Ingushetia's Vernacular Landscape and the Colonial Encounter in Idris Bazorkin's *Iz T'my Vekov* (1968)

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Abstract: This article analyses the role of landscape in Ingush writer Idris Bazorkin's historical novel *From the Darkness of Ages* (1968). It aims to show how the novel criticises both 19th-century Russian imperial colonialism and intra-ethnic feuds in the region by concentrating on the way in which the landscape is altered by these conflicts rather than fully relying on anthropocentrism as do most Soviet historical works. In order to better grasp the transformation process of the landscape, this article chiefly employs the dichotomy established by Nixon between vernacular and official landscapes. Complementary theoretical frameworks, such as the notion of affective and disturbed landscapes as well as de Certeau's place-space dichotomy, also prove useful for the analysis.

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In the first chapter of his text on the consequences of climate change, war and displacement on the poor and disempowered in the global South, literary and environmental scholar Rob Nixon (2013: 17) introduces the difference between vernacular and official landscapes. He defines the former as landscapes with strong historical, affective, and spiritual ties to their dwellers, which become part of the community's socioenvironmental dynamics rather than being treated as purely extrinsic repositories of natural resources. This relationship can be severed by officialising such landscapes, for instance in an imperial or colonial framework. The official landscape typically disregards earlier affective maps; instead, it foregrounds an externalising view on the land by focusing on its natural resources and how they can be brought to fruition.

While Nixon's concept might seem more fruitful for anthropology rather than literature, it has also contributed to solidifying the bond between postcolonial studies and the environmental humanities in literary theory. Especially DeLoughrey has highlighted how the adoption of an ecocritical framework is vital to understanding the mutual relationship between every imperial project and the exploitation of a territory's natural resources (DeLoughrey / Headley, 2011: 10). By shifting their focus toward the environment, postcolonial studies can help uncover the history of colonial violence embedded in the landscape and thus give a voice to both the human and the non-human subaltern, a task that's been one of the main endeavours of the discipline. Ultimately, it is through the engagement with place and other non-human actors that postcolonial studies can go beyond anthropocentrism and dismantle dualisms born from the colonial process such as culture/nature and civilisation/barbarism. Taking into account the central role of narratives about land, its ownership and the disputes that surround it in an imperial framework, it is clear that the synergy of postcolonial methodologies and the environmental humanities can lead to fruitful results in a variety of disciplines, including literary studies (ibid.: 8, 24 f.).

Although postcolonial environmental approaches have mostly been applied to literature from the English-speaking world, strong arguments have been made for the diversification of their canon beyond the American realm. According to Nixon, rethinking the paradigm to include international literature would be a vital step to challenge the view of environmentalism as born in the centre and exported to (or forced onto) the periphery, one of the reasons for its rather tepid early reception among postcolonial theorists (Nixon, 2005: 244 ff.). Nixon's plea for internationalisation has since been answered in a variety of ways, including the recent engagement with environmental cultures in Central and Eastern Europe. In this article, I intend to follow in the footsteps of this engagement with the region by using the conceptual framework of (postcolonial) environmental humanities to analyse the under-researched[1] historical novel *From the Darkness of Ages* (*Iz T'my Vekov*, 1968) by Ingush national writer Idris Murtuzovich Bazorkin (1910–1993). Nested in the northeastern part of the Caucasus mountain range, Ingushetia is the smallest republic of the Russian Federation, mostly inhabited by the Ingush, a population closely related to the Chechens with whom they share a mutually understandable language, a societal structure traditionally without an aristocracy and based on clans with a common ancestor (*taipa*), and most of their customs (Dettmering, 2014: 243). Bazorkin's novel focuses on the history of Ingushetia from the end of the Caucasus War in 1864, which marked the Russian Empire's conquest of the entire north Caucasus, to the October Revolution in 1917. By taking the perspective of a clan of Ingush highlanders – the Egis – forced to relocate and start a new life in the mountains because of a feud with an enemy clan that chooses to ally with the advancing imperial army, Bazorkin utters a critique of tsarist colonialism and problematises intrinsic conflicts among the Ingush as well as their consequences for both the human and the non-human victim.

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[1] The only Western scholar who has hitherto engaged with the novel is Rebecca R. Gould, who has described it as decidedly postcolonial – a position which I do not fully support, as will become apparent further below – and situated it in the broader European context by comparing it to Thomas Hardy's English pastoral (Gould, 2020: 406 ff.).

The novel is interesting for a variety of reasons that have to do with both postcolonial and environmental literary theory. Having published as a minority writer from a region that had faced marginalisation, repression and large-scale deportations until the late 1950s, Bazorkin found himself in a peculiar position within the framework of Soviet multinational literature, a literary project that already existed *in embryo* in the 1920s and was further developed during the First Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934 (Dobrenko, 2022: 870). On paper, Soviet multinational literature seeked to develop the regional cultures and languages of the USSR and welcomed *postcolonial* criticism of imperial Russia, especially when it came from minority literatures[2] with a history of marginalisation (Frank, 2016: 196). This criticism was, however, mandated from above, born in the political and cultural centres of the Soviet Union and forcefully exported to the periphery. Moreover, it was to be carried out under strict conditions, namely through the medium of Russian as a literary lingua franca and the focus on the Russian Empire, avoiding the problematisation of Soviet ideology (ibid.). By being active in such an unfree political and cultural space, which criticised imperialism while exhibiting strong imperial undertones itself, Bazorkin crafted a novel that is, paradoxically, both postcolonial – in that it condemns imperial colonial practices in the north Caucasus – and non-colonial – in that it fails to address Soviet colonial strategies in the region, such as the deportation of the Chechens and Ingush to Central Asia in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The relationship of the novel to the aesthetic canon of Socialist realism is equally ambivalent. Much in the sense of Marx's theory of historical materialism, the mandatory view on world history in the USSR, Ingush society is initially depicted as backward and torn apart by ancient feuds among the clans, exacerbated by the Russian colonisers who align with varying families in order to assert control over the region.

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[2] I use the term *minority literature* to indicate literature pertaining to an ethnic minority written in a region's dominant language. Other key features of minority literature include its inherently political and collective character: since it develops in an exiguous space, the individual affairs on which it focuses immediately become a collective action and subsequently branch out into politics (Deleuze/Guattari, 1975: 29 ff.).

Only the main protagonist – a young shepherd who comes from an impoverished family but is otherwise in possession of all desirable qualities, such as physical strength, honour, honesty, and humility[3] – is able to grant the advancement of his people from *the darkness of ages* to the *enlightenment* of the Socialist Revolution by fighting against a rich Ingush landowner from an enemy clan backed by the Russians and ultimately joining the army and aiding Lenin's coming into power.

However, the struggles of the main characters against each other and the colonial system are not always in the centre of the novel. Instead, Bazorkin moves away from the ideal of anthropocentrism by firmly locating the novel in the unmistakable landscape of his homeland, deeply fraught with age-old culture and traditions but threatened by the colonial encounter, and foregrounding the interplay between nature and the ancestral worldview of the Ingush. The novel is thus able to go beyond some of the dogmata of Socialist realism, which was thoroughly anthropocentric and viewed the *national-ness* of the regional literatures as defiant of the idea of a party-sustained, *proletarian* literature that was supposed to unite the republics instead of emphasising their cultural differences (Dobrenko, 2022: 879 f.).

Although the novel can be read from an anthropocentric standpoint, Bazorkin's great historical and ethnographic accuracy also brings about a highly complex affective landscape[4] that's worthy of a deeper analysis. In this article I aim to show how mountainous Ingushetia as described in the novel can be defined as a vernacular landscape according to Nixon's definition, and how Russian imperialism deeply alters the highlanders' life by looking at the landscape in a bureaucratic and extraction-driven manner. I will highlight how the relationship between the mountain dwellers and the vernacular landscape is always reciprocal, meaning that the landscape is shaped by the dwellers' worldview, deep-rooted beliefs and customary practices one the one hand, and is able to influence their thinking, actions, and the way they perceive one another on the other. Mountainous Ingushetia will thus emerge as a powerful affective landscape in that, in alignment with Spinoza's definition of affect in *Ethics III*, it concerns both the dwellers' mind – their thinking – and the physics of their body – their actions (Jacquet, 2018: 75 f.). I will also rely on the place/space dichotomy as defined by de Certeau to show how Ingushetia functions as a *space* when inhabited by the Ingush highlanders because it's perceived to have been defined by all-encompassing ancestral forces in a time other than the present, but becomes a *place* in the eyes of the colonisers, because they foreground the present and seek to master the land by delimiting their own locus and using it to deal with the threats posed by the exteriority (de Certeau, 1984: 36).

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[3] One could argue that, for a Soviet-era hero, not being wealthy also constitutes a desirable quality.

[4] I borrowed this term from Berberich et al. to refer to a landscape that "becomes its own character", triggering the dwellers' powerful emotional reactions (Berberich et al., 2015: 1).

Religious Rituals and the Sacralisation of Landscape

References to the polytheistic belief system of the Ingush can be found all throughout the novel. This does not come as a surprise, since Bazorkin intended to portray the traditions and worldview of the mountain dwellers as realistically as possible: pagan practices historically remained common in Ingushetia up until the late 19th century, coexisting with Islam, which spread westward from Dagestan over the course of several centuries until it ended up replacing 11th century (Orthodox) Christianity (Albogachieva, 2017: 10).

The landscape of mountainous Ingushetia is also shaped by the legendary deeds of the Narts, giant demigods whose birth and adventures are at the core of the Nart Sagas, the heroic takes that make up the bulk of north Caucasian mythology (Colarusso, 2002: xiv). When considering more closely their influence on the narrated landscape, two cliffs mentioned in the first chapters of the novel should be taken into account: the cliff of Seska Solsa and the cliff of Kaloi Kant.

The cliff of Seska Solsa is named after one of the main characters of the Ingush Nart Sagas, the Nart also known as Siska Solsa in Ingush, Soslan in Ossetian and Sosruquo in Abkhaz. While some characters of the Ingush Nart corpus only occur in the Northeast Caucasian tradition, Seska Solsa is known throughout the Caucasus. The story of his birth is also narrated similarly in all traditions. It features a young man sitting on a stone, seeing – be it in a dream or in reality – the girl he loves. Through his passion for her, he is able to plant a seed into the stone that will later give birth to Seska Solsa – in some versions after nine months, reinforcing the metaphorical meaning of the tale. A wise woman is then usually able to break the stone and take out the newly born Nart, whom she raises as her son (Dakhkil'gov, 2012: 46).

This tale is interesting insofar as it shows that the North Caucasian peoples viewed stone as something not only immutable and everlasting, but also capable of giving birth and creating new life (Biguaa, 2021: 348). Stone thus assumes the role of the smallest possible unit of life: whereas other peoples' mythological tales are centred around water and trees as sources of life, the Nart sagas tell the tale of giants born from stone and residing atop mountains. The role of stones as cradles in which the first seed of a hero is formed also points to a communion of the (super)human with the landscape. By giving sustenance to the former, the latter is elevated to the role of an active character with human – in this case womanly – prerogatives, as opposed to remaining a passive framework for the actions of others.

While giving life to something new, stones are also seen as eternal and never-changing. They witness the events around them and are able to recall and retell them to anyone who will be able and willing to listen. In this sense, even though the tale of stones is oral, they function as witnesses of the past in a way that is akin to the written word (ibid.: 353). They can even be seen as superior, as the writing process assumes the presence of a writer who might not have been present when the events happened or might want to foreground his version of the truth over a more objective account, whereas stones are ever-present and offer an unaltered imprint of reality. Keeping with this worldview, in Bazorkin's novel the *word* of the stones is regarded as superior to the human word. For instance, when the spiritual guide of the Muslim highlanders of clan Egi, the mullah Hasan, suddenly disappears with his long-time secret lover Nasi, the second wife of landowner Goitemir, the narrator is prompted to comment on the speculations as follows: "Sooner or later the rumours fall silent. But the stones always speak…" (Bazorkin I, 2001: 332).[5] This suggests that the truth that's set in stone is preferable to human speculations by virtue of both its eternity and its immediacy, as stones are understood to have been present when Hasan disappeared, while humans were not.

In the novel, the cliff of Seska Solsa – a boulder that the prodigiously strong Nart was able to lift and drop against his enemies according to an Ingush legend (ibid.: 27) – is the place where the villagers of clan Egi settle after being forced by an enemy clan backed by the Russians to leave the plains. Years later, it becomes the favourite place of the novel's protagonist, the young shepherd Kaloi Egi, who dwells there seeking a connection with his natural parents, whom he has never met, knowing from his uncle's tales that his father planted an apple tree on the cliff (ibid.: 92). Through its interaction with Kaloi, the landscape exists simultaneously in two time frames, linking the past to the present. As Kaloi tries to imagine a time when his parents crossed the mountains that surround him now, he romanticises the cliff and the apple tree under which he sleeps, wishing that they would answer when he expresses his grief.

However much a human actor might be able to influence the landscape, their relationship is always mutual. Kaloi, for instance, gets his name from being born under the cliff of Kaloi Kant, a local hero of the Ingush Nart sagas (Dalgat, 1972: 174).[6] In the eponymous tale, Kaloi Kant is an exceptionally strong shepherd who lives in the mountains and comes into possession of a large flock of sheep thanks to the magical abilities of a talking goat. Seska Solsa, jealous of his wealth, finds out that his strength will subside as soon as he lays with a woman and sends his sister to seduce him. Kaloi Kant loses his strength as they fall in love and is eventually attacked and easily overpowered by the Narts, who take him captive, steal his sheep and kill the goat. From the bones of the goat Kaloi Kant makes a zurna, which he plays with such melancholy that the melody is heard throughout the village and his brothers come to his rescue. However, the gods intervene before they can take revenge on the Narts, redirecting the course of a river so that Kaloi Kant, his family and half of the flock are left on one shore, while the Narts find themselves on the opposite side with the rest of the sheep. Enraged, Kaloi Kant throws an enormous rock to the other side, which goes on to be known as the cliff of Kaloi Kant (ibid.: 175).

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[5] "Рано или поздно молва умолкает. А камни всегда говорят..."
All citations as well as the novel's title have been translated by the author. In the case of a direct citation, the Russian original has been added to the footnotes for further clarity.

[6] Dalgat translates the name Kaloi (or Kolai) Kant as "young man from Kolai", Kolai/Kaloi being a locality in Ingushetia (also Chechen: k'ant = young man) (ibid.).

The boulder establishes a link between Kaloi and Kaloi Kant that has a lasting influence on the way the former looks, behaves and is perceived by others. When he's praised for his strength and bravery by fellow villagers of clan Egi, he's described as a "true second Kaloi-Kant", hinting at the fact that it wasn't without reason that he was born under that cliff and was named after the legendary hero by his father (Bazorkin I, 2001: 120). His way of living – Kaloi is also a shepherd and spends most of his time in the mountains with his flock – and musical ability with the *rozhok*, a wind instrument similar to the zurna which he often plays when he visits the cliff of Seska Solsa, are also explicitly compared to Kaloi Kant's (ibid.: 99). Moreover, there are several parallels between Kaloi Kant's battle against an all too powerful enemy, who doesn't hesitate to cheat out of jealousy for the sudden stroke of luck that has befallen the shepherd, and Kaloi's struggle against the wealthy landowner Goitemir and, later, his son Chaborz, whose dishonourable conduct puts clan Egi in jeopardy more than once throughout the novel.

Within the broader framework of Soviet multinational literature, this struggle can be interpreted in two ways. The fight of a single man, representative of his clan, against a colonial system that has taken away his livelihood, can be taken as a critique of Russian imperial colonialism in 19th-century Ingushetia, giving the novel postcolonial undertones *ante litteram*. However, the narrative of the impoverished but noble hero who (at least partially) successfully stands against the wealthy and morally depraved antagonist and even ends up aiding the Revolution is also typical for Soviet literature. The link established through the cliff between the age-old tale of Kaloi Kant and Bazorkin's hero thus functions not only as an element of a vernacular landscape that's deeply tied to its dwellers' worldview, but also as a way to broaden the interpretation of two narratives that would otherwise remain very different in time and literary genre.

While heroes and Narts act as undisputed protagonists (or antagonists) of the sagas, the Ingush pagan pantheon also features several anthropomorphic deities pertaining to different areas of life – from planets, the stars and the universe to individual physical and spiritual health (Albogachieva, 2017: 13 ff.). Some of these gods appear in the novel and are revered through the association with elements of the landscape such as trees, caves, and cliffs. There is no indication that these places of religious devotion look differently than other natural grounds – however, their semiotics are set apart from the contiguous non-holy spaces through the presence of particular symbols and the rituals performed by the community (Wee / Goh, 2019: 55). Moreover, their importance for the villagers is emphasised by the conflicts they cause between the pagans, who worship the *old gods* in the mountains, and the Muslims, who meet in the mullah's house to worship another god, who is regarded as newer, but generally not different from the others, and is thus aptly named *god-Allah*.

The first instance of a ritual that gives a sacred component to an otherwise non-holy landscape is found at the beginning of the novel. Confronted with torrential rains that last several days and destroy everything on their path, the pagan mountaineers of clan Egi go to pray in the temple of the god Elta, one of the most important deities in the Ingush pantheon and protector of the hunters. The temple is described as a "small building with a stepped roof, where the villagers have been honouring the protector of hunters for centuries" (Bazorkin I, 2001: 33), located "among holy walnut trees, adorned with antlers" (ibid.).[7] From a purely topographical standpoint, the temple is indistinguishable from the nearby space. However, it is understood to be sacred based on the religious practice of putting animal antlers as offerings onto the trees and entering the building to pray to Elta. Similarly, the outside of the temple of Tusholi, where the women pray to the goddess of fertility to grant them a child, features a single stone as a symbol of motherhood, which is sacralised by the praxis of the local women to kneel before it and undress to show their bosom (ibid.: 28).

The most thoroughly described ritual which brings together animism and the landscape takes place in a cave atop the sacred mountain Tsei-Lom in honour of Malkhaaza, the goddess of dawn (Tsaroeva, 2016: 107). Dali, a local girl, is chosen by the pagan priest to perform it and is accompanied to the cave by Kaloi (Bazorkin I, 2001: 364 ff.). The impervious way to the top of the mountain already shows traces of the supernatural: the forest is described as "seemingly enchanted" and Dali fears the presence of creatures following them (ibid.: 366). Once they reach the cave, Kaloi notices a bird perching above the cave and hears bats waking up in the distance, which is significant as birds were thought to be messengers of the gods (ibid.). The pairing of ordinary natural elements such as caves and forests, non-human actors such as birds, and religious practices evokes a variety of feelings in the characters which, in turn, influence their decisions and the way the plot of the novel unfolds. While sleeping in the cave, for instance, Kaloi dreams of Dali, and is therefore later convinced by the priest to marry her (ibid.: 376), a decision that marks a decisive break with the past and gives way to the family happiness that he will experience from this point onward. Not only do the villagers’ religious practices alter the landscape by sacralising it – the sacralised landscape is also able to actively influence the villagers’ worldview and change the course of their life, a trait that makes it profoundly vernacular.

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[7] [Д]омик со ступенчатой крышей, в котором испокон веков жители села чествовали покровителя охоты [...] в кругу священных ореховых деревьев, увешанных рогами животных [...].

Although Islam is held in the same regards as polytheism, the pagan villagers do regard the gods of the traditional pantheon as superior to god-Allah precisely because they embody the environment, which they consider almighty – not without reason in a rural society whose survival depends on favourable weather and soil conditions. This stance is exemplified by the pagan priest’s answer to the question as to why the highlanders of clan Egi have been befallen by hunger and disease despite their devotion to all gods:

> Ėl’murza thought about it and answered: – I am not a saint. Only the gods themselves know for certain. But if you want to know what I think, I’ll tell you. In truth, we do not believe. [...] That is, we believe [...] solely out of fear… I think that god-Allah is great. But our land, mountains, water, air have their own gods and we mustn’t forget about them. What would there be without the sun? May it send its blessing upon us! (ibid.: 365)[8]

The priest concludes that the gods who personify nature and whose worship directly involves the landscape are mightier than the *newer* god-Allah who was, on the contrary, imposed on the landscape from an outside force and at a later time. Naturally, not everyone shares this opinion: the mullah complains more than once about the villagers’ hesitation to abandon the old beliefs in favour of a purely monotheistic Islam and interprets the natural calamities as a sign of Allah’s dissatisfaction (ibid.: 34). However, it should be noted that some degree of religious syncretism affects most characters in the novel. Even Kaloi, who is otherwise described as a devout Muslim, doesn’t hesitate to take part in pagan rituals and point out that his fellow villagers who converted to Islam have probably also prayed to the pagan gods at some point in their life and shouldn’t completely reject the traditional beliefs (ibid.: 343). The communion with sacralised elements of the landscape, which is necessary to pray to the old gods, therefore emerges as an essential part of the characters’ identity irrespective of the religion they observe publicly.

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[8] Эльмурза задумался и ответил: — Я не святой. Это известно только самим богам. А если хочешь знать, что я думаю, скажу. Не верим мы по-настоящему [...], верим […] за страх… Я считаю, что и бог-Аллах велик. Но земля наша, горы, вода, воздух имеют своих богов, и мы не должны о них забывать. Что было бы без солнца? Да ниспошлет оно нам свое благо!

Violence and Deceit in the Disturbed Landscape

The extent to which the traditional worldview of the Ingush is entangled with the mountainous landscape that I have described above might give the impression that a vernacular landscape is only found in relation to *primitive* peoples who have somehow remained capable of dwelling in harmony with the environment in a kind of *never-ending pastoral* while the world around them has developed further – an image that's historically been dear to the self-proclaimed *civilised* European (Garrard, 2011: 129).

However, this isn't consistent with Nixon's view on vernacular and official landscapes, nor does it account for the depiction of the Ingush in Bazorkin's novel. Notwithstanding the dwellers' persisting affective ties, the vernacular landscape can also be marked by experiences of conflict, resettlement, and loss (Nixon, 2013: 17 ff.), which create a landscape of corruption and violence. In the case of *From the Darkness of Ages*, formal and informal burial sites visibly alter the Ingush landscape in commemoration of the victims of both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts – as the feuds between clans precede the Russian colonisation of the region and are later exacerbated by it. As the influence of the Russian Empire becomes palpable, the fields, mountains, and forests of mountainous Ingushetia also become the centre of conspiracies and corrupt schemes that aim to enrich collaborative clans while taking away the livelihood of less cooperative highlanders.

I will refer to landscapes marked by violence and corruption as *disturbed landscapes*. This term, along with similar ones such as deathscapes, landscapes of death and traumascapes, has been repeatedly used in East European and Eurasian historiography and literary studies to refer to landscapes affected by wars and natural disasters, which lost their pastoral component and were distorted by experiences of human trauma (Barcz, 2020: 161 ff.). As these traumata are remembered in and through the present landscape, the dwellers develop a unique understanding of locality which is anchored in a sequence of places and events and presupposes the communion of place and collective memory, implying that the landscape and its inhabitants come to form a coherent whole and a clear division between the two is no longer possible (Kołodziejczyk, 2015: 274).

The memorials that characterise the novel's landscape can take the form of monuments whose specific purpose is remembrance, such as graves, or sanctuaries that don't have a specific religious significance *per se*, but become accidental memorials (Schramm, 2011: 6). The former is, for instance, the case with the burial site built by Kaloi to commemorate his parents who were forced to leave the homeland and, as he finds out later in the novel, were killed in exile in the Ottoman Empire. Looking for an adequate place for the monument, he intentionally decides on a site in the mountains which already has sacred connotations, the pass of the Three Obelisks, where the yearly pagan women's festival is celebrated (Bazorkin I, 2001: 125). There, he places two stone slabs to mark the graves, plants an apple and a pear tree and builds a fountain. In his view, each drop of water from the fountain shall "remind people of all those [...] who remained without a grave in a foreign land" (ibid.: 232).[9]

The experience of displacement and eviction is thus extended from the bereaved community to all the peoples who have experienced forced resettlement. Through the entanglement of memory and space, the disturbed landscape goes on to function as a temporal and geographical translocality which reunites different time frames and places in the history of a single community – such as the time before and after the deportation to the Ottoman Empire and the resettlement to the mountains from the plains respectively – and geographically faraway peoples with a similarly violent past who have to grieve and remember while living in an alien space. In the second part of the novel, Kaloi and his cousin Ortsi are drafted by the Russian army and serve in Ukraine and the Carpatians during the First World War. There, the grief that stems from a past of displacement is once again extended to faraway communities – the families of the unknown soldiers whose corpses were left on the battlefield, never to be discovered and properly buried: "But none of their relatives will ever come here, to the faraway Carpatians, to their solitary grave" (Bazorkin II, 2001: 188).[10] The same affective response set off by the burial sites in the Ingush landscape is imagined in other contexts, implying a universal understanding of grief and bringing together all communities struck by war and trauma.

While intentional burial places play a key role for the critique of imperialism, unintentional sanctuaries also enable the characters to come to terms with a past marked by hardships and loss. Before finding out about his parents' death, Kaloi lingers on the cliff where they used to live and under the tree planted by his father, longing for them to act as he imagines his parents would (Bazorkin I, 2001: 92). The tree is not inherently sacred, nor was it planted with the intention of making it a sanctuary – as opposed to the gravestones, its consecration arises from the interaction with a particular actor, for whom the site functions on both a past and a present level. The holiness of an involuntary memorial site is thus highly personal – able to arise, disappear and change its form depending on the actor(s) involved – and achievable only through performance (Schramm, 2011: 6 ff.), which, in this case, involves dwelling under a tree and treating it as a human being.

Intentional and accidental memorials that help the community confront its past and merge the violence it has experienced, its own collective memory, and the landscape are not the only elements that characterise the disturbed landscape. In the novel, the *postcolonial* narrative goes hand in hand with the critique of the wealthy and unethical, paralleled by the final triumph of the poor and morally superior – a mandatory message in the literature that forwarded at least some Soviet ideals. Though not particularly original in its essence, this critique is still interesting because it is voiced through elements of the landscape and nonhuman actors that become the centres of dispute and, as such, causes of disturbance.

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[9] "Пусть каплями этой воды люди помянут [...]таких, как они, оставшихся без могил на чужбине".

[10] "Но никто из родных никогда не придет сюда, в далекие Карпаты, на их одинокую могилу".

A paramount example here is the wealthy Chaborz, who inherits money, land, and a good relationship with the Russian administration from his late father Goitemir, but still tries to enrich himself at the expense of Kaloi and clan Egi. As the village elder, Chaborz administers the fields in the plains that are harvested by the highlanders, but owned by the Cossacks, who received them from the Russians after the Ingush were forced to give them up and resettle in the mountains. His position as a mediator between the Cossacks and the Ingush, however, does not work because of his dishonesty. Rather than paying the Cossacks the agreed-upon fee in full, so that the community can live off the harvest during winter, he secretly keeps some of the money for himself. This draws the ire of the Cossack landowner, who eventually sends a herd of wild horses and armed men to the mountains to savage the fields of the Ingush, kill their cattle and trample any resistance they might find (Bazorkin II, 2001: 68 ff.). Chaborz, who is conveniently away on a journey when this happens, comes back days later only to find out that his wife was almost killed when she tried to stop the herd by herself, and the villagers have stripped him of the title of elder after finding out about the missing money (ibid.: 79). In this situation, Chaborz's deception comes across as particularly wicked because of his wealth, which means that the Cossacks' raid won't impact him negatively, and because it is linked to the destruction of fertile land, the main source of livelihood for the impoverished highlanders who therefore find themselves in danger of starvation during the winter. The fact that his wife tries to step in and prevent the Cossacks from destroying the crops (ibid.: 70 ff.) also underscores the gravity of Chaborz's cowardice. In a strict cultural framework that calls for men to provide and fight for their family and face the consequences of their actions head-on, whereas women are expected to be *pure*, submissive, and not interfere with the husband's public affairs (Pavlova, 2012: 231), his deception subverts the traditional gender norms and prompts the villagers to insult him by referring to him as a woman, while his wife is praised because "she acted like a man" (Bazorkin II, 2001: 78).

On another occasion, during a particularly harsh winter, Chaborz resorts to placing his extended family's cattle in a cave in the mountains in order to hide it from Kaloi and his relatives (Bazorkin I, 2001: 340 ff.). This proves ineffective – Kaloi easily overpowers the guards at the entrance of the cave, manages to find the cattle and gifts it to his fellow villagers, threatened by hunger and starvation – and widens the ethical gap between Chaborz and Kaloi by foregrounding their relation to the nonhuman.[11] While Kaloi masters the landscape so well that he easily finds the cattle and later chooses to generously donate it, Chaborz, who doesn't know the mountains as he lives in a big house in the plains, is depicted as a greedy man who only cares for the people around him inasmuch as they can help him achieve more wealth or, on the contrary, cause him economical damage.

In a context of both intrinsic feuds and the emergence of extrinsic colonialism, the vernacular landscape is marked by violence that's commemorated in different forms and involves different actors, but always focuses on the land and its ownership. The disturbed landscape therefore becomes instrumental in criticising imperialism and intra-ethnic conflict as well as in foregrounding certain aspects of the traditional moral code of the Ingush that are in accordance with Soviet ideals – such as generosity and the rejection of greed and the uncontrolled accumulation of wealth.

Of Fields and Forests, or: The Officialisation of Landscape

Historically, every imperial project involved some form of exploitation of natural resources and thus had a transformative impact on the environment, be it the landscape or the seascape, which makes it impossible to separate colonialism from the study of environmental history. As such, post-imperial (and postcolonial) texts tend to rely on discourses of a type of environmental purity that was lost to foreign conquest, although they might not consciously foreground them (DeLoughrey, 2011: 10, 23).

The bond between the natural environment and imperial expansion is therefore instrumental in understanding the Russian colonisation of the north Caucasus, whose successes and failures were largely conditioned by the region's environment. The Cossacks, and later the regular Russian troops under the command of general Ermolov, deforested large areas of the northeast Caucasus, as the wood was needed as lumber and firewood in the villages in the steppes (Barrett, 1999: 29, 34). The deforestation, in turn, caused massive problems especially along the main rivers, such as the Terek and its eastern tributaries in present-day Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Georgia. This forced the Cossacks to choose between settling close to the rivers, where they often fell prey to unhealthy, swampy surroundings, or settling in the inner steppe and having to reckon with water shortages (ibid.: 37).

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[11] Gould has highlighted how the novel presents and contrasts two ethical systems through the landscape, the ethics of the mountains – linked with virtuous characters such as Kaloi – and the deranged ethics of the plains, exemplified by Chaborz and his extended family (Gould, 2020: 418 ff.).

Given this historical background, it's not surprising that Bazorkin focuses on the mountaineers' struggle against the colonial administration to keep control of their resources. In the novel, the consolidation of the Russian rule during the last decades of the 19th century enables the officialisation of the Ingush landscape. As noted by Nixon, the official landscape functions differently from its vernacular counterpart in that the colonisers see it solely as an environment rich in natural resources that can potentially be exploited by the metropolitan centre, feeding the dynamics of the core-periphery power relations typical for empires (Nixon, 2013: 17). In the case of the Ingush, I will concentrate on the two resources that offer the most ground for dispute – the fertile land used mainly for grazing and harvesting, and the forest.

Since the novel revolves around a rural community, land is of paramount importance. Fraught with deep-rooted traditional beliefs and tied to the ancestors' struggles – meaning that leaving and resettling somewhere else is never an option that is considered lightheartedly – the fields are also valued in their extrinsic characteristics, as the main sources of sustenance for humans and cattle. Unsurprisingly, the first key conflict mentioned at the beginning of the novel involves precisely the question of land ownership, as Kaloi's aunt remembers and idealises her life in the plains before being forcefully displaced and having to settle in the mountains: "the house and everything they owned remained in the village of Angusht, surrounded by green fields" (Bazorkin I, 2001: 28).[12] Even as landowner Goitemir, one of the few Ingush who is in good terms with the Russian administration, visits the local Russian governor in the city of Vladikavkaz accompanied by Kaloi's late father Turs, he is not able to convince him to give back the land that has been taken from the Ingush:

> Goitemir waved his hand in annoyance. – We came too late with our petition. They said: there is a royal decree, and no one can revoke it. [...] [A]ll land that has been taken from our people will from now on belong to those who have settled on it. (ibid.: 50)[13]

The colonial administration also meddles in the intra-ethnic feuds that involve Goitemir and later his son Chaborz on the one hand, and Turs and later his brother Garak and Kaloi on the other. When Goitemir's fields in the plains are set on fire after an argument with Garak, the local Russian deputy bailiff comes to the mountains and arrests Garak on the spot, despite lacking proof against him (ibid.: 102 ff.). He regards the arson "not as a personal affair, but rather as a crime against the law" (ibid.: 110).[14] Here, the fallacy of the colonial administration becomes especially apparent. The deputy bailiff only considers the geographical appearance of the land – the fields that belong to Goitemir and were set on fire, causing him and his family a substantial loss for which someone must be punished. He isn't aware of the intricate history of the land that lies beneath the surface – the feud between the families of Goitemir and Garak, the fact that the land has been the object of dispute for years, or Garak's quarrel with Goitemir on behalf of his elder brother Turs, who was deported and killed in the Ottoman Empire by the very administration represented by the deputy bailiff. The violence and struggle that mark the past and present of the land don't concern him – their origins are too far removed on the temporal axis for him to grasp.

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[12] Дом и все, что было у них, осталось в селении Ангушт, окруженном зелеными садами.

[13] Гойтемир с досадой махнул рукой. — Опоздали мы с прошением. Сказали: есть царский указ и его никто не может отменить. [...] [В]ся земля, которую отняли у наших, отныне навсегда будет принадлежат тем, кто на ней поселен.

The shift from the spatial to the temporal dimension is noteworthy because it mirrors de Certeau's distinction between place and space, which proves useful to understand the conflicting views on the Ingush landscape (de Certeau, 1984: 35 ff.). Whereas place can be understood in purely geographical terms – as a part of the environment delimited as one's own and used as a starting point to manage relationships with the outside – the notion of space presupposes some type of temporality in order to be grasped fully, focusing on its state as an inhabited locus with a more or less ancient history (ibid.). In this case, the imperial administration concentrates on the present state of the geographical land – the (official) place – as opposed to considering its past and affective ties to the dwellers – the (vernacular) space. The lack of knowledge about the Ingush landscape as a space also stems from the colonial power dynamic that's at work in this passage. Influenced by Russian orientalism, which historically viewed the peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia as backward savages who were in dire need to be brought to the enlightenment of civilisation by ethnic Russians (Tlostanova, 2022: 158 ff.), the deputy bailiff sees himself as the representative of the only valid government and the only legal system that ought to be applied among the *savages* – the Russian one. The traditional laws of the northern Caucasian highlanders, broadly known as *'adats* in Caucasiology, which greatly value one's honour and family ties and call for active rebellion in the face of injustice, do not interest him because he sees them through imperial lenses as inherently inferior. As the local history and culture are deeply tied to the landscape and its dwellers, the disinterest for one of these aspects is bound to go hand in hand with the ignorance of the others, bringing about an officialisation of the vernacular landscape.

The conflict surrounding the usage of Ingush woodlands is mostly akin to the difficult relationship to the land. In fact, the two cannot be considered separately, as the wood-land is also part of the land whose ownership is in dispute. However, while the fields are initially regarded as a contentious issue between two families and their clans and later develop as a broader struggle that also involves the Russian authorities, the question concerning the control over the forest immediately starts out as an inter-ethnic problem. After he is heard chopping wood in the forest that once belonged to his family, Garak is called to answer for his alleged crime in front of three local governors, as the forest now belongs to the government and can no longer be cut by the highlanders (Bazorkin I, 2001: 80). Naturally, the Ingush are resistant to the notion of a landscape that belongs to the state, perceived as an abstract entity, but not the people who have been taking care of it for generations, and see the intrusion of foreign authorities as unjust. Even when threatened with imprisonment, Garak doesn't back up:

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[14] "Мы рассматриваем этот акт не как личные отношения, а как выступление против закона."

> – I don't know what is inside the earth – he said. – From the earth come springs, rivers. We believe that this water belongs to everyone. The air as well. But the outer land and the forest belong to their owners. I used to hew trees in my forest, I still hew them today and I'll continue to hew them… [...] If the tsar is cold, I can share firewood with him. But I don't know why he decided that what is mine, is his. (ibid.: 81)[15]

Again, Garak legitimises his claim on the forest temporally rather than geographically, emphasising that it used to belong to his ancestors and he'll continue to use it and, eventually, pass it onto his son. His fellow villagers also point out the fact that imperialism is infiltrating their space all too deeply by progressively taking the landscape away from them – a landscape they perceive as their own because they have been dwelling there for centuries (ibid.). In accordance with both de Certeau's understanding of place and Nixon's official landscapes, however, the Russian governors are not able to grasp the temporality of the landscape. Their place-making strategy is based on delimiting a geographical location which is to be marked as one's own and employed to exploit the region as intensively as possible while keeping outsiders at bay (de Certeau, 1984: 36). As colonisation reaches deeper into mountainous Ingushetia, the highlanders try to resist being othered and relegated to a shrinking space, not only by openly rebelling to the empire's legal apparatus, but also by using the existing rules to their advantage. Since the regional government allows them to collect bushwood, for instance, they gather as much as possible before winter and interrupt the regular wood trade with the Cossacks, who therefore end up being harmed by the very laws enforced by the government with which they cooperate (Bazorkin I, 2001: 83). This strategy – subverting the rules from within and moulding them to better reflect the traditional way of life without openly defying the law – has been described by de Certeau (1984: 31) as a way of indigenous space-making in an imperial context, and although he referred to the legal relations between Native Americans and Spaniards, it can also be applied here in the context of the Russian Empire.

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[15] — Что в земле, я не знаю, — сказал он. — Из земли выходят родники, реки. Эту воду мы считаем общей. Воздух тоже. А верхняя земля и лес принадлежат хозяевам. Я свой лес рубил, рублю и буду рубить… [...] Если царю холодно, я могу поделиться с ним дровами. Но почему он решил мое считать своим, я не знаю.

The exploitation of the Ingush land and forest plays a crucial role in the novel in that it shows how differently the colonisers and the indigenous peoples see the landscape. While the former officialise it by having no concept of its history and influence on current community dynamics and seeing it solely as a geographical place that ought to be divided, controlled and exploited, the latter use the space's temporality to legitimise their claim on its resources and, if hindered by the host government, are able to mend its laws and find a pathway between the state and customary practices.

Soviet Multinational Literature and the Environmental Humanities – A Productive Synergy?

The conceptual framework of (postcolonial) environmental humanities makes it possible to uncover the deeply mutual relationship between the Ingush landscape, in which customary practices and religious beliefs are embedded, and its dwellers, whose perception and deeds are, in turn, influenced by the ancestral landscape they have known since birth. This landscape, though vernacular and affective, is not depicted as a pastoral idyll. Instead, it is disturbed by violence that stems from feuds among different Ingush clans as well as the progressing Russian imperialism. As a Soviet author, Bazorkin problematises both. While he regards imperialism as the main culprit in what Nixon calls the officialisation of landscape, as well as the aggravation of the intra-ethnic conflicts, he does not shy away from criticising the wealthy and greedy, regardless of their ethnicity, as well as the futile feuds that end up splitting the highlanders instead of uniting them against a common enemy, ultimately bringing about their integration in the empire.

Moreover, as the novel conveniently ends in 1917 as the first part of a planned trilogy that was never completed,[16] he omits the parallels between the Russian Empire's officialisation of the landscape and the early Soviet collectivisation and resource exploitation, which still persists in Eurasia and the Caucasus in the form of contemporary geopolitics of oil and gas (Deckard, 2016: 287). The time frame of the novel makes it impossible to focus on the similarities between the forced displacement of the Ingush from the plains to the mountains and, for some of them, further to the Ottoman lands in the 1860s, and their deportation to Central Asia ordered by Stalin in 1944. Both events were especially traumatic for the Ingush, the Chechens, and the Circassians, and have retained their relevance in the contemporary political landscape of the Russian Federation.[17]

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[16] Indeed, Bazorkin had intended for *From the Darkness of Ages* to be the first part of a trilogy that would have focused on a century of Ingush history, from the Russian colonisation until the return to the homeland in 1957 after the deportation during Stalinism. As the following books were meant to foreground topics that were still taboo until at least 1991, however, they could never be published. The manuscripts were seized by governmental forces in 1992 during the Ossetian-Ingush conflict and have never resurfaced (Bazorkin I, 2001: 22).

A contemporary interpretation that focuses on the rendition of the Ingush landscape between vernacularisation and officialisation, then, can help foreground the novel's relevance in the context of contemporary cultural and environmental politics. A comparative approach to north Caucasian literary works of the 1960s and 70s with similar themes – such as Bagrat Shinkuba's *The Last of the Departed* (1976) about the deportation of the Ubykhs from the northwest Caucasus to Anatolia in the 1850s and Abuzar Aidamirov's *Long Nights* (1972) about the Chechen deportation – could shed further light on the way Soviet writers from the north Caucasus voiced post-imperial criticism through the landscape of their homeland.

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[17] Two of the most recent examples include the 2014 Winter Olympics held in Sochi, to which several Circassian organisations objected as some of the games took place on a site where the Circassians were massacred by the Russian army in the 1860s, and the new history books released by the Russian Ministry of Education in 2023 that, while chiefly trying to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine from a historical standpoint, also removed every reference to the Stalinist deportations in the 1940s, drawing the ire of (among others) the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov.

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