

**IMAGINING CHUVASH HISTORICAL TIME:
HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES AND INTELLECTUAL FAILURES***

Maksym W. Kyrchanoff (Makšämě Kärçansen)
Voronezh State University

Abstract. The concept of historical time is a focal point in the imagination and invention of national history. Among nations without a tradition of independent statehood, historical time was actualized when these nations became independent actors in historical processes. Nationalists played a special role in inventing historical time in their struggle against more powerful opponents. Beginning in the interwar period, Chuvash nationalists formed their own unique Chuvash concept of historical time. Nationalist-inclined Chuvash intellectuals radically tried to separate Chuvash historical time from Russian collective representations. In contrast, during the latter half of the twentieth century, Chuvash Soviet intellectuals developed a loyal version of historical time integrated into the broader Soviet and Russian historical context. In the post-Soviet period, Chuvash intellectuals revived the earlier national idea of historical time from their interwar predecessors. The current intellectual community of historians in Chuvashia is fragmented into two groups, those who cultivate a national Chuvash version of historical time and those who endorse a pro-Russian version. On the one hand, the general uncertainty of Chuvash historical time has stimulated the rise of historical pessimism. On the other hand, the historical situation provided intellectuals with limited number of opportunities and options for political, social and cultural progress. Therefore, debates about historical time among Chuvash nationalists continue through the present day, while the general trajectories of collective representations about historical time remain unclear.

Keywords: Chuvash identity, nationalism, historical imagination, the invention of traditions.

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Correspondence to: Maksym W. Kyrchanoff, Department of Regional Studies and Foreign Economies, Faculty of International Relations, Voronezh State University. 394000, Voronezh, Pushkinskaia st., 16, room 236, Russia. E-mail: maksymkyrchanoff[at]gmail.com

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**ВООБРАЖАЯ ЧУВАШСКОЕ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЕ ВРЕМЯ:
ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЕ ПРЕЕМСТВЕННОСТИ И
ИНТЕЛЛЕКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ПРОВАЛЫ**

Максим В. Кирчанов (Мақсәм Кӳрчансен)
Воронежский государственный университет

Аннотация. Понятие исторического времени является одним из центральных в воображении и изобретении национальной истории. Понятия и категории исторического времени были актуализированы среди народов, не имеющих традиций собственной государственности, когда они стали независимыми субъектами исторического процесса. Националисты играли особую роль в изобретении идеи исторического времени в целом – это происходило в ходе их борьбы с противниками из формально доминирующих групп. Чувашская концепция исторического времени была сформирована усилиями чувашских националистов. Первые попытки изобрести чувашское историческое время имели место в период между двумя мировыми войнами, когда чувашские националистически ориентированные интеллектуалы коренным образом пытались отделить категорию чувашского исторического времени от аналогичных российских коллективных представлений. Чувашская советская интеллигенция во второй половине XX века разработала лояльную версию исторического времени, интегрированного по большей части в русский и советский исторический контекст. Чувашская интеллигенция 1990-х и 2000-х годов попыталась возродить национальную идею исторического времени своих предшественников межвоенного периода. Интеллектуальное сообщество историков в Чувашии разделено на две группы: одна культивирует национальную чувашскую версию исторического времени, другая – пророссийскую. С одной стороны, чувашская концепция исторического времени среди интеллектуалов продолжает оставаться неопределенной; это стимулирует рост исторического пессимизма. С другой стороны, историческая ситуация в целом изменила пространство для интеллектуальных маневров. Таким образом, дебаты по поводу исторического времени среди чувашских националистов не завершены. Общие траектории коллективных представлений о трансформации исторического времени остаются неясными.

Ключевые слова: чувашская идентичность, национализм, историческое воображение, изобретение традиций.

Introduction

The assumption that nationalists are the founding fathers of modern nations has become commonplace in national and international historiographies of nationalism. Certainly, nationalist intellectuals played leading roles in the formation, invention, and imagination of modern nations. Writers, poets, historians, and other intellectuals proposed nations based upon imagined cultural attributes and social markers that they believed would radically improve the nation's status, transforming it into an historical nation. Some modern nations emerged as cultural and social communities relatively late because they existed in economic underdevelopment, which slowed the political progress of peripheral nationalisms. For these nations, the concepts of historical time and national history were among the most important systemic markers in national formation and development. In general, the slow development of modern nations and national identities was the result of negative historical and social dynamics.

Nationalists on the peripheries of Europe conceptualized national history and historical time for their potential fellow citizens with considerable delay. Russian and foreign scholars of nationalism have examined the issue of intellectual and nationalist participation in the development of historical imagination (Gryncharov 2006; Vacheva, Papuchiev 2012). Most of this scholarship, including some of the author's own articles, are focused on the tactics and strategies of nationalist intellectuals in writing synthetic versions of national history in the form of grand narratives. Some scholars of nationalism (Vacheva 2002; Alipieva 2006) prefer to analyze how intellectuals in moments of particular nationalist agitation and nationalistic leaders in transitional societies attempt to nationalize the past and to reinterpret and invent new versions and visions of national history. These studies, though productive, can be defined as normative: these themes appear in the classical corpus of texts in Nationalism Studies, providing the historian of nationalism with a defined range of methods. The inventionist and imaginalist approaches (Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983) are among the most productive and promising in Nationalism Studies. Studies focused predominantly on nations, nationalisms, and identities have thus far overshadowed research on the themes of imagination and the invention of historical time, collective nationalist conceptions of time as an element of national existence, tactics and strategies of nationalization, and historical time appropriation.

