

# **Narrating Identity**

## **Identity Construction and Fragmentation in German Sadulaev's *Ja – čėčėnec!* and *Šalinskij rejd***

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**Abstract** The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Chechen wars were for German Sadulaev, a writer of Chechen origin, the starting point for a broad reflection on identity and nationality in the post-Soviet era. This paper aims to scrutinise how issues related to identity are addressed in two works by the author, the collection of short stories *Ja – čėčėnec!* [I Am a Chechen, 2006] and the novel *Šalinskij rejd* [The Raid on Shali, 2010]. Specific attention is paid to the role that narratives play in the considered works. In this respect, the paper first considers ethnicity/nationality as a narrative construct. Then, it deals with fragmentation of identity self-narrative as the consequence of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finally, it considers the act of narrating as an attempt to hold together collective and personal identities.

**Keywords** German Sadulaev. Post-Soviet Literature. Russophone Literature. Chechnya. Nationalism. Collective Memory. Trauma and Memory Studies. Postcolonial Studies.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Deconstructing the Narrative of the Nation. – 3 The Lost Motherland. Trauma and the Disintegration of the Self-Narrative. – 4 Narrating as a 'Mechanism of Compensation'. – 5 Conclusion.

### **1 Introduction**

The collapse of the Soviet Union, with all its former Republics declaring their independence, put the new-born countries in need to create an identity that could replace the dissolving Soviet one. This was particularly true for Russia, the most ethnically and religiously hetero-

geneous country emerged from the dissolution of the USSR. Indeed, as Marsh points out, one of the main goals set by the governments of the Russian Federation in the last years has been to recreate a “new idea for Russia” (2013, 124).

Nevertheless, one should be not deceived by the apparently ethnically-neutral formula ‘Soviet identity’ and minimise the role that ethnicity played during the Soviet era: Soviet Union promoted a series of ambiguous policies and practices that, more or less, preserved not only ethnic peace, but also underlying tensions (Smith 2013; Martin 2001). Therefore, it is no coincidence if ethnic nationalism was one of the most powerful instruments that politicians used in the Nineties to pursue their (often personal) causes. Moreover, “the drawing of tens of thousands of borders” (Martin 2001, 56) – a side effect of the territorial principle at the heart of nationality policy (Smith 2013) and of strategic thinking – is still nowadays one of the main reasons of conflicts and protests in the area.<sup>1</sup>

As far as the territories of today’s Russian Federation were concerned, the years immediately preceding and following the break-up were characterised by the so-called ‘parade of sovereignties’, a direct consequence of Yeltsin’s promise to the ethnic territories of Russia to take “as much sovereignty as they can swallow” (Tishkov 1997, 54). If for most autonomous republics a peaceful agreement was reached, thus preventing the disintegration of the new-born Russian Federation, this was not the case for Chechnya, the protagonist of the bloodiest conflicts (1994-96; 1999-2009) in the aftermath of USSR dissolution. These catastrophic events were for German Umaralevič Sadulaev, writer and publicist of Chechen origin, the starting point for a broader reflection on identity and nationality<sup>2</sup> in the post-Soviet era.

German Sadulaev was born in 1973 in Shali (Chechen-Ingush ASSR) to a Russian mother (of Terek Cossack origin) and a Chechen father. He moved to Leningrad in 1989 to attend the Faculty of Journalism, but, having changed his mind at the last minute, he enrolled in law school. He debuted on *Znamja* in 2005 with the *povest’* ‘short novel’ *Odna lastočka eščë ne delaet vesny* *Одна ласточка еще не делает весны* (A Swallow Doesn’t Make a Summer), soon followed by four short stories published on *Kontinent* under the name *Apokrify Čečenskoj vojny* *Апокрифы Чеченской войны* (Apocrypha of the

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**1** Notably the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh or, within the territory of the Russian Federation, the protests in Ingushetia because of the annexation of Ingush territories to Chechnya in 2018. For a throughout examination of Soviet policies towards ethnic minorities see Martin 2001 and Hirsch 2005; on Soviet policies and on their consequences in the aftermath of USSR collapse see also Tishkov 1997 and Smith 2013.

**2** *Nacional’nost* ‘nationality’ in post-Soviet countries should be understood as “ethnic identity” (Tishkov 1997, 21) and not as a synonym of citizenship.

