considered to belong to the opposition.

Buriatskii was equally taken up by Il'ia Fal'kovskii, a public intellectual involved in a broader movement of Russian anti-fascists, opponents of the Putin government and of globalization. After Buriatskii's death, Fal'kovskii produced (together with Aleksandr Litoi) a book under the title *Civil War Has Already Begun* (Fal'kovskii and Litoi 2013), in which he explores the biographies of nine Russian terrorists, ranging from Islamists (Buriatskii, Anzor Astemirov and Iasin Rasulov) to Russian radical nationalists (such as Nikita Tikhonov). Fal'kovskii also gives an account of two 'partisan' groups, including the 'Far Eastern Partisans' (*Primorskie partizany*) (Fal'kovskii and Litoi 2013, 178). Again, the religious divide (Islam–non-Islam) is bridged to describe a common phenomenon.

Fal'kovskii (now using the Islamized pseudonym Il'ias Fal'kaev) published his Buriatskii chapter on the website of the artistic art group 'Pop-Grafika' (Fal'kaev n.d.). Here too, the context makes the difference: in the same section, he published his interview with Dmitrii Prigov (the writer introduced above as a pioneer of 'new sincerity'), and an article on the poet Timur Kibirov (another widely acknowledged representative of that 'new sincerity' in art; see Rutten 2008, 205–210). Falkaev/Fal'kovskii makes a direct link between Buriatskii and 'sincerity': 'Said, whose sincerity caused no doubts even among his enemies, became a martyr killed for his faith. For the radicals his glory will only get stronger over the years' (Fal'kaev n.d.). Fal'kovskii compares Buriatskii to Russian terrorists of the late nineteenth century, such as Boris Savinkov and Mariia Spiridonova.⁴ According to Fal'kovskii, what Buriatskii has in common with them is his attitude of self-sacrifice (*samopozhertvovanie*).

Needless to say, positive images of Buriatskii are especially abundant on the websites of the Islamic militants. The emphasis on sincerity is most compelling in a document published by his mother, entitled 'Letter of the Mother of Said Buriatskii to the Russian Media', which was published on the radical Islamist websites *Kavkazcenter* and *Hunafa.com* in March 2010. In this peculiar modern hagiography, Buriatskii's mother ('Umm Said', 'mother of Said') portrays her son in the most positive hues, claiming that as a school boy he already had a deep knowledge of literature and history, and that he regularly used the public library (the family was not wealthy enough to purchase books); she describes his conversion as resulting from his 'sincere and pure' (*iskrennyye i chistye*)

motivations, from a spiritual search. She herself embraced Islam two years before Aleksandr, purportedly after reading ‘Human Son’ (*Syn chelovecheskii*), a work by the Orthodox Christian priest Aleksandr Men’ (Umm Said 2010). Aleksandr Men’ was killed in 1990 by unknown assailants; the Orthodox missionary Daniil Sysoev (himself assassinated in 2009) called him a ‘heretic’ (Sysoev 2002).⁵ Umm Said’s link to Islam, however, may also have been due to the influence of her second husband, an ethnic Chechen (Gazeta 2010). However that may have been, what is important here is that conversion to Islam in the 1990s must be seen in the context of a broader search for religious truth, one in which the borders between the traditional confessions were initially not of primary importance for the individual – leading to configurations that would seem paradoxical today.

Going against such hagiographical accounts, a thoroughly negative view of Buriatskii is given by Rinat Kazakhstani, a Tatar Salafi preacher from Kazakhstan. Kazakhstani eventually became associated with ‘Madkhalism’, a Salafi movement named after Rabi’ al-Madkhalī (b. 1931), the former head of the Sunna Studies Department at the Islamic University of Medina. There is a network of Madkhali media activists in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Crimea, who are characterized by their professed loyalty to the incumbent regimes, be that Nazarbaev’s, Putin’s or Aliiev’s. Kazakhstani rejects the call to jihad in the present situation, and thus opposed Buriatskii and the Caucasus Emirate. In Kazakhstani’s opinion, Dokku Umarov in fact declared the whole Chechen nation to be unbelievers, since the population largely supports the current Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. In a 2009 online statement (eliminated from the web but re-published as Kazakhstani 2011), he accused Buriatskii of following Umarov in this act of *takfīr*.

Kazakhstani also claimed that Buriatskii had a weak theological training. During his study year in Egypt, Buriatskii ‘preferred to learn the [Arabic] language, instead of our lessons in ‘*aqīda* [Islamic dogma] and other books [that Kazakhstani and his brother Nail’ taught to the students from Buguraslan]. In this way he stayed in Egypt for eight months’. For Kazakhstani, the only thing Buriatskii was good at was retelling the stories of others; he ‘had no knowledge whatsoever’. Buriatskii (2009a) immediately responded to this accusation, conceding that he never claimed to be an Islamic scholar (*‘ālim*), and that he did not claim he was able to give fatwas (expert opinions on matters of Islamic law). This is a frank statement, and it is true that academic scholars of Islamic theology would probably find Buriatskii’s opus too trivial to study seriously. Buriatskii obviously saw himself not as a theologian but as a Muslim Russian public intellectual who used his erudition in secular humanities to justify the jihadist movement.

Istishhād, sacrifice and the theory of passionarity

Buriatskii’s internet publications display a mix of historical, ideological and religious elements, best demonstrated in a text he published in December 2009 on *kavkazcenter.com*, the major web portal of the Caucasus Emirate. In his programmatic text entitled ‘Istishhad: between Truth and Lie’, Buriatskii gives an account of the Islamists’ motivation for sacrificing their lives on the path of Allah (Buriatskii 2009b). The text addresses not only insiders, and not only Muslims, but ‘everybody whose brain has not already been washed by television’. The main question Buriatskii discusses is why some people decide to become martyrs (Russian: *smertniki/shakhidy*, Arabic: *shahīd*, pl. *shuhadāʾ*).

In the first part of the text, Buriatskii discusses a number of historical examples, beginning with the Prophet himself (who in 628 at Hudaibiyya received his followers' oath to fight and if necessary die for Islam; see Watt 1971, 539). The tradition of *istishhād*, 'readiness/longing to die as a martyr', thus goes back to the very founder of Islam. Buriatskii also discusses the Shi'i Isma'ilis of the medieval period (who were denounced as *Hashshāshīn*, 'hashish-consuming killers' – hence the English term 'Assassins'). However, in Buriatskii's Sunni eyes, their readiness to die for their faith was already a 'degeneration' of the *istishhād* principle, because their fight went against the 'whole Muslim world'. Buriatskii argues that it is the image of these Assassins that is influencing Russian journalists when they portray the motivations of contemporary suicide bombers in the North Caucasus as being a result of brainwashing, hypnosis and drugs. The purpose of Buriatskii's article is to show that there is no such manipulation, but that jihadist militants and suicide bombers are fully convinced of their cause, and sincere in their actions.

While the radical Shi'i sects of the medieval period are thus described as an aberration, Buriatskii makes a positive reference to Christian cases of self-sacrifice. He refers to a historical incident (in 286 CE) when the Tenth Theban Legion refused to participate in the persecution of Christians. To punish this disobedience, the Roman Emperor Trajan gave the command to execute every tenth soldier in the Legion. Buriatskii claims that the emperor had to revoke this order when he saw how many volunteers were willing to be martyred. According to Buriatskii (2009b), it was this willingness to sacrifice their own lives that eventually brought the Christians to power in the Roman Empire.

However, Buriatskii's most important non-Muslim point of reference in this programmatic text is the famous Russian historian and anthropologist Lev N. Gumilev (1912–1992), from whose work Buriatskii borrows the concept of 'passionarity' (*passionarnost'*) – a concept that in its highest form leads to *istishhād*. Buriatskii claimed that he had read Gumilev in his youth:

At one point I studied the works of L. N. Gumilev, the famous historian; already in my youth I learned about the concept of *passionarnost'*, which he introduced into the historical sciences, and he saw as an instrument for systematizing history. Here we will not review other versions of that historical approach [to come to an overall understanding of historical development], and we will not look at the 'civilizational' approach of [Arnold] Toynbee, the conception of Jean-Baptiste Vico, of [Oswald] Spengler, and not even of the great historian of Islam Ibn Khaldun. I have always been interested in [Gumilev's] idea of 'passionarity', and in the theory according to which the emergence of ethnos is directly connected to that phenomenon. [Gumilev] understood this term [passionarity] as the general striving of a people (*narod*), of an ethnos, to reach its major goal, [and for this goal] people were ready to perform great deeds. In his opinion, [passionarity] was the reason why ethnos could emerge, seemingly out of nothing; and a reduction in the level of passionarity led to the disappearance of an ethnos. The main thing here is that [Gumilev developed a matrix] on which he indicated the highest level of passionarity [under the term] P6; this peak Gumilev understood as self-sacrifice (*samopozhertvovanie*), a readiness to make sacrifices (*zhertvennost'*) to fulfil a given task. If we look at this from a neutral position, we will understand that Gumilev was right – because not only states but also whole peoples (*narody*) rose only when persons were ready to sacrifice their lives for a certain idea.

He then turns to Islam:

When the companions of Allah's Prophet, although they were just a few people, attacked the thousands of soldiers of the Byzantine and Persian armies, it was very normal to die on the

Path of Allah; and this passionarity became the fundamental principle of the Caliphate. And when the Muslims [later started to] delve in luxury, and when death on the Path of Allah was already regarded as [merely] suicide, the curve of passionarity went down.

But we cannot ignore the fact that sacrifice was primarily inherent in followers of religions, rather than in nationalists who [merely] cared for the creation of the state. And there are no other world religions except Islam and Christianity where sacrifice would manifest itself so massively. (Buriatskii 2009b)

What we see here is that Buriatskii turns to the Soviet/Russian academic discourse of anthropology, from which he borrows concepts such as ‘passionarity’, ‘ethnos’ and ‘sacrifice’. As Alfrid Bustanov and Michael Kemper have shown, within the Russian Islamic discourse there is one strong trend that embraces academic concepts and jargon; they refer to a specific ‘academic’ version of the Russian Islamic discourse, which develops a specific form of Russian Islamic sociolect that these scholars postulate (Bustanov and Kemper 2013). While Bustanov and Kemper studied this ‘academic Islamic language’ with regard to borrowings from mainstream Soviet Marxist, as well as post-modern Western academic parlance, Buriatskii chose to draw from the repertoire of Gumilev, a Russian scholar whom one could best classify as a non-Marxist dissident, a charismatic figure who stood against mainstream Soviet interpretations, and who, for this, suffered from Soviet repression (Doroshenko and Kefeli 2012). Obviously, Gumilev’s marginality in Soviet science resulted from his own passion to reject all accepted wisdom, and to ignore the established opinions of his colleagues; for this reason, Gumilev might have suited Buriatskii much better than any possible reference to European cultural conservatives such as Oswald Spengler (1880–1931), who predicted ‘the decline of Europe’. The same seems to hold true for the Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun (d. 1405), to whom Buriatskii might have referred as a pioneer of Islamic sociology. All of these share, in one way or another, Gumilev’s conception of historical cycles to explain the origin, rise and fall of civilizations and states; but while the Islamic scholar and diplomat Ibn Khaldun saw the fates of peoples as an expression of Allah’s will, Gumilev does not mention God at all.

Buriatskii is quick to note that Gumilev’s views on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad were ‘unsubstantiated and unfounded’, and this he presents as the reason why Gumilev gained ‘the reputation of an irrational person’ (Buriatskii 2009b). Buriatskii thus defends the conceptual edifice of an outspoken critic of Islam, but dissociates Gumilev’s particular errors about Islam from the validity of his grand overarching theory. It should be noted that Buriatskii’s respect for Gumilev is not only reflected in this article: he also referred to Gumilev’s passionarity theory in other publications (Buriatskii 2013a), and even in press releases on behalf of the ‘Caucasus Emirate’ (Hunafa 2009).

Why Gumilev?

We must assume that Gumilev was chosen as a major point of reference because his theory of ethnos would appeal to a broad Russian-speaking audience. Gumilev did not give a clear-cut definition of his ‘passionarity’ concept (Gumilev 2004, 341), focusing instead on its postulated impact. As he noted in his ‘Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere of the Earth’ (written in the 1970s but first published in 1989), ‘self-sacrifice for others, for

the sake of the fatherland is called patriotism, and it cannot be explained by any [material] benefit [that the bearers of self-sacrifice would attain]' (Gumilev 2004, 471). This concept includes martyrdom for one's belief (*vera*), as he claimed in one of his public lectures in the 1980s. Gumilev's books became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but we can assume that today Gumilev's lectures on Youtube are even more important than his academic writings.

One of the factors that contributed to Gumilev's popularity in late-Soviet and early post-Soviet Russia was that he had been subjected to state repression. The son of the famous poet Anna Akhmatova and the Russian poet and literary critic Nikolai Gumilev, who was executed in 1921, Lev Gumilev was himself accused of participation in counter-revolutionary anti-Soviet agitation, and spent 1938–1943 and 1949–1956 in Soviet labour camps. In between and after his release, he fought his way back into academic life and eventually obtained prestigious teaching positions at Leningrad State University. His theory of passionarity (which he reportedly developed in prison) made him an *enfant terrible*; while many attested to his charismatic aura, his scientific work (such as his dissertations on the Turkic Kaganate and the Khazars) was heavily criticized for its alleged amateurism, and for the lack of evidence for his grand theories (Koreniako 2006). Russian historians and ethnologists called his works pseudoscientific (Ianov 1992; Lurie 1994; Koreniako 2006). In particular, his theory of passionarity earned him much criticism; many argued that Gumilev exaggerated the natural factor in ethnic history (Artamonov 1971; Bromlei 1981; Efremov 1971), and his vague 'space factor' – a cosmic energy of sorts that evoked the passionate impulse in man – received a lot of flak from the scientific community. Some reviewers called Gumilev a dabbler in astrophysics (Koreniako 2006; Klein 1992). Others accused him of anti-Semitism, and believed that his research was a fertile ground for extreme right-wing views. Some maintained that his research supported the idea of 'cultural incompatibility' among nations (Shnirel'man 2006), eventually justifying the violence and war committed by those whom he described as bearers of passionarity (Shnirelman and Panarin 2001; Shnirel'man 1996).

One could argue, though, that with his claim to be presenting an explanation of the history of Eurasia's peoples with the help of physics and biology (Titov 2005, 225), Gumilev was appealing to a late-Soviet society that believed in the exact sciences, and in the power of man to shape his environment. After all, it was the technocrats and engineers who rose to prominence in the Perestroika years, and who carried out democratic reforms in post-Soviet Russia. According to the American historian and linguist Mark Lipovetsky (2013, 118), the scientific and technical intelligentsia that emerged in the 'thaw' era became the bearers of a liberal post-Soviet movement. The cultural discourse of engineers and technical workers, according to Lipovetsky, was shaped by essentialism. This cultural essentialism, paired with scientific language, we also find back in the works of Lev Gumilev. At the same time, Gumilev did not deny the existence of God and the power of religion, and he considered himself an Orthodox Christian (Beliakov 2013). Against the background of the increasing role of religion in post-Soviet society, this certainly added to his popularity.

By the late 1980s, Gumilev had already begun to be referred to positively by conservative Russian-Eurasian writers such as Dmitry Balashov (1927–2000) and Vadim Kozhinov (1930–2001) (Titov 2005, 228). For them, Gumilev was a major figure in the conservative tradition of Russian nationalists who reject Westernization and emphasize

the positive impact of the Mongolian nomadic traditions on the Russian soul (230). Gumilev was thereby linked back to the early Eurasianists in exile, such as George Vernadskii and Peter Savitskii (Laruelle 2008, 57). As Shnirel'man and Panarin (2001, 1) note, Gumilev used the ideas of Eurasianists to construct his theory of *ethnos*, according to which 'ethnicity' is a biological entity, embedded in a natural environment and brought to its historical fruition by those within the species who are blessed with passionarity.

By borrowing from Gumilev, Buriatskii thus used an ideological edifice that was formally scientific but ultimately built more on charisma and enigma. Gumilev's public standing was that of a giant, a strong representative of sincerity in thought and action; and if many of Gumilev's theories were highly controversial, this was no particular shortcoming in a period when all other accepted theories had just collapsed, including those of his critics.

However, when Buriatskii began to quote Gumilev in 2008, the public perception of him had changed dramatically: by that time Gumilev had come to be embraced by a new generation of intellectuals who in one way or another defended imperial positions. Since the 2000s, Eurasianism has been no longer a dissident trend but close to the ideology of the current holders of power (Shlapentokh 2007). To this group belongs, first, the renowned Aleksandr Dugin, but also various representatives of the intellectual elite of the national republics within the Russian Federation, including in Tatarstan. Gumilev's image had changed from being one of a non-conformist to being one of a proponent of strong state-building. Paradoxically, Eurasianism came to bring an academic aura to the very imperial and national positions that Buriatskii opposed so vehemently – while at the same time seeing himself as a contributor to the building of yet another type of state, the 'Caucasus Emirate'.

We can conclude that the idea of passionarity was for Buriatskii a convenient (pseudo-)scientific explanatory model to justify the actions and motivations of jihadists in the North Caucasus by adducing transcendental principles. Islam thus becomes an archetype for the theory of passionarity – and passionarity was meant to explain the rise of the Caucasus Emirate: 'If we look at *istishhād* only from a historical perspective, we will see that this [recent] outbreak of passionarity [in the activities of jihadists] reaches another peak, and this is where the Caucasus Emirate started' (Buriatskii 2009b).

At the same time, the passionarity discourse allowed Buriatskii to build bridges with Christianity, for, as he said, only in Christianity and in Islam has the phenomenon of self-sacrifice manifested itself so massively. This emphasis on shared passionarity was obviously meant to speak to a Russian Orthodox audience; it stands against the background, though not mentioned explicitly here, that in history, Islam has a general respect for the other 'book religions', those that have their origins in the revelations of the prophets.

We can thus say that Said Buriatskii performs the role of a translator – he transforms the language of Muslim terms and symbols (which are so abundant in most Islamist texts in the Russian language) into a language that any Russian reader or viewer would be familiar with; and his appeal is vague enough to resonate not only with Muslims and convinced jihadists but also with listeners who identify with Orthodox Christianity, and with those who share Gumilev's scientific mode of demonstration without subscribing to any religious confession.

Back to jihad

In the second part of the same article, Buriatskii dwells on the heroism of ‘Caucasus Emirate’ jihadists in more detail, and specifically on the truthfulness of suicide bombers. Here, he switches back from the academic discourse on history to the style of a direct participant, speaking as an authoritative eye-witness:

Their eyes are not empty, their pupils are not dilated on drugs; these people do not look like stupid hypnotized zombies. (...) These people no longer lived in our dimension. What I am saying is incomprehensible for those kafirs who consider me the ‘ideologist’ of suicide-bombers, who think that my sermons force people to get into *istishhad*. (...) The decision to get into *istishhad* comes from the depths of the soul, where the person wishes to meet with Allah, and He gives him this opportunity. (Buriatskii 2009b)

Buriatskii is ambiguous about his own role in mobilizing people for suicide attacks. He claims that

those who are willing to go to *istishhad* have come to that decision themselves. Of course, I agree that in some way they had been influenced by *davat* [Arabic *daʿwā*, ‘propaganda’, ‘missionary work’] and the works of scholars, but the final decision is always taken by the person himself.

But he also argues that

I can only promise to kafirs that as long as I am alive, I will do everything possible to ensure that the ranks of ‘*Riʿad-us-Salihin*’ keep expanding, and new waves of *mujahidin* keep getting into *Istishhad*. (Buriatskii 2009b)

The change of perspective in the article, from pseudo-academic discourse to personal testimony, also involves a switch in language. While in the first part of the article Buriatskii only sporadically uses terminology of Arabic origin (and thus remains within the jargon of ‘Academism’, as Bustanov and Kemper [2013] term it), towards the end of the message his vocabulary is full of Arabic terms, especially *munāfiqīn* (‘hypocrites’), *kāfir* (‘unbeliever’), *daʿwā* (‘propaganda’), *duʿā* (‘invocation’), and *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*. ‘Passionarity’ is replaced by *Allāh*, ‘martyr’ becomes *shahīd* and *mujāhidīn*, and ‘sacrifice’ turns into *istishhād* (Buriatskii 2009b). Thus, within one and the same text, Buriatskii performed an act of code-switching, from the ‘academic’ style of Islamo-Russian to what Bustanov and Kemper (2013, 269) have classified as ‘Arabism’. Nevertheless, it is striking that his Arabic loanwords remain limited to a dozen standard terms: in the whole text (comprising 3,680 words), he uses only 15 Islamo-Arabic terms, although they occur no fewer than 78 times. Thus, ‘Arabism’ here is a device to mark a text as distinctly Islamic, while not making the text too difficult for the uninitiated to understand.⁶ That Buriatskii took care to speak in plain language to reach the widest possible audience is also reflected in the Russian equivalents he uses for Arabic loanwords: for example, the term *smertnik* (suicide-bomber) is used 11 times, considerably more often than its Arabic equivalent *shahīd* (four instances). The Arabo-Islamic repertoire is thus consciously introduced in doses, to fill the passionarity concept with Islamic content without making it too difficult to understand.

Conclusion

Regardless of the fact that Said Buriatskii was known as one of the most famous jihadist speakers in Russia in the late 2000s, his videos and articles from the North

Caucasus show that he had a role as a public intellectual, with a recognized place in the post-Soviet cultural context. To justify the movement of jihadism and prove the sincerity of jihadist suicide bombers, Buriatskii did not focus only on Islamic arguments but also used concepts and ideas that were very popular in post-Soviet Russia. This is particularly evident in his references to the theory of passionarity elaborated by the Soviet dissident ethnographer Lev Gumilev. Buriatskii's discourse thereby integrated key terms from Soviet anthropology (such as 'ethnicity' and *passionarnost*), as well as codes and topoi that came to play an important role in contemporary Russian culture ('sincerity', 'sacrifice', 'devotion'). By linking these to a moderate use of Islamic terminology, Buriatskii's texts remained comprehensible to a non-Muslim readership.

Buriatskii's enthusiasm for Gumilev's ideas demonstrates how much he was a product of his time. After the collapse of the USSR, writers who had been banned or marginalized by the Soviet authorities became immensely popular among a wide swathe of Russian-speaking readers. The former political prisoner Gumilev was one of these new icons, although professional ethnographers and historians continued to criticize him heavily. But while Gumilev became popular among Eurasianists of all shades in Russia and Kazakhstan, he remained a marginal and exotic figure in the international arena. Curiously, Buriatskii enjoyed a similar fate: with the rise of Salafism, he established a niche for himself in the Russian market of religious ideas, but there is no indication that he enjoyed any particular recognition beyond Russia. Like Gumilev, too, Buriatskii remained an exclusively Russian ideological phenomenon.

The ideological and socio-economic crisis of the post-Soviet period clearly created a demand for new images of heroes, and thus for thinkers and authors who revived values such as sincerity, honesty and self-sacrifice. Their logic was characterized by cultural essentialism coupled with a positivistic belief in the arguments of natural and exact sciences, which are arguably still a mainstream feature of Russian post-Soviet society, from the Far East to the North Caucasus. It is against this background that we can understand how Gumilev posthumously found grateful adepts among Muslim radicals like Buriatskii, and how Buriatskii himself (after his violent death in March 2010) gained appreciation among Russian non-Muslim intellectuals.

This article has argued that the Russian character of Russia's jihadism has so far been consistently overlooked in current research. This neglect leads to an overestimation of the foreign roots of Russia's radical Islam. In fact, the easy juxtaposition of 'traditional/Russian' Islam versus 'Salafi/foreign' Islam is a convenient instrument for the authorities – but also for most radicals, to stress the alterity of their discourse, and to mark the righteousness of their struggle. It is thus remarkable that it was precisely a prominent representative of the Caucasus Emirate's PR apparatus who transcended these easy dichotomies. It should be noted that Buriatskii's pamphlets and texts reveal many examples of his serious engagement with Russian culture, which would expand our argument;⁷ and we also find similar 'Russian elements' in the texts of other jihadists, and even in jihadi poetry.⁸ Soviet-raised converts to Islam play an important role in this process of Russian-Islamic hybridization; cultural and scholarly references to Russian culture thus accompany the choice to use Russian language for Islamist propaganda.

Notes

1. Russian *steb* is generally understood as an ironic/sarcastic joke about your interlocutor (mostly in the latter's presence). According to Yurchak, *steb* gave rise to a 'unique postmodern genre'.
2. Iuliia Latynina, a very influential and confrontational Russian journalist and author widely known for her independent and libertarian stances, has also compared Buriatskii to Che Guevara (as reported in Al'fa 2010). The first to note similarities between Guevara and North Caucasus jihadists (and in particular Shamil Basaev) was sociologist Georgi Derluguian (1999).
3. Simulacrum is an important post-modern term used by French post-structuralists such as Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard. This term means a simulation or copy of something that has no archetype in reality.
4. Boris Savinkov (1879–1925) was a revolutionary terrorist, head of the military organization of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, and a member of the White movement. Savinkov was also a writer of prose and a publicist. Mariia Spiridonova (1884–1941), a Russian terrorist, was one of the heads of the left-wing SR Party.
5. On Sysoev, see Gulnaz Sibgatullina's contribution to this issue.
6. The terms most used are: *istishhād* (27 times), *kāfirs* (16), *mujāhidīn* (13), *jihād* (5), *shahīd* (4 mentions), *murtadd* (3), *intifāda* (2).
7. For example, he discusses the Soviet heroic narratives of Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia and Pavlik Morozov.
8. A prominent case of this kind is the Russophone Chechen singer Timur Mutsuraev (b. 1976), a self-proclaimed 'poet of jihad' who uses Soviet-Russian music trends to express military and radical views.

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