

***Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity.* By Edith W. Clowes. Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2011. xviii, 179 pp. Index. Maps. Illustrations. \$65.00, hard bound. \$24.95 paper.**

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The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 sparked heated debate over a thorny question that has haunted public discourse in Russia for years: the problem of Russian identity. In her latest book, Edith Clowes examines the ongoing renegotiation of Russian identity in post-Soviet culture. Drawing on a variety of sources ranging from visual (murals in the Moscow metro), literary/philosophical (Mikhail Ryklin, Viktor Pelevin, Tatiana Tolstaia, Liudmila Ulitskaia, Aleksandr Dugin), film (Sergei Bodrov's *Kavkazskii plennik*, Aleksei Balabanov's *Voina*) and journalistic reports (Anna Politkovskaia), Clowes argues that a major shift has occurred in the symbolic imagining of Russian identity. She claims that "in distinction to Soviet identity, which was temporally defined – linked to a vision of the Soviet state at the vanguard of history – the post-Soviet debate about Russian identity has been couched in spatial metaphors of territory and geography" (xi). While the question of space has long troubled Russian and Soviet policy-makers, Clowes' claim underlines an important shift: unlike in the Soviet era, with its teleological emphasis on "historical process", there is not yet a dominant ideology defining Russian identity in the post-Soviet context. Instead, in the Yeltsin and early Putin era, a range of voices offered alternate views on what "Russia" should be. Investigating this discourse, Clowes offers an intriguing glimpse into the ongoing process of negotiation through which Russian identity is being re-imagined.

Clowes draws upon post-colonial theory to define what she calls the "imagined geographies" of post-Soviet Russia: the "conceptual oppositions of center and periphery, center and border, the geopolitical concept of heartland, and familiar geographical axes, juxtaposing east to west and north to south" (2-3). The concepts of center and periphery touch upon both "the geopolitical realia of empire" and Russia's (particularly Moscow's) anxiety that it is itself "nothing more than a hinterland" of other, stronger empires (12). Expanding on the ideas of Homi Bhabha, Yuri Lotman and Merab Mamardashvili she argues that Russian public intellectuals have, since at least the 1970s, used discourse about the peripheries to create "productive challenges to the self-justifications of the center" situated in Moscow (7-9, 171). The study itself is organized in what Clowes calls a "point-counterpoint" pattern, juxtaposing differing positions on post-Soviet identity. The first chapter, accordingly, focuses upon the problem of the center. Moscow, Clowes argues, has faced its own identity crisis since the early 1990s. The deconstruction of Moscow as a center of power that she traces in late Soviet and early post-Soviet literary and cultural products provides the basis upon which later chapters build – having disassembled the symbolic import of the center, competing voices of the periphery emerged with greater strength.

The heart of Clowes' literary analysis emerges in chapters two through five. Starting with an insightful assessment of both the sources and substance of Aleksandr Dugin's call for a new Eurasian empire, she then explores how a number of post-Soviet

writers have responded to Dugin's vision. These responses have ranged from Viktor Pelevin's literary parodies, Mikhail Ryklin's calls for a "neo-Westernizer" worldview, and Liudmila Ulitskaia's symbolic employment of the ethnically non-Russian south as "a site of liberation" for her characters. In each of these case studies, Clowes emphasizes the importance of geographical space in defining Russian identity.

The problem of the "Muslim south," hinted at in the analysis of Ulitskaia's writings serves as the central focus for chapter six. Assessing the writings of Ryklin and Politkovskaia, Clowes argues that the "Chechen issue" provides the "fulcrum on which the future of Russian society turns – either toward a multiethnic civil society that guarantees the rights of all citizens or toward an authoritarian state ruled by ethnic Russians" (142). The importance of the conflict in Chechnya in defining central boundaries of the contemporary debate over Russian identity can scarcely be questioned; this is the moment in Clowes' study when symbolic discourse collides with political reality. Clowes uses Aleksandr Prokhanov's novel *Mr. Hexogen* and Aleksei Balabanov's film *Voyna (The War)* to demonstrate the process of "sanctifying the Russian homeland and demonizing the Other" that lies at the basis of nationalist mythmaking in the Putin era (153). The explicit connection between the Putin government and these cultural definitions of Russian identity could have received more detailed treatment however; Clowes argues that "the Putin administration's expanded wild zone of power has done a great deal of damage. . . the 'other south' of the Chechens has been used during the first years of the twenty-first century to rekindle age-old Russian xenophobia" (162). While the ongoing tensions with Chechnya have certainly been exploited in pro-Kremlin media discourse, Clowes bases her statement on the claims of liberal dissidents (Politkovskaia, Ryklin) and cultural products not immediately linked to the Putin government. A brief survey of Russian media portrayal of the Second Chechen War in order to demonstrate the precise nature of the "state's mythmaking balloon" that Clowes argues Politkovskaia's journalism "successfully punctured" would have strengthened this part of her analysis.

Clowes has provided a valuable scholarly service in assessing both the intellectual genealogy and political claims of several important figures in post-Soviet Russian culture. While the primary target audience for this work is literary scholars, cultural critics, cultural/intellectual historians, political scientists and anthropologists interested in contemporary Russian public life will find much of value; graduate students will also gain valuable insight from Clowes' skilled application of post-colonial theory to contemporary literature and film.