Chechen War 2005), that all together merged in the book *Ja - čečenec!* Я - чеченец! (I am a Chechen!, 2006). His later novels *Tabletka* Таблетка (The Pill, 2008) and *Šalinskij rejd* Шалинский рейд (The Raid on Shali, 2010) were short-listed for the Russian Booker (respectively in 2008 and 2010), while his last novel *Ivan Auslender* Иван Ауслендер (Ivan Auslender, 2017) was in the shortlist of the Jasna-ja Poljana Prize in 2017. Scholars (Chomjakov 2019; Ganieva 2010; Astvacaturov, Marcucci 2017) place Sadulaev – along with writers of his own age, such as Zachar Prilepin, Roman Senčín and Aleksandr Snegirëv – in the much debated literary ‘movement’ of *novyj realizm* ‘new realism’, that in Ganieva’s opinion should be better described as a *vseobščee mirooščuščenje* ‘common attitude’ (Ganieva 2007) mirrored in the works of the generation of writers that appeared in a period of radical political change (Ganieva 2010).<sup>3</sup> Critics, such as Pogorelaja (2015), argue that the works of these writers have a strong journalistic style.<sup>4</sup> Sadulaev’s literary production is not an exception: indeed, his works are crossed by the same reflections on contemporary thorny issues that the author elaborates in his opinion articles. Moreover, the author often introduces in his works autobiographical references, thus blurring the line between fiction and reality.

In the light of the aforementioned traumatic events – the dissolution of the USSR and the Chechen wars –, this paper aims to scrutinise how issues related to identity are addressed in two books by the author, the above-mentioned *Ja - čečenec!*, a collection of short stories and impressions, and the novel *Šalinskij rejd*. Issues concerning identity dynamics, past legacies, and new economic and social order in post-Soviet Russia and Chechnya play a key role in the selected works. Such issues are indeed of the utmost importance for authors, such as Sadulaev, from the North Caucasus, an area at the intersection of the remains of tsarist colonialism,<sup>5</sup> Soviet past and global present, and inhabited by populations that are still nowadays considered as the internal ‘Other’ by ethnic Russians.<sup>6</sup>

In particular, the paper will pay specific attention to the role of narratives as it emerges from the selected works. In the paper the word ‘narrative’ is primarily understood in its psychological-cognitive acceptance as the process that aims to give meaning to events by identifying them as parts of a coherent and understandable plot (Polkinghorne 1991). ‘Emplotment’ indeed is the way by which indi-

<sup>3</sup> For a definition of *novyj realizm* see Ganieva 2007 and Chomjakov 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Some critics have strongly criticised ‘new realists’ for the lack of literariness of their works and even accused them of not being true writers (Chomjakov 2019).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed study on Russian Empire and colonialism in the North Caucasus see Bobrovnikov, Babič 2007.

<sup>6</sup> On the subject see Tlostanova 2011, 2014.

viduals “provide ‘shape’ to what remains chaotic, obscure and mute” (Ricoeur 1991, 115). Therefore, it is through narratives and narrativity that people – as individuals and as members of communities (e.g., nations) – make sense of the world and constitute their identities (Somers 1994).

The study has benefited of concepts elaborated both in Postcolonial<sup>7</sup> and Trauma and Memory Studies. Several scholars have shed light on the numerous intersections between the postcolonial and the post-Soviet/postcommunist conditions (Tlostanova 2003; Chari, Verdery 2009; Kołodziejczyk, Şandru 2012)<sup>8</sup> and on the central role that the postcolonial theoretical framework could play in conceptualising the relations of post-imperial Russia with its former colonies (Tlostanova 2003).<sup>9</sup> Inside this framework, the notion of ‘cultural hybridity’ elaborated by Bhabha (1994), showing cultural identity as a never-ending process of negotiation, is of particular interest, since it opposes essentialism – often embodied in blind nationalism and mechanisms of othering – and dismantles any claim of superiority of one culture over the others.

While nostalgia has been a central topic in post-Soviet Studies at least since Boym’s seminal work *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), only few scholars (Etkind 2009; 2013; Noordenbos 2016) have actively engaged with concepts elaborated in Trauma and Memory Studies when analysing literary works. Nevertheless, for Noordenbos (2016, 20), in their attempt to reimagine Russian identity, writers “have [...] grappled with [...] losses of lives, spaces, and ideals”. For this reason, he goes on, “literary and sociological theories of trauma are a methodological necessity when studying post-Soviet identity narratives” (Noordenbos 2016, 20).

Trauma and Memory Studies indeed offer useful tools to understand how past and recent traumas have contributed to shaping personal and collective identities, disintegrating any coherent identity narrative or, on the contrary, creating new narratives and working as a powerful social glue.

The paper is organised into three sections. The first section will scrutinise the concept of ethnicity/nationality as a narrative con-

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**7** It should be noted that few scholars (Sorochkin 2016; Pisarska 2019; Beljaeva 2019) have already resorted to postcolonial concepts to analyse Sadulaev’s production, while in a recent issue of *NLO* Breininger (2020) underlined the limits of such approach.

