

# THE RAPE OF HOLY MOTHER RUSSIA AND THE HATRED OF FEMININITY: THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND THE USE OF FEMININE IMAGERY IN THE RUSSIAN NATIONALIST PRESS

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Among the many political parties that today battle each other for the definition of Russia's future, the ultra-right nationalist forces strike me as most extreme in their agenda. While their aggressive anti-Semitic, anti-Western and anti-Democratic orientation attracts immediate attention, their attitude toward women is not always as easily discerned. Often the nationalists' position with regard to women's roles in the society is consistent with the conservative return-to-tradition sentiment of the *perestroika* period. Women are extolled as mothers and "guardians of the family hearth" and reminded of their "fair sex" status. A closer reading of the nationalist press, however, reveals deep misogyny and contempt for the feminine. This paper will demonstrate how the nationalist project manipulates the feminine imagery to solicit support for its own cause and to verbally attack its political enemies. The examples and quotations are drawn from the weekly newspaper *Zavtra*, which identifies itself as the "Newspaper of the Russian State. It has a circulation of 100,000 issues all over the NIS and it is edited by well-known nationalist publicist and writer Aleksandr Prokhanov. This study consists of the analysis of 30 issues dating from May 1998 to November 1998.

A brief excursus into the history of the newspaper and its editor-in-chief will facilitate an understanding of its political mission and role. Although *Zavtra* was officially founded in 1993, it has in fact a slightly longer history as a periodical: from 1990 to 1993 the editorial board and writers of today's *Zavtra* worked for the newspaper *Den'* which was closed down because of the political reaction to the anti-governmental position of the newspaper. Aleksandr Prokhanov had emerged on the literary and political scene as a nationalist writer near the end of the 1970s during the debates between the village prose school and the writers who saw Russia's future in the technological development (Brudny 1998). Prokhanov's belief that Russia's power is connected to technological and military advancement became one of the main arguments of his influential essay "Sufficient Defense" (*Dostatochnaya Oborona*) twenty years later, when Prokhanov publicly opposed Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of disarmament, accusing him of surrendering the Soviet power to Washington (Brudny 1998: 235).

In the early 1990s, Prokhanov began to work in cooperation with Gennadii Zyuganov, a leader of the Russian Communist Party, and thus made an ideological link between the nationalist movements and communist organizations. In their "Word to the People" (*Slovo k narodu*) written in 1991, Prokhanov and Zyuganov declared the preservation of the empire as the goal of the new movement (Brudny 1998: 256). Today, Prokhanov's *Zavtra* continues to be oriented towards social groups espousing both nationalist and communist ideas. Although the circulation of the newspaper is not large in comparison with older and more mainstream periodicals (for example, the older *Pravda* and *Izvestia* can each boast a circulation of more than 400,000), Prokhanov remains one of the most influential ideologues of contemporary Russian nationalism and *Zavtra* serves as his most public tribune.

Before the examination of the concrete examples from *Zavtra*, I find it necessary to position myself with regard to theoretical writings on gender and nationalism. Therefore, in the first part of the paper I will address the issue of definitions of *nation* and *nationalism* and formulate the agendas of the Russian nationalism as it is presented in *Zavtra*. Then, I will offer a brief excursus into the history of the feminine images of Russian nationhood and interpret their relation to the construction of the Other. The second part of the paper will contain an analysis of the feminine images in the newspaper.

### **Nation, Nationalism, and the Feminine in Russian Culture**

In their book *Woman—Nation—State* (1989), Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias point out five major ways in which women participate in nationalist projects:

- a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
- b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups;
- c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of culture;
- d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences—as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
- e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989: 7).

In this paper I will focus on the fourth type of participation and treat Russian women as the “actual symbolic figuration” (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989: 9) of Russians as a national group. My acceptance of Anthias’s and Yuval-Davis’s formulation of women’s roles in nationalism is based on the assumption of the constructed nature of nation. As Benedict Anderson (1983) observes, nation is imagined as a limited and sovereign community and nationality or “nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artifacts of a particular kind” (Anderson 1989: 13). The difficulty in defining nation has been discussed by many scholars (Anderson 1989; Hobsbawm 1990; Smith 1991, 1997; Verdery 1996). One of the problems is the “Janus-nature of the nation, at once visionary and nostalgic, backward-looking, yet oriented to the future” (Smith 1997: 36). The dualism of nation as concept and reality and its positioning between the past and the future was also noted by Eric Hobsbawm who remarked that the “‘nation’ as conceived by nationalism, can be recognized prospectively; the real ‘nation’ can be recognized *a posteriori*” (Hobsbawm 1990: 9). It is the first aspect of nation that I will concentrate upon in this paper.

Whether it is a concept or reality, Katherine Verdery’s warning against treating nation as something actually defined by a set of factors holds true for both elements (Verdery 1996). Her own approach transcends a simple assemblage of objective and subjective factors such as history, culture, territory, and ethnic consciousness and treats nation as an “aspect of the political and symbolic/ideological order and also of the world of social interaction and feeling” (1996: 226). Verdery’s definition of nationalism echoes Anthony Smith’s “ideology, language and sentiment” (Smith 1991: 72): it is the “political utilization of the symbol nation through discourse and political activity, as well as the sentiment that draws people into responding to the symbol’s use” (Verdery 1996: 227).

In light of these definitions, my analysis of the newspaper *Zavtra* will seek to expose the mechanism of political deployment of the feminine in the construction of the nationalist version of symbol Russia. In my study, Russia as nation will denote two types

of subject-state relations: ethnicity and nationalism.<sup>1</sup> While differentiation between the relations of citizenship and relations of ethnicity is analytically important, it is not always easily achieved. For example, in the Russian anti-Semitic discourse, Jews are not only responsible for contamination of Russian blood but also for seizing the political and economic power and depriving the Russians of their citizenship rights and privileges.

How does *Zavtra* envision the Russia of tomorrow?<sup>2</sup> If the goal of nationalism is “attaining autonomy, unity and identity” of the nation (Smith 1991: 73), the goal of Russian nationalism can be defined as the restoration of Russia as an Orthodox empire which is economically and politically independent from the affluent West. Such a project of restoration to former power and glory necessarily requires invoking the country’s “Golden Age” that contains the essence of the “true” Russian identity. Examining the importance of the “Golden Age” for the project of national revival, Anthony Smith (1997) identifies several functions that this concept fulfills for individuals and communities. Smith believes that the “Golden Age” satisfies the search for authenticity, relocates the community in its historical territory, promotes a sense of continuity between the generations, boosts the community’s sense of self-worth by reminding its members of their glorious past, promises the near change from the present oppressed and humiliated position to a higher status, and directs the community toward its “ordained destiny” of spiritual renewal.

Historians observe that Russia’s “Golden Age” has several points of reference in the past. Two of the most notable are the Romanov’s Russian Empire and the USSR. Although the tsarist and Soviet Russias were founded on conflicting ideologies, in the national memory they share one common feature: the imperial greatness and power. Such greatness and power came to be viewed as essentially Russian features that have been temporarily lost. Describing his emotions after visiting a newly restored Orthodox cathedral, one of the *Zavtra*’s journalists was moved to tears by the “beauty, greatness, luxury and spiritual power that were created by the Russian Empire” (Zolotsev 1998: 5). At the same time, he was also crying over “another greatness—the spiritual force and capacity to create beauty that were characteristic of another empire called the USSR.” “Yes,” continued the journalist, “that [empire] which, having to overcome great tortures, from a Bolshevik-Marxist republic turned into an Empire, although of a different, Soviet kind; but the Russian foundation in it was unquestionable” (Zolotsev 1998: 5)

Another kind of “usable past” (Smith 1997: 37) that has become a point of reference for Russian nationalism is pre-Petrine Muscovy as a symbol of Orthodox faith, moral purity and spiritual strength. This period of Russian history lasted approximately from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century and ended with Peter’s reforms in the mid-seventeenth century that divided the society into Westernizers and Slavophiles. The pre-Petrine era was remarkable for its conflation of the Christian religion with national belonging: by the fourteenth century, being Russian began to be equated with being Orthodox. As the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev wrote, the blending of ethnic and religious identity manifested itself in the idea of the messianic role of Russia in saving the Christian religion (in its Orthodox version) from pollution and destruction (1990). In the public consciousness of the time, Moscow acquired the mystic and sacred status of the Third Rome.

These deeply religious and apocalyptic images of medieval Russia are well represented in *Zavtra*’s section entitled “The Symbol of Faith” that publishes articles by

Orthodox writers. The theme of the sacredness of the Russian land being endangered by the blasphemous and corrupt internal and external enemies is raised in numerous articles with the such titles as “Russia—A Country of Mother of God” (No. 40 (253)) “Russia—The Empire of Spirit” (No. 45 (258)), “Third Rome, Second Carphagene” (No. 41 (254)) with the subheading “In the undeclared war of the West against Russia, the decisive battle, as usual, will be the battle for Moscow” and “Moscow: Idea, Doctrine, Hieroglyph” (No. 41 (254)) with the subheading “Besides the political profit for the USA, the annihilation of Moscow as the center of Russia has a sacral meaning.”

The femininity and religiousness of the images of Russia and Moscow have a long tradition in Russian history. They draw on the ancient imagery of Mother-Earth (*Mat'-Zemlya*) whose explicitly female characteristics are well expressed in an old Russian saying *syra Mat'-Zemlya* (Mother-Earth is damp), where the dampness of the dirt is metaphorically compared with the dampness of the mother's womb (Mamonova 1989). This use of Mother-Earth and Motherland<sup>3</sup> symbolism gave birth to another central symbol of nation-building imagery--Mother Russia. In addition to the Mother Earth/Mother Russia imagery, the feminine and religious images of Russia and Moscow acquire a distinct Orthodox coloring from the figure of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God. The two images --Mother-Russia and Mother of God--merged in the collective consciousness in a curious way, creating a new symbolic relationship. Mother of God came to be perceived as the protector of Russia, while Russia acquired the epithet “holy” (*svyataya Rus'*).

*Zavtra* demonstrates how the adoration and love for Mother Russia fails to translate into the acceptance of women. The newspaper's attitude towards women is openly misogynist. The 28 issues of *Zavtra* contain no articulation or discussion of women's economic, social, cultural or political issues and the rare references to female politicians and journalists are vicious *ad hominem* attacks that ridicule the women for being women. But perhaps most visible is the glaring absence of visual images of women in the newspaper. In a half-year period, *Zavtra* offered only five photographs of women: a facial portrait of a woman politician, a photograph of two beggars, a mother and a daughter, a photo-collage of pop-singer Pugacheva with her skirt up performing on a presidium desk in the Parliament (the caption reads “Pugacheva's entrance onto the political scene”), portraits of the Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna and her distant descendant, and a portrait of a politician's wife with her husband. Four of the images are not supported by the personal voice of the women depicted. In the single case in which the woman is allowed to speak for herself, she talks about her husband and is quoted as supporting her husband's belief that “broads are stupid.” The interview with a woman-politician contains no reference to her personality or background and it effectively erases her gender. In contrast, each issue of the newspaper contains interviews and biographical articles of male politicians, economists and writers accompanied by their portraits and photographs.

The photographs in *Zavtra* demonstrate the exclusion of women from the scope of political interests of the newspaper. Moreover, they employ several stereotypes of women ranging from dichotomization into whores (Democratic Pugacheva) and saints (two beggars) to presentations of a successful professional woman as a “man in a skirt.” The only obviously supported heroine is the politician's wife who is only represented in relation to her husband. The fiction section in the newspaper is more relentless to women.

Most of the short stories are written in the style of a so-called “village prose” which adopts a perspective of a common rural man. Despite the fact that female characters in the stories are also polarized into good and suffering versus evil and immoral types, all women are typically signified by a common noun with derogatory connotations *baba--* “broad.”<sup>4</sup> The male characters of the stories are depicted relishing the scenes of violence, torture and humiliation of their girl-friends, mothers and female neighbors. It is remarkable that in a country where most women work outside the home, this newspaper does not contain a single positive example of a professional woman.

The misogyny of Russian nationalism goes hand in hand with the construction of the numerous Others: the USA and the West are presented as the external enemy, the Jews are the internal/external Other,<sup>5</sup> and the Democrats are given the status of internal enemy. In the list of Others women occupy different places: the degree of their gender “otherness” depends on their relation to the men who constitute “us.” According to the logic of nationalism, “our” women and land are pure and their bodies/boundaries need to be protected from the encroachments of “them”—Jews, Democrats, Western powers. My analysis of the deployment of feminine imagery in the second part of my essay will demonstrate how the feminization of the Us and the Other can be used for different political purposes.

#### The Manipulation of the Feminine in the Nationalist Press

As in many other cultures, the Russian land is often described through sexual metaphors, which imply the likeness of the landscape and the female body. As Julie Mostov (1995: 517) writes, in the patriotic rhetoric “the nation is adored and adorned, made strong and bountiful or raped and defiled, its limbs torn apart, its womb invaded.” In her brilliant analysis of Romanian patriotic writings, Katherine Verdery (1994: 249) examines how metaphoric representation of nation as a woman victimized by the enemy serves to “naturalize/gender the question of territorial boundaries . . . [and] establish . . . a set of sentiments to support [the] armed defense of the feminine motherland by her masculinized sons.” Furthermore, Verdery constructs a set of antinomies that are embedded in patriotic thinking:

$\frac{\text{woman}}{\text{man}} \sim \frac{\text{beloved}}{\text{lover}} \sim \frac{\text{body}}{\text{soul}} \sim \frac{\text{nature}}{\text{culture}} \sim \frac{\text{land}}{\text{people}} \sim \frac{\text{space}}{\text{time}} \sim \frac{\text{birth}}{\text{(creative)death}}$  (Verdery 1994: 249).

Curiously enough, not only spatial boundaries of the nation can be associated with the female body. *Zavtra* offers examples where the image of “our” woman being violated by the enemy can be projected on state political organs, the army, public television and other entities that metaphorically represent the nation. Consider the following examples.

Example 1. The rich had time to learn better than us that faith without a deed is dead and they are continuing to rape Russia under the accompaniment of the incoherent threats addressed to them (From Dudinskii 1998: 7).

Example 2. In the nearest time, Yeltsin will offer to adopt Chubais’s law on privatization to the raped but preserved Duma. . . Will the slaves and compromisers of the Duma be able to fight for the sovereignty of the Motherland? (Prokhanov 1998a: 1)

In Example 1, Russia-woman is violated by the internal Other represented by the rich, while her protectors are rendered impotent and weak, sending “incoherent threats” to the forceful Other and cowardly avoiding action. Although Russia here represents more of a political field than a geographical territory, the message of the metaphor remains the same: “men who cannot defend their woman/nation against rape have lost their ‘claim’ to that body, that land” (V. Spike as cited in Mostov 1995: 523.).

The association of the Duma with the female body is made possible by the feminine gender of the word “duma” in the Russian language. The powerful effect of the metaphor could not have been achieved if the author used a masculine noun ‘parliament’ which is also commonly used to denote the Russian legislative body. The image of the masculine parliament being raped would not be effective because its implied homosexuality would not cause sympathy in the homophobic Russian society. The rape metaphor functions only in the heterosexist framework: although the Duma as an institution is predominantly male, its plight solicits proper sympathy only when it is represented as vulnerable and defenseless female. The internal Other, in this case, the Democrats, is pictured as a hyperbolically powerful force that threatens “our” nation by dishonoring its political body (both literally and metaphorically) and it is the weak and cowardly men, “the slaves and compromisers,” who allowed the crime to happen. Thus, the appeal to fight against the enemy becomes more expressive when it challenges male bravery and honor. The fact that such appeals to honor, bravery and glory are generally typical of the nationalist discourse prompted some scholars to conclude that nationalism has a masculine character. Joan Nagel, for instance, notes that

the culture of nationalism is constructed to emphasize and resonate with masculine cultural themes. Themes like honour, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the nation and manliness (Nagel 1998: 251-252).

While the metaphoric association of Russia and the State Parliament with women renders them vulnerable and in need of protection, feminization of the enemy renders it vulnerable and easy to destroy. “Their” women-nations, as opposed to “our” pure, sacred women, are whores and their bodies can be justifiably raped and their spatial boundaries can be penetrated. As Ruth Siefert (1996) observes, this logic of sexualized violence finds its most horrible implementation in wars where the rape of women becomes a rape of culture and hence the whole nation. Consider the following example.

Example 3. Today we understand perfectly well that the last obstacle that prevents the NATO from bombing the Tretyakov [Art] Gallery, the launching site Plesetskii, Severomorsk and the market Kon’kovo is the tired Russian missiles that are capable of putting a lit cigar in America’s same very place where playful Clinton put it in Mermaid Monica during their amorous pranks (Prokhanov 1998b: 1)

In this fragment, the author Prokhanov obviously refers to the notorious “cigar episode” of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal. Creating the scene of immoral pleasure with the help of nouns suggesting enjoyment, the author symbolically equates “promiscuous” Lewinsky with the whole American nation. Consequentially, America is represented as an ultimate whore whose body is accessible not only to her master—Clinton—but also to any other man or state. Curiously enough, Russia as a country here loses its femininity and become a symbol of potent aggressive masculinity. The conflict between America and Russia is placed within the heterosexist framework where the weak, debased and

despised part becomes feminized while the strong, aggressive and authoritative side is masculinized.

The author of the article, however, does not simply fantasize about rape; the episode suggests that the penetration be done with a weapon—missile—placed as “a lit cigar” into the symbolic womb of America. Prokhanov’s fantasy of a symbolic destruction of the enemy through the rape of its nation/ woman is in fact analogous to the very real rapes committed during the war in Yugoslavia. Seifert observes, the atrocities committed against women during that war were often “centered on the femininity of the body: [there were] cases in which a woman’s breasts were cut off, her stomach was slashed open or her vagina torn apart with a weapon or military tool after she had been raped” (Seifert 1996: 38). She concludes that “only a hatred of femininity as such can account for that specific kind of violence” (ibid).

The enemy can also be effectively humiliated by being associated with the female reproductive organs and genitals. In his study of male sexuality at the rise of fascism in Germany, Klaus Theweleit (1987) describes how the fear and contempt for women were the necessary part of the cult of nationalist manliness. For the fraternity of militant men bonded by their dedication to the spirit of war, valor and bravery, women’s bodies and their female organs were the signs and loci of symbolic pollution, decay and death. References to female reproductive organs in the Russian nationalist newspaper are predominantly made with the same misogynist intention. *Zavtra*’s humor section is particularly remarkable for puns of this kind. The first two examples below are taken from the humor section, while the third one represents a sub-title in an article about the government. Since the play on words usually defies the rules of translation, I will offer the two readings of the pun.

Example 4. Rybkin is the inflamed ovary/addition of Beresovsky.

Example 5. Seleznyov is the Speaker of the State Cunt/Duma.

Example 6. The Death of the Eggcell/Yeltsin-cell (*Zavtra* 1998).

Example 4 is based on the double meaning of the Russian word *pridatok* which means both a female reproductive organ—ovary—and an additional and usually unnecessary part of something. In the joke, the politician Rybkin is denied a political integrity of his own and humiliated by association with the feminine organ. The humiliation is intensified by the image of the pollution and sickness: the ovary is inflamed.

In Example 5, the authors displayed a peculiar sense of the language by exchanging the consonants in the two syllables of the word *duma*. Although the resulting *muda* is a non-existent word, it has an explicit reference to sexual organs. The closest existing relative of the noun *muda* is *mudi*—a vulgar noun denoting testicles. However, the feminine gender of *muda* and its phonetic proximity to *pizda*—a vulgar word denoting vagina—leaves no doubt about the intended effect of the joke. The pun not only denigrates the Speaker of the Parliament Seleznyov, but it also suggests the pollution and hostility of the Parliament by metaphorically associating it with vagina. While in Example 3 the Duma is represented as a woman who is violated and who deserves to be avenged and protected, Example 5 denies the woman-Duma personality and reduces her to her sexual organs that provoke ridicule and contempt. Thus, the authors of the joke

employ a common pornographic device of objectification of the female body (of the Duma) and its reduction to the “cunt.”

Example 6 is based on the phonetic similarity between the Russian word *yaitso* (egg) and President’s surname *Yeltsin*. The pun alludes to Yeltsin’s failed attempts to gather a team of supporters around his presidency. The denigrating effect of comparison with the woman’s egg is aggravated by the image of decay and pollution: the death of the egg-cell.

### Conclusion

At the first glance, the nationalist project of building new Russia seems to have an ambiguous position towards women: the cult of adoration and reverence for Mother Russia appears to coexist inexplicably with the hatred for the feminine. This ambiguity, however, is superficial. What is loved in Mother Russia has little to do with real women and their live femininity. In fact, women’s femininity is the opposite of the qualities and ideals that Mother Russia signifies for the nationalist project. As Rada Ivekovic perceptively notes,

the fact that women “embody” ideas, thereby serving to justify them, doesn’t mean that what is embodied, the principle or mechanism, is a “feminine” one. One has to distinguish between the carrier of an ideal and the ideal that is carried. What is symbolically “embodied” in the female figure can still remain a male ideal, activity, or experience (Ivekovic 1993: 123).

The maleness of the activity and experience of Russian nationalism leaves women little political space for participation. With the revival of patriarchy and the growing influence of Orthodoxy, women are being forced, moved, and persuaded to return to their “most natural” place at the family hearth. Their symbolic participation in the nationalist project is also limited: women’s femininity is alienated from them to be used as a weapon in masculine political battles. The ways in which the feminine is deployed suggests the deep contempt for women’s bodies, minds, feelings, needs and desires. Thus, the new Russia in the *Zavtra*’s version of nationalism is an unambiguously misogynist society.

Russian nationalism as it is represented in Alexandr Prokhanov’s newspaper has a great political potential in today’s Russia where democratic reformers discredited themselves in the eyes of the majority of the population. Subsuming misogyny under a broader term “sexophobia,” the Russian psychologist Igor Kon predicts:

If democratic and economic reform programs fail, Russia will have an openly ‘red-brown’ fascist government, or at best, an extremely conservative, ultranationalistic one. Despite whatever economic and political concessions it will have to make to the West, its ideology will be strongly anti-democratic, anti-Western, and anti-Semitic. Sexophobia, along with anti-Semitism, will be a very powerful weapon again (Kon 1995: 270).

Therefore, it is vital that the nationalist projects of *Zavtra* and of other political forces are subject to critical scrutiny and analysis. The revival of the nation must not be based on the values that promote hatred of femininity and violent intolerance of the Other.

## Notes

1. In addition to Hobsbawm's two types of the subject-state relations--ethnicity and citizenship—Verdery identifies a third type characteristic of socialist states: socialist paternalism. Although I believe it is an important category for the analysis of Russia during the USSR era, the recent social, political and economic developments in Russia caused such profound changes in the political form of the state that it now suggests more of a capitalist step-father than of a socialist parent.

2. Ironically, *zavtra* in Russian means "tomorrow."

3. In the Russian language the word *zemlya* means both "Earth" and "land."

4. It can be argued, of course, that the word *baba* is more commonly used in the rural peasant communities and therefore it conveys the spirit of the Russian village. This, however, does not erase its derogatory connotations. Perhaps, the most persuasive argument against the usage of this word would be to ask the writers to call a woman *baba* in her face. Most likely, this would cause an immediate insult, demonstrating the unacceptability of the word in the educated language.

5. In his lecture at the University of Michigan on November 24, 1998, Slavoj Žižek also pointed out the difficulty in locating the Jews as the Other in relation to the borders of the nation. Although located inside the nation, the Jews are perceived as members of a world-wide conspiracy against the nation. For instance, for Russian nationalists, the Jews as the internal Other are represented by political figures with conspicuously non-Russian surnames like Chubais, Sobchak, Berezovsky. At the same time, the Jews are constructed as the external enemy: the multibillionaire philanthropist George Soros, for example, is repeatedly attacked as the ambassador of the world Zionism and American capitalism.

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