This article analyzes the strategies and tactics of nationalists in the invention and imagination of historical time in social and cultural transformation. The extant paradigms of Nationalism Studies are

insufficient for such a study of collective representations and ideas about time. As a result, this article draws on the theoretical and methodological achievements of postmodern historiography, in which historians radically revised collective ideas about time (Koposov 2013; Boitsov 2013). Postmodern historiography dismantled the “time” category from the historical process, and challenged its internal unity. World history and national histories transformed from something primordial to imagined and artificial intellectual constructs. A multiplicity of histories came to be understood as characteristic of history in general and historical time in particular.

Given the enormous breadth of this subject, the article concentrates on efforts to construct historical time in Chuvash identity. The number of studies on Chuvash nationalism in general, and the concept of time in Chuvash nationalist identity and imagination in particular, remain far too limited (Pogodin 1997). Parallel studies in the formation and development of modern nations among other ethnic groups of the Volga region (Vasil’ev, Shibanov 1997) are equally rare in the historiography. Therefore, the author focuses on the tactics and strategies of Chuvash nationalism in the imagination and invention of historical time in the context of modern Chuvash identity.

Interwar Intellectual Debates and Their Reverberations

Revolutionary political changes institutionalized Chuvash autonomy in the Russian Federation. They also led to the transformation of political and intellectual life in sovietized Chuvashia. Chuvash intellectuals began to debate the development of Chuvash language (Timuha Hēvetērē 1928; *Škulta vērenmelli učebniksene kēnē terminsem* 1934; Vanerkke 1926; 1929), and the role of the Chuvash nation in history. Academic studies of the Chuvash language and its wide promotion in the 1920s and the 1930s had a dual function. On the one hand, Chuvash linguists actualized “past” narratives because language was invented, understood, and perceived by them as a living form of continuity between historical generations of an imagined Chuvash nation. On the other hand, they also perceived language as an expression of Chuvash national potential in its “future” dimensions. These discussions actualized “past” and “future” problems of the Chuvash nation. Overall, Chuvash history was invented and imagined by Chuvash intellectuals as an effective tool for strengthening and development of national identity. The historical studies of the 1920s and the 1930s were widely used for the formation of a Chuvash version of historicism. Yet the dichotomy of “national history” and “national language” among Chuvash intellectuals in the 1920s and the 1930s lost its value by the mid-1950s when national history finally and forcibly replaced the history of Chuvash people and the history of the Chuvash Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.

The revolution and Chuvash autonomy allowed Chuvash intellectuals to map Chuvashia onto the newly invented and imagined political geography of the Soviet Union. Petrov-Tinehpi Mišši was among the remarkable representatives of this revolutionary generation among Chuvash intellectuals. Mišši argued that “Chuvash history,” as a part of academic historical study, should focus on the study of Chuvash national history (Petrov-Tinehpi Mišši 1925). In the same period, Vanter Kurijë (1921) cultivated a sense of Chuvash historical imagination based in Bulgarian and Golden Horde narratives. He assisted in the Chuvashization of history and in collective representations of its historical past. In addition, Mišši (Petrov-Tinehpi Mišši 1928) argued that Chuvashia’s neighbors had deprived the Chuvash nation of its ability to act as an independent and autonomous actor in history. In 1928, he stressed that the “period between the 1236 and 1917 was one of servile existence... The Russian regime of oppression was a continuation of Tatar oppression... the wild Asians began the destruction of the Chuvash State ... and Russian statehood, which was brutally predatory and stupid in its cruelty completed the subjugation of the Chuvash nation” (*Pervyi Vsechuvashskii kraevedcheskii s'ezd* 1929, 63).

Therefore, Mišši (Petrov-Tinehpi Mišši 1925) believed, the Chuvash nation played a passive role in Russian-Tatar political struggles, as Tatars and Russian erased the Chuvash nation from history and Russian intellectuals reimaged it as primitive and non-historical. Chuvash intellectuals and historians of the 1920s took the first steps towards the creation and institutionalization of a Chuvash historical narrative and the invention of Chuvash historical time and national history. At the same time, radical and orthodox communist Chuvash historians condemned such efforts. Ivan Kuznetsov (1930; 1931), one of the founding fathers of communist discourse in Chuvash historiography, actively criticized Mišši and Kurijë as his ideological opponents. Likewise, Vasiliï Dimitriev, a leading Soviet and post-Soviet Chuvash historian, criticized the ideas of nationally oriented Chuvash intellectuals in the interwar period. He rejected the concept of a separate and independent Chuvash history, historical time, and historical process.