**8** Among them Kołodziejczyk and Şandru (2012) have identified: structures of exclusion/inclusion; formation of nationalism and structures of othering; the experience of trauma; concepts such as alterity, ambivalence, self-colonisation, orientalisation and transnationalism.

**9** The possibility to apply postcolonial theories to post-Soviet realities has been much debated in the last twenty years. For a comprehensive review of the literature on the subject see Koplatadze 2019.

struct and the ideal of a common Soviet identity. The second section, identifying the collapse of the Soviet Union as the core of the post-Soviet trauma for Sadulaev's characters, will deal with fragmentation of identity self-narrative. Lastly, the third section will take into account the act of narrating as a 'mechanism of compensation', that is, as an attempt to hold together collective and personal identities.

## 2 Deconstructing the Narrative of the Nation

In the autofictional short story, *Odna lastočka eščë ne delaet vesny* (henceforth *Odna lastočka*),<sup>10</sup> the narrator, in the form of semi-hallucinated fragments, result of a schizophrenic and wounded memory, clearly addresses to the Chechen identity as a construct articulated only in very recent times. In the narrator's opinion, a Chechen national identity was created soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Chechnya declared its independence, in order to legitimise the conflict. Therefore, not surprisingly, in a brief digression on the supposed origin of a Chechen ethnicity, the narrator questions its very existence. Chechen 'ethnicity' is presented as a new Babylon of various populations, that arrived in different times in the territory of today's Chechnya and, because of the *tajpa*<sup>11</sup> organisation of Chechen society, have never merged into a nation. If the birth of a Chechen nation and of a Chechen people was finally possible, the narrator explicitly declares, Russians need to be thanked. Reviving and exasperating the opposition *voj-čuzžoj* 'Self-Other', labelling all Chechens as barbaric enemies and denying a common past, post-Soviet Russia has with any doubt to be considered the creator of the Chechen identity:

Вплоть до новейших времен чеченцы были лишь конгломератом разношерстных племен, которые никогда не были способны объединиться до конца, создать собственную государственность и сформировать единую нацию. Если «война до последнего чеченца» не будет завершена, если чеченцы выживут и станут народом, благодарить за это они будут должны Россию, которая лучше всяких солнечных аномалий зажгла в них пассионарность, заставила встать плечом к плечу и внушила каждому: арию, хурриту, хазару - ты чеченец. Русские - наша последняя надежда. [...] Они заставят нас быть чеченцами и мужчинами, потому что каждый чеченец - боевик, каждый чеченец - враг. (Sadulaev 2006, 43-4)

<sup>10</sup> All the short stories that will be mentioned are included in *Ja - čečeneц!*.

<sup>11</sup> The *tajpa* is a sub-unit of *tukhum*, the larger social unit in Chechen society. Members of the same *tajpa* claim descent from a common ancestor (Jaimoukha 2005).

Right up until recent times, the Chechens were merely a ragbag of tribes, who'd never been able once and for all to unite, to establish their own statehood and form a unified nation. If the "war till the last Chechen" is not carried to completion, if the Chechens survive and become a nation, they'll only have Russia to thank. Who ignited passion in them more than any solar anomaly, forced them to stand shoulder to shoulder, impressed on each Aryan, Hurrian, Khazar: You are a Chechen. The Russians are our last hope. [...] They'll force us to be Chechens and men, because every Chechen is a combatant, every Chechen is the enemy. (Sadulaev 2011)<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, in *Šalinskij rejd*, this construction of otherness is also presented as the only way to save Russia from disintegration, providing material for the creation of a new Russian post-Soviet national identity. Tamerlan, the narrator, indeed, reflecting on the representation of the second Chechen war among Russians, finds in it the founding element for what he defines a new Russian myth:

России, русскому народу был нужен этот миф: о собственном героизме, снова о саможертвовании, о святом христовом воинстве и прочая. Это и есть - русская национальная идея. Если бы чеченцев не было, их стоило бы выдумать. [...] Нет, вторая чеченская не просто привела на президентский престол еще одного чиновника. Но спасла Россию! Дала Россию миф, веру, образы. (Sadulaev 2010, 170)

Russia, Russians needed this myth: on their own heroism, again on their self-sacrifice, on the sacred army of Christ and so on. This is it, the Russian national idea. If there weren't any Chechens, they would need to be invented. [...] No, not only the second Chechen war brought to the presidential throne another functionary. But it saved Russia! It gave to Russia a myth, a hope, images.<sup>13</sup>

These considerations are interesting at least in two respects: on the one side, the narrators of *Odna lastočka* and *Šalinskij rejd* firmly oppose ethnic primordialism<sup>14</sup> and nationalisms as one of its direct consequences; on the other, referring to myth, Tamerlan's words help establish a direct link between nationalisms and narratives. As Assmann maintains, collective agents, such as nations, creates for them-

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<sup>12</sup> Here, as in other works of the author, the narrator quite explicitly refers to Lev Gumilëv's theory of *passionarnost'*, 'passionarity'.

<sup>13</sup> When not specified, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>14</sup> Primordial approach sees "ethnicity as an objective 'given', a sort of primordial characteristic of humanity" (Tishkov 1997, 1).

selves a ‘functional identity memory’, a kind of memory that emerges “from a process of selection, connection, and meaningful configuration” (Assmann 2011, 127). Nationalist thought, not being an exception, is also based on this kind of memory that involves the selection of causal sequences from the complex of the events, their bounding and structuration into comprehensible relations: a process, that of emplotment, that is at the core of the creation of stories (Hogan 2009).

The binarism between Russians and Chechens, presented in the quoted excerpts as a result of the war, can be traced back to Soviet times. In this respect, the short story *Kogda prosnulis’ tanki* Когда проснулись танки (When the Tanks Awoke) is emblematic. The very construction of the short story is quite interesting, since it alternates the two protagonists, Din’ka (Denis) and Zelik (Zelimchan), as narrators, except for the first two chapters and the last one where the narrator’s identity is not identifiable. Din’ka and Zelik spend all the summer playing together in Shali (Chechnya), where Din’ka comes every year to visit his Russian grandparents. They seem to belong to two different species, that of *bogi*, ‘gods’ (Russians) and *ljudi*, ‘humans’ (Chechens), which occupy distinctive and exclusive parts of the village. Nevertheless, Zelik is an exception. Child to a Russian mother and a Chechen father, speaking both the ‘language of gods’ (*jazyk bogov*) (Sadulaev 2006, 143) and the ‘incomprehensible and unfamiliar language’ (*čužoj, neponjatnyj jazyk*) of Chechens (Sadulaev 2006, 148),<sup>15</sup> he is admitted into the ‘city of gods’, the secure compound, where he plays with Din’ka and other Russian children. In fact, Din’ka describes Zelik as an ‘intermediary between worlds’ (*provodnik meždu mirami*) and as a ‘prophet’ (*prorok*) (Sadulaev 2006, 149), teaching a message of universal equality:

А когда мы посмотрим, мы вспомним, да нет, мы поймем, что ничего и никогда не забывали, и не были ни титанами, ни богами, ни взрослыми, ни детьми, ни министрами, ни сторожами, ни кошками, ни ласточками, ни мальчиками, ни девочками, ни русскими, ни чеченцами. (Sadulaev 2006, 149)

And when we look, we will remember, no, we’ll realise that we never forgot a thing and we were neither titans, nor gods, nor grown-ups, nor children, nor ministers, nor guards, nor cats, nor swallows, nor boys, nor girls, nor Russians, nor Chechens. (Sadulaev 2011)

15 It should be noted that Zelik gives the first definition, while Din’ka the second.

Zelik is only one of Sadulaev's characters who, as the writer himself,<sup>16</sup> oscillating between two poles of belonging, demonstrate their inconsistency. Occupying an emblematic double marginality, that of a minority and of a 'half-blood', they dismantle from within the discourse of purity and mutual exclusivity. From their privileged 'interstitial' position, they refuse "the binary representation of social antagonism" (Bhabha 1996, 58) and acknowledge that "hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable" (Bhabha 1994, 55) because cultural meanings and symbols are incessantly negotiated. Thus, once again, national identity is presented as a "conventional narrative construct" (Tlostanova 2004, 21) and, more generally, identity reveals its true nature, that of being a process never completed, lodged in contingency, a discourse constructed through difference, that is, not based on sameness, but in relation to the Other (Hall 1996).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that this condition of 'in-betweenness', besides offering a vantage point, is often a source of pain. In this regard, commenting on Sadulaev's works and on the recurring theme of 'doubleness', the literary critic Latynina (2010) suggests that:

the source of the doubleness of Sadulaev's characters lies in the problem of his national self-identification, in that psychologic traumatic experience that a half-Chechen and half-Russian receives at first in his community of origin that treats him as a Russian, and then in the urban environment, that suffers from an anti-Chechen syndrome.

With respect to *Kogda prosnulis' tanki*, this 'doubleness' is mirrored in Zelik and Din'ka's friendship<sup>17</sup> and in their 'split identities'. This last aspect is a reason of internal torment, particularly for Din'ka: the discovery that his unknown father is actually a Chechen who abandoned his mother and did not acknowledge him questions Din'ka's identity as a Russian and eventually leads him, some years later, to fight against the Chechens to take revenge. The last chapter, seeing Zelik and Din'ka on different fronts, stages the absurdity of the Chechen-Russian conflict in which one friend kills the other only on the basis of an ideological construction of otherness. Because of the aforementioned narrative technique, the reader does not know who kills whom, but a clarification seems not to be important: both to the readers' and to Sadulaev's eyes, such a conflict can only ap-

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<sup>16</sup> In many interviews Sadulaev has insisted on his in-between position as a writer of mixed ethnic origin. See, for example, Sadulaev, Kovaleva 2009 and Sadulaev, Danilova 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Their friendship is described, among other things, resorting to the myth of the twins and to that of the Androgyne.



pear as a fratricidal war. Indeed, Sadulaev (2005) in the afterword to *Odna lastočka*<sup>18</sup> explicitly declares:

Поделюсь переживаниями: мне не нравится, когда мои тексты воспринимают как 'слово с той стороны'. [...] Потому что нет 'той стороны'. У нас одна сторона, общая. Здесь есть концептуальное непонимание, смещение позиций. Вернее, конструирование несуществующей контрпозиции: 'чеченцы и русские, они и мы, свои и чужие'. Постарайтесь читать повесть, убрав установку, что это 'они' пишут о 'нас'. Поймите, что это 'мы' пишем о 'себе'.

I share my feelings: I don't like when my works are interpreted as 'a word from the other side'. [...] Because the 'other side' doesn't exist. We only have one, common side. There is a conceptual incomprehension, a shifting of positions. More likely, a construction of non-existent counter-positions: 'Chechens and Russians, they and we, ours and the others'. Try to read the short story removing the preconception of 'them' writing about 'us'. Understand that this is 'we' writing about 'ourselves'.

The 'we' Sadulaev refers to is that of the people of the former Soviet Union, the state that has united under the same flag different cultures and populations for almost seventy years. In the author's opinion, those populations lived, and live even today, in a common cultural space, unified, first of all, by the Russian language, in which local differences are far less important than shared values and a common past (Sadulaev 2005). In particular, this ideal of a common Soviet identity is best expressed by the Chechen veteran Vacha Sultanovič Aslanov in the short story *Den' Pobedy* День Победы (Victory Day). Although having fought in the Second World War, Vacha is deported to Kazakhstan because of his nationality and loses his whole family.<sup>19</sup> After the rehabilitation of the Chechen people, he moves to Tallinn, where his Russian friend and comrade Aleksej Pavlovič Rodin lives. When Aleksej asks him, if he now hates the Soviet Union and the Russians, he answers:

вместе не только сидели на зонах. Вместе победили фашистов, отправили человека в космос, построили социализм в нищей и разоренной стране. Все это делали вместе и все это – не только лагеря – называлось: Советский Союз. (Sadulaev 2006, 249-50)

<sup>18</sup> The Author is referring to the publication on *Znamja*.

<sup>19</sup> The narrator refers to the so-called *operacija Čečevica* 'operation Lentil' (1944) that saw Chechens and Ingush, accused of collaboration with the Nazis, being deported to Central Asia along with other populations.

not only had they been together in the camps, they had also conquered the Fascists together; they had sent a man into space; they had built Socialism in their down-and-out, impoverished country. All this they had done together, and all this - not just the camps - was called the Soviet Union. (Sadulaev 2011)

In Sadulaev's opinion (Platonov 2018; Sadulaev, Bogoslovskij 2014; Karabanova 2014), since the collapse of the Soviet Union this common identity has been jeopardised by capitalism, consumerism, and nationalistic impulses that promote inter-ethnic hatred and confine, once again, the Chechens to be the Other. Agreeing or not agreeing with Sadulaev's point of view on a common Soviet identity, which is not immune to some degree of ambiguity, there is no doubt that the collapse of the Soviet Union is the main cause of the identity crisis his characters are described to suffer from.

### **3 The Lost Motherland. Trauma and the Disintegration of the Self-Narrative**

The core of today's all-Russian identity crisis is identified, according to the writer, in the breakup of the Soviet Union. Indeed, the Soviet Union is portrayed by most of Sadulaev's *alter egos* as a 'lost motherland' (*poterjannaja rodina*) (Sadulaev 2006, 239).

In the short story *Post n. 1 Пост № 1* (Post no. 1), narrated in the first person, the sense of disorientation caused by the end of the Soviet Union is compