

Prisoners of the Caucasus: Literary myths and media representations of the Chechen conflict.

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Prisoners of the Caucasus: Literary Myths and Media Representations of the Chechen Conflict

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Abstract

Russia's literary tradition was the primary locus of Russian debate on the Caucasus until the media revolution of the post-Soviet 1990s. This paper examines how the idiom of nineteenth-century literary romanticism, both in its representations of the North Caucasian peoples and in its implied critique of the Russian state, collided with the verbal and visual material of the post-Soviet 1990s. In the past, writers such as Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy had employed the literary figures of the Savage, the Captive, and the Corpse, who each represented the political, psychic, and physiological dimensions of the Russian mythology of the Caucasus. In the first half of the 1990s, the media inherited the prophetic function formerly accorded to the artist. During the Chechen war of 1994-1996, press freedom brought with it a new ethical responsibility, as well as a ready spectacularization of violence and a loosening of the internal coherence of received ideas, experiences, and narratives. The paper concludes by examining whether and how the nineteenth-century literary myths of the Chechen as "savage" and the Russian nation as "captive," that is victim both of the imperial state and of anti-imperialist resistance, persisted in the changed political and symbolic landscape of the post-Soviet era.

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