If Kurijë, Mišši, and V. Smolin (Smolin 1921) wrote the history of Chuvashia as a national Chuvash history, Kuznetsov and Dimitriev (Dimitriev 2003) developed deeply pro-Russian forms of history writing. While the former invented and imagined the Chuvash nation as an active and central subject in Chuvash history, the latter denied the Chuvash nation its historical personality. Thus, even as Kurijë, Mišši, and Smolin “Chuvashized” an imagined category of historical time, their ideological opponents were inclined to invent and imagine Russian influence as the uniformly positive basis for Chuvash history. In this version of historical imagination, the Chuvash nation became a silent majority.

The major faultline in this debate among Chuvash historians was the acceptance or rejection of Chuvash history as a national form of history with

its own imagined historical time. Kurijė, Mišši, and Smolin preferred to write a nationalized history of Chuvashia, inventing it as a national Chuvash history. Their ideological and political critics, including Kuznetsov, accused them of national stereotypes and prejudices. In particular, Kuznetsov accused Mišši of falsification of history. He presumed that Mišši, instead of writing the history of class struggles, had written instead a history of “the Chuvash people and the Chuvash nation (Kuznetsov 1930; 1931). For Kuznetsov, his opponents had created a folk and national history that facilitated the ideologization and mythologization of history in general.

Historical narratives promoted the dimensions of historical time in Chuvash identity. Commenting in the late 1990s on the interwar debates among Chuvash intellectuals, Evgenii Pogodin presumed that “the retrogressive Marxist historicism prevailed over Chuvash liberal positivist historicism” (Pogodin 1999). These histories were not imagined as Chuvash due to an ideological struggle against “bourgeois nationalism” (including Chuvash), which periodically took place in the Soviet regions, including the autonomous republics. The role of Chuvash language was gradually reduced as well. The invented categories of historical landscape and historical time in Chuvash national imagination only formally and nominally continued to function in the wake of gradual denationalization and Russification, both of which eroded national identities among non-Russian nations and ethnic groups in the USSR. Even so, historical and linguistic interwar scholarship were important components of collective “past” and “future” representations in Chuvash identity. In the latter half of the twentieth century, mental “past” and “future” narratives migrated into Chuvash literature. This was possible because interwar Chuvash intellectuals Chuvashized categories of history and historical time. They also transformed Chuvash from non-historical *inorodtsy* into an historical Chuvash nation, while forming an imagined category of Chuvash historical time and Chuvash historicism.

Historical Subjectivity and Politics in Chuvash Intellectual Debates

Twentieth-century Chuvash intellectuals had an extremely difficult relationship with historical time, and their attempts to place the Chuvash within history were controversial. In the post-Soviet Chuvash Republic, efforts to map Chuvash presence onto historical time were unsuccessful due to Chuvash historiography’s dependence on Russian and Soviet historiography. The latter was a unique type of imperial historiography that successfully imitated federalism in its organization of scholarly communities of professional historians in the Soviet Union. National historians in Soviet republics supported the notion of their nations’ voluntary incorporation by the Russian state.

In this system, history could be imagined and invented as exclusively Russian or Soviet. National histories within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) could be imagined only as local, regional, or minor versions of an assumed greater Russian or Soviet history. This

informal national hierarchy, based on “people’s friendship,” assisted in the assimilation of non-Russian ethnic groups and nations, who in turn lost their national histories and identities. The historical framework of the Soviet historiographical imagination could be only Russian and exclusively Soviet. This intellectual situation was maintained by political elites until effective mechanisms of ideological and political control and censorship finally fell into crisis in the late 1980s. The collapse of the Soviet Union made relevant, actual, and influential historiographical theories that previously had been suppressed and intentionally ignored because they were inconvenient for official communist ideology.

Two famous Chuvash historians offer an ideal lens for examining the problems of historical time and the symbolic status of the Chuvash nation in the historical process. Arsenii Izorkin (1932–2006) and Vasilii Dimitriev (1924–2013) were both prominent Chuvash historians, but with contrasting influence in their community of scholars (*Chuvashskoe gumanitarnoe soobshchestvo* 2010, 181–191). Dimitriev has been idealized and mythologized in Chuvash historiography (Boiko 2013). By comparison, Izorkin became known primarily as a historian of Chuvash national periodicals and intellectual traditions (1999). Izorkin focused on Chuvash national movement history. In the 1990s he was one of the leading authors of Chuvash nationalist journals and newspapers. Overall, however, Dimitriev was formally a more significant and influential figure in the Chuvash academic community.

Izorkin was among Chuvash historians who suggested the need for revision of Soviet historical narratives (1996; 1997a; 1997b; 1997c; 1999). He critically evaluated Soviet historiography, especially works focused on the inclusion of Chuvash areas into the Russian state, a major topic of debate among Chuvash intellectuals in the 1990s. Yet while Izorkin was only a candidate of science in history, Dimitriev was a doctor of science, and in the formalized scientific hierarchy he occupied a more advantageous position. Although Izorkin was a well-known historian and journalist, Dimitriev headed the Research Institute of Language, Literature, History, and Economics from 1968 to 1988 (Boiko 2000; Ivanov 2011). This institute had official status in the Council of Ministers of the Chuvash Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Dimitriev remained an important figure even as the institute changed to the Chuvash State Institute of Humanities. He became one of the most authoritative, mythologized, and idealized historians in Chuvashia.

The existence or non-existence of Chuvash historical time was among the central topics of historiographical debates. Supporters of neo-Soviet historiography argued that Chuvashia voluntarily became part of the Russian state. In this view, the history of Chuvashia in the Kazan Khanate was imagined and invented as a period of national oppression. Tatars of the sovietized and loyal Chuvash historical imagination were understood as universal anti-heroes and oppressors. In contrast, Russians were idealized

and imagined as liberators. Izorkin was among the Chuvash historians and intellectuals who tried to propose a radically new version of national history in the 1990s and 2000s. He decisively abandoned the old ideologized visions of Chuvash inclusion in the Russian state. Izorkin proposed that Chuvash inclusion into the Russian state was a violent act. In response, Dimitriev penned an official rebuke (2000; 2000–2001) and criticized Izorkin in numerous articles (1994; 1996), in which he developed his own unique conception of Chuvash national and state identity.

This article will not dwell on the ideological and methodological debates between Izorkin and Dimitriev except in so far as they demonstrate the manipulation of history and historical memory in which both Izorkin and Dimitriev actively engaged. Izorkin tried to revise the concept of historical time and made it more Chuvash. His critique of the alleged voluntary inclusion of Chuvash territories was, in fact, an attempt to imagine the Chuvash nation as an equal actor in historical processes, and it led him to propose a different understanding of the Kazan Khanate.

In contrast, Soviet Russian and Soviet Chuvash historians preferred to promote a negative and ultimately unattractive image of the Kazan Khanate. They imagined it as an exclusively Tatar state in which Tatar feudal lords oppressed all other ethnic and religious groups. While Izorkin concluded that this concept was ideologized and incorrect, Dimitriev saw Izorkin's suggested historical revisions as unproven and unfounded. He accused Izorkin of idealization of Tatar history in general and the history of the Kazan Khanate in particular. He further insisted that the Kazan Khanate was a Tatar feudal state and strongly disagreed with attempts to reinvent it as a joint state of Tatars, Chuvash, Mari, Udmurt, and other ethnic and religious groups. In the early 2000s, Dimitriev stopped short of accusing Izorkin of Chuvash nationalism and he preferred to indicate that his opponent was not a specialist in sixteenth-century history. Dimitriev and Izorkin's historical conclusions were based on diametrically opposing perceptions of the "past" and "future," and of historical time.

Not surprisingly then, their interpretations of the role of the Chuvash nation were diametrically opposed as well. Izorkin was inclined to invent, imagine, and write the history of the Chuvash Republic as Chuvash in its national coordinate system. In this regard, the Chuvash nation was invented by Izorkin as the main actor and participant in the historical process. The category of "Chuvashness" was actualized by Izorkin in the context of historical time. By comparison, Dimitriev was inclined to write the history of Chuvashia in the shadow of Russian history. His pro-Soviet and pro-Russian preferences led to the marginalization of Chuvash history. Chuvash history lost its self-sufficient value and was reduced from national history to a regional version of Russian history. Despite these significant differences, both men can be imagined as Chuvash nationalists: Izorkin expressed himself as a radical nationalist in the 1990s, while Dimitriev was more moderate in his attempts to actualize Chuvash identity.

Chuvash Identity in Transitive Intellectual Situations

Twentieth-century Chuvash identity developed through the coexistence and interactions of two mutually exclusive tendencies of continuity and discontinuity. The poetry of Şeşpĕl Mişşi can be idealized, mythologized, and politicized. Soviet historians presumed that Şeşpĕl Mişşi's texts became the starting point for the development of an ideologized Chuvash Soviet literature. Contemporary Chuvash intellectuals prefer to imagine this poetry as modernist or futuristic. Yet despite the apologetics and idealization of the first modern Chuvash poet, his immediate successors, poetic and ideological heirs, were not able willingly, freely, and openly to create a coherent social and national narrative or image of a Chuvash national future.

Political repression in the late 1930s substantially weakened and undermined the cultural and intellectual potential of Chuvash intelligentsia. Soviet national policy was reduced to rigid Sovietization of intellectual landscapes in the autonomous republics, where ideological and cultural dictates from Moscow dominated and socialist realism was recognized as the universal paradigm in state-sanctioned literature. The central political elites were not fully successful in their efforts to Russify the Soviet republics. Representatives of the Party elites were forced to put up with the existence of Ukrainian, Latvian, Moldovan, Georgian and other national cultures and literatures. Moreover, despite all their attempts to enforce assimilation, Party elites were unable to completely destroy national languages. Even as they failed in these goals in the Soviet republics, they enacted revenge on the interior regions where they could significantly limit possibilities for cultural and intellectual maneuvers by national intellectual communities, including the Chuvash, in the autonomous republics of the RSFSR. The policy of the central elites institutionalized cultural and intellectual gaps in the development of national cultures and literature. The early period of dynamic cultural and literary development, with its attendant rise in national languages, was replaced by stagnation and Russification. National intellectual communities in the autonomous republics reacted differently, but their representatives largely preferred passive and covert forms of resistance.

The policy of cultural and ideological unification, initiated by Moscow, barred the development of certain literary genres in the national literatures of the autonomous republics. Even so, Moscow's ideological curators institutionalized cultural failures in the development of Chuvash literature. Mişşi could be imagined as both the first Chuvash modernist and futurist author, and as the first utopia and dystopian author in Chuvash literature, but his successors and heirs in the twentieth century are hard to find. The history of Chuvash literature in the canon of socialist realism can be imagined as a failure of dialogue between the poetical experimentations of Mişşi and the cultural activities of Chuvash writers who belonged to the next generation that came of age in the 1980s.

As noted above, it is a supremely difficult task to locate utopian and dystopian elements in Chuvash literature of the second half of the twentieth century. Boris Cheendykov is among the few outstanding figures in contemporary Chuvash literature, but utopian and dystopian motives were never central to his texts. Some elements of utopian or anti-utopian self-consciousness appear in one of his most controversial works, “Häysene häysem vēleressēn surähsem,” or “Sheep Who Want Death” (Cheendykov 2009; 2012). The story, written in the 1980s, cannot be defined as utopian by any classical definition. The text is replete with motifs from traditional culture and the pagan perception of the world and reality. The image of death is central to the story:

It was winter and it was cold. My wife died on one of the clear, frosty nights, and I was alone. I occasionally went to a big club in the village center... I played cards, smoked a lot, and sometimes drank, but women were not attractive to me. I went up to the attic at midnight and, head bowed, sat next to the dead body of my beloved, and sometimes I kissed her. She, of course, was only a corpse, but for some reason, her hair still seemed alive to me. I looked at her for a long time... She was probably cold, and only in order not to frighten me, she did not talk about it. Every time, I came down from the attic sad and taciturn. My mind and my heart were dried up, and I could not sleep... I got up and sat in the back of the hut... I painted polygons, circles on the whitewashed furnace ... I drew and wiped them (Cheendykov 2009, 15).

“Häysene häysem vēleressēn surähsem” is not a classical utopia or dystopia because the actions take place not in an ideal imagined world of the future, but in an agrarian and rural Chuvash periphery without any concrete and determined historical origins or roots. The imagined world of the central hero of this story is lost in time, or perhaps exists on the border between time, space, and epoch. The cemetery is imagined as one of the emblematic places of memory in the text:

Soon I got tired of such a life, and I wrapped the body on the sled... I harnessed an old, lame mare and went to the ancient cemetery where long ago no one was buried. All day long I shoveled snow and picked at the frozen ground. Only in the evening was the grave ready and I said goodbye forever to my beloved. At night I stumbled home, wept, and buried my head in the pillow, forgotten in a dream” (Cheendykov 2009, 16).

The text of the story is multifaceted, multilevel, and extremely controversial. Allegorical descriptions of necrophilia are not invented as a biological act, but rather imagined as an intellectual form of Chuvash

community existence during an identity crisis. The scenes of necrophilia represent attempts to return to ethnic and traditional roots, to archaic culture, and a desire to give up our time, to break with traditions of contemporary consumerism. Therefore, the central character chooses a strategy based on a compromise with an old faith as a natural and inevitable form of religion. This identity choice helps the anonymous and unnamed hero to realize that “sometimes sheep kill themselves. The sheep who want to die. The sheep who do not understand what it is to just lie down and die. Apparently, these sheep are incredibly fond of white light, and their souls have a similarity to the human soul” (Cheendykov 2009, 19).

The cultural and intellectual traditions of the twentieth century developed discretely from the utopia and dystopia in Chuvash literature. Mišši foresaw utopia and dystopia as two different dimensions of a future ideal and idealized world. The utopian and anti-utopian motifs in his writings developed simultaneously, but were focused on universal national Chuvash futurum. The imagined coordinates of this ideal world of utopia in his Chuvash poetry can be mapped chronologically as part of the imagining “futurum” because they were imagined as part of the future in general. The poetics of Cheendykov’s prose actualize another variant of utopian and anti-utopian elements in Chuvash identity. A postmodernist, he renounces rigid and fixed localization of applicable heroes in space and time. The imagined world of Cheendykov develops as timeless and spaceless, as the world-phantom, imagined multiple worlds, worlds without clear boundaries, as world-frontier.

The boundaries between death and life, between being and non-being, between existence and non-existence, between paganism and Christianity are imagined, invented, mapped, and localized in the prose of Cheendykov onto mental maps of identity as vague, fuzzy, and blurred. Therefore, utopian elements and dystopian motifs in his texts could take place anywhere and at any time in the past, present, or future. Cheendykov breaks down and deconstructs hard and strict connotations between utopia and dystopia in abstract futurum. His utopian prose can be imagined as a prose of reverse direction. This structural feature is characteristic for Chuvash identity in general because Chuvash intellectuals of the twentieth century faced significant challenges of self-imagination and invention of national identity. However, while these difficulties could have encouraged the development of Chuvash science fiction and utopia and dystopia genres, this scenario of Chuvash identity transformation was not realized.

Efforts to develop a science fiction genre in Chuvash literature took place during the Soviet period, but Chuvash prose fiction writers were too much wrapped up and dressed in the formal and ceremonial robes of socialist realism, much like a restless imprisoned patient in a straitjacket. In the post-Soviet period, the national, folkloric, and ethnographic motifs that were extracted by Chuvash nationalist-oriented intellectuals from the dusty storerooms of Chuvash identity, strangled science fiction just as

socialist realism had in the heyday of its dynamic development. This suggests a poor prognosis for formalized Chuvash science fiction. The utopian and anti-utopian trends in Chuvash national and cultural identity in the twentieth century were subjected to coercive and violent deconstruction, marginalization, and displacement beyond the cultural and intellectual space. Therefore, attempts by Chuvash intellectuals to imagine, invent, mentally map, and reactualize national identity were only the first steps in the reconstruction of the elements and trends of utopian and dystopian self-consciousness.

The “Past” and “Future” in Grand Narratives of Official Historiography

Grand narratives develop as the dominant form of official contemporary Chuvash historiography, including folk history reconstructions (Yenykka 2012) intended for mass consumption by Chuvash children. The modern Chuvash Republic requires legitimation, and local elites are interested in history writing as a means of consolidating national identity. More broadly, all great and generalized versions of history are important in the context of national unity. They create positive and attractive images of national history. The modern Chuvash Republic is not an exception from this universal logic of nationalism and national identity. In the Chuvash case, grand narratives conjure up a past that could assist in strengthening the consolidation of the Chuvash nation as an imagined community.

The history in Soviet Chuvashia and the post-Soviet republic was used as an effective mechanism for the consolidation and strengthening of national memory. That said, the general mechanisms of this memory are still unclear because quasi-official government versions of identity in modern Chuvashia have developed within a closed and predominantly conservative model. Universities and research academic institutions that have existed in Chuvashia since the Soviet period are expected to serve official historiographical discourse and narrative continuity for legitimacy production. The great narratives in modern Chuvash historiography actualize its status as a predominantly normative historiography. The ancient, medieval, and modern histories of Chuvashia in official historiography (*Istoriia Chuvashii noveishego vremeni* 2001; *Istoriia Chuvashii noveishego vremeni* 2009) are analyzed and studied in a predominantly political paradigm. This version of Chuvash history has been accepted by the ruling regional elites as the only true and correct option. Typical of this situation is the preface (Fedorov 2001) to then President of the Chuvash Republic Nikolai Fedorov’s history of Chuvashia. Overall, in this framework, an events-driven history intersects with ethnographic studies (Ivanov 2009).

Chuvash medieval history is overloaded with narratives that serve state and ethno-political myths of continuity between Chuvash groups who populated the territories of the current Chuvash Republic. These narratives

also actualize continuity between different periods of Chuvash history. The thematic scope of this standardized historiography is too narrow and limited. The modern Chuvash historians involved and engaged in historical studies prefer to think in predominantly linear, political, events-driven, state, social, and economic history. The great synthetic versions of Chuvash history crafted after 1991 contain numerous defects common to post-Soviet historical knowledge and are extremely ideologized. The main vectors of inquiry are too conventional; their methodological status is conditional and imagined. This version of historiography depends on political and ideological conditions. Chuvash official historiography in the post-Soviet period has not been successful in adopting new modes of historical writing, making it impossible for Chuvash historians to provide an effective framework for Chuvash history writing.

The “past” and “future” images in contemporary Chuvash historiography have no independent value for modern Chuvash historians who prefer to write a history of Chuvashia as a part of the greater discourse of linear history. The informal or formal principles of “past in the future” or “future in the past” are widely used by former Soviet Chuvash historians and intellectuals. As national history in the Soviet period was ideologically banned as politically incorrect and therefore reduced to a prehistory of the October Revolution, Soviet historians promoted futuristic dimensions of history as imagined backgrounds and invented the origins of a communist future. By comparison, contemporary historiography in post-Soviet Chuvashia developed in similar intellectual conditions and with similar approaches.

Still, contemporary historians have abandoned the notion that the history of Chuvashia started in October 1917. Instead, they have proposed a new version of history writing based on collective perceptions of the past as the prehistory of a Chuvash state and statehood. In the late 1990s, some Chuvash historians, including Izorkin (1997c; 1999a; 1999b) and Pogodin (1997) tried to radically revise the principles of history writing and propose a new concept of Chuvash history as national history, but their attempts were unsuccessful. Methodological approaches, theoretical foundations, and the presumed roots of Chuvash history remained largely unchanged. Therefore, the time / tense, landscape, and space, “the past in the future” and “the future in the past,” are rather unattractive frameworks for conservative Chuvash historians. These problems are analyzed predominantly by nationally-oriented intellectuals and Chuvash historians who tend to use a multidisciplinary approach. They are not affiliated with official state academic institutions in the Chuvash Republic, which predominantly reproduce the official historiographical discourse.

The concepts of national history that actualize “past” and “future” narratives are not developed in official contemporary discourse. Chuvash historians of the past two decades have dismissed the concept of a national history and instead developed an alternative, state history of the Chuvash

Republic. This state version of history writing in the 2010s assumed the dominant position. The principles of communist loyalty were replaced by myths of moderate Chuvash political nationalism. The Soviet history of Chuvashia in this methodological approach lost its independent significance. Historical imagination in post-Soviet Chuvash historiography became a prehistory of transformation within the Chuvash Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which was framed as an incomplete and flawed form of autonomy that was ultimately replaced by the Chuvash Republic in the Russian Federation. Contemporary official historiography in the Chuvash Republic tends to conscribe “past” and “future” narratives in historical imagination, seeming them as a replacement for the earlier mechanics of chronologically ordered events and socioeconomic changes.

Modern Chuvash historians are not interested in analysis of theoretical foundations and historical tense problems. They presume to focus historical studies on other problems and themes that unify society and serve the political order of the ruling elites. It should be noted that these features are not unique to Chuvash historians. Chuvash historiography is characterized by servile orientations and preferences, which adversely influence the main vectors of humanities scholarship in modern Chuvashia. This situation has fragmented the Chuvash intellectual landscape. Supporters of a radical historical epistemology and a predominantly postmodern interdisciplinary synthesis propose different perceptions of historical tense that actualize Chuvash “past” and “future” narratives in Chuvash historical imagination and identity.

Historical Time in the Post-Soviet Chuvash Identity

The uncertainty of chronological time and “past” / “future” categories, and the constant invention and imagining of identity, were also characteristic of other modern Chuvash intellectuals. Atner Huzangaj was among those who managed to express the prevalent attitudes of the Chuvash people. Huzangaj proclaimed the outset of “twilight’s time, a twilight state of mind” (1997). The aforementioned story by Cheendykov (2009a; 2012), unstudied except for one brief review article (Savel’eva, 2012), is a typical example of the dominance of certain trends, analyzed above, in Chuvash intellectual discourse. In the story, Cheendykov touches upon problems of death and questions of continuity and discontinuity between generations, as well as the forms and dimensions of Chuvash historical past and future time. The story cannot be unequivocally and categorically defined as futuristic. Although it has a predominantly postmodern connotation, it belongs to Chuvash futurist discourse, based on the “past” and “future” reflections.

Cheendykov (1987; 1993) further developed these ideas in his later play, *Dinner after Midnight* [*Şurşēr huşşānhi apatlanu*] (1992). In the play, images of death, intertwined with national narratives, act as an incarnation of the past. The text of the play has parallels with earlier ideas of a national

Chuvash project proposed by Mišši. Artur, one of central protagonists, declares the general uncertainty and ambiguity of time in Chuvash identity:

...the hideous, ugly and unbearable times came... dreary autumn days... ... I want to forget for a moment and escape away in the far world of dream... there is nobody in this world ... nature, flowers and grass, sky, earth, the river wide as Atāl will be there with you... the sun is not too far... but you never will reach the sun, poor Chuvash ... will never reach... fly, fly to the sun ... to the great sun, to the Yellow Days Land... you will reach the sun and you will melt ... but it is better to thaw than to live like this... turn to the light, to the native land... (Cheendykov 1997).

The problems of uncertain development in Chuvash identity are also presented in other texts by Cheendykov, for example in his short story, “The Return of Khan” (2005). The formally post-Soviet, but in fact neo-Soviet reality simultaneously coexists with different and uncertain scenarios of development and transformation. The neo-Soviet protagonists, including Kazimir Petrovich, drink “cognac from the former Soviet and now brotherly Turkic Azerbaijan.” At the same time, they are still in a transcultural situation of “sovereign Yerland in Great Russia,” a republic ruled by former Communist Party functionaries who introduce previously banned elements of nationalistic ideology into the educational system. The transcultural situation is also expressed in the descriptions of a “robe embroidered with gold runic script and signs of ancient ancestors.” The short story reflects a mental form of anxiety and concern about the development of Chuvash language and identity in post-Soviet Chuvashia. Its text reveals the trans-boundary and trans-temporal status of contemporary Chuvash identity, displaced painfully between the Turkic world and the post-Soviet realities of modern Russia, where political elites continue to persistently ignore the national characteristics of the regions.

Cheendykov’s sentiments were further developed in a lecture delivered in 2012 at a summer camp hosted by the Chuvash public organization “Haval,” At this event, he stated:

I live quietly now. I do not write anything. It does not mean that I do not want to write, but I do not know how to write or for whom to write. Of course, I would like to write something else, at least a couple of works, but God knows how it will be... I do not want to write bad texts because when you write something it has to be interesting firstly for you... and if it is not interesting... I think that such texts, in my opinion, are not necessary (Cheendykov 2009b).

Similar sentiments among Chuvash intellectuals were the result of Chuvash identity changes and transformations in the post-global era.

Chuvash identity, as well as other national identities, sharply and nervously reacted to the threat of globalization. Chuvash intellectuals, including Cheendykov, sadly note, “You probably often see girls in Chuvash national costumes in official meetings on photographs from the public site cap.ru, but there is nothing in the soul in these costumes... they are used to hide this nothingness... it would be much better if Chuvashes wore American clothes, shorts, shirts, but would talk in Chuvash. This disease can be diagnosed as ornamentalism... and I do not know how to recover from it” (Cheendykov, 2009c).

In this context, Cheendykov draws parallels between postmodern Chuvash cultural identity and the Western world, which several decades earlier entered the era of postnational development. A singular national identity transformed into only one element among other fragmented and deconstructed components of collective memory. This postnational development put aside grand narratives that in previous historical epochs effectively consolidated and united nations, proposing universal values of political citizenship and ethnic identity. The combination of pessimism and optimism, futuristic impulses and tendency to restoration of archaic ethnicity, substantially influenced the concept of time in Chuvash identity. In the context of death, this time development became an imagined premonition of the inevitable erosion of national identities which started to transform in popular cultures of the post-Soviet Russia. The concept of “death” in modern Chuvash identity has futuristic connotations. Chuvash artist Gennadii Isaev argues that “we should ever disappear from the face of the earth, or embark on a path leading to the Future” (Iakovlev 1999).

The same ideas and mood are also characteristic of Yuri Yakku (1995). The image of death is transformed in his framework from the final destination to the starting point of movement directed into the future. Images of death in contemporary postmodern Chuvash identity turn death into a category that is outside of historical time, balancing between the historic past and futuristic future. The mixture of time frontiers and chronological boundaries, and the rethinking of the concept of “time” in general, are characteristic of Chuvash intellectual tradition. The genesis of this intellectual situation remains the subject of debate. Its origins should be placed within the historical experiences that the Chuvash nation was forced to live during historical time in a non-Chuvash cultural environment. Chuvash collective ideas and perceptions of time and landscape were formed and developed in the context of other cultures. In this regard, the institutionalization of time in Chuvash culture occurred too late.

Conclusion

To summarize the assumptions about different perceptions of historical time and strategies of its appropriation in Chuvash nationalism and identity, the author argues as follows: Chuvash understanding of historical time coincided with the development of Chuvash nationalism and mentally dwelt

among projects that assisted in the strengthening and modernization of Chuvash identity and promoted its transformation from traditional premodern agrarian communities into the identity of a nation-state. In nationalist imaginations, the 1917 revolution was nationalized, imagined, and reinvented as a Chuvash national revolution and an integral component of the Chuvash national historical project and local perception of historical time. Speculative ideas of Chuvash intellectuals about historical time in this framework were a form of national modernism, culturally and intellectually based on attempts to provide spiritual justification for the forced and violent Soviet model of political modernization. This required the radical destruction of the old and archaic, the predominantly peasant, and the partly Christian and partly pagan religious culture of a premodern Chuvash identity.

The political and ideological dynamics of the interwar Soviet cultural and literary landscape opened up debates about Chuvash historical time, but did not provide definitive answers. The rediscovery of Chuvash time as an imagined category of invented tradition became possible in the 1980s and 1990s, when Chuvash nationalism was on the rise. Chuvash perceptions of historical time in the twentieth century developed as a retrospective modernism based on old, archaic, simultaneous idealization and glorification of Chuvash national archaic history which was invented and imagined within a Chuvash national coordinate system. Chuvash intellectuals in the Soviet Union did not have a wide range of opportunities to realize their political ambitions and searched for symbolic salvation in the nationalization of history. The ideal future and futuristic world of the Chuvash landscape in Soviet Chuvash versions of futurism were mentally mapped and localized in the past. Chuvash national futurism in the post-Soviet era continued to evolve as retrospective futurism based on reflections, discussions, battles, and debates about failed and unrealized possibilities, and about dreams and ideals of the Chuvash national movement. National pessimism permeated the existential angst of Chuvash national identity makers and proponents in the early twenty-first century.

Slow historical dynamics were characteristic of Chuvash nationalism development, which imagined and invented a Chuvash nation rather late in comparison to other European nations. The late institutionalization of a Chuvash nation assisted its unique concept of time formation. Chuvash culture and literature were formed and developed in the absence of independent Chuvash statehood. Therefore Chuvash intellectuals came late to historical stages in the development of European culture, which other nations experienced in the nineteenth century. Thus, Chuvash versions and forms of romanticism, sentimentalism, and realism emerged later than in other European cultures. Chuvash historical time, on the one hand, was compressed. On the other hand, this situation institutionalized conditions for a more active and dynamic development of other cultural trends of modernism and futurism. The collective representations and debates on the past in Chuvash intellectual and cultural discourse were not formed during

the great historical stages of romanticism or realism. Modernism, with its focus on futurism, was not based on reflections or speculation about an imagined glorious past. This cultural trend formed Chuvash collective “past” and “future” ideas. Reflections about the future were critical to this intellectual situation. The formation of history, the “past,” and historical time, were proposed and developed with considerable delay.

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About the author

Maksym W. Kyrchanoff (Makşämë Kärçansen), Doctor of Science (History), is Associate Professor in the Department of Regional Studies and Foreign Economies at the Voronezh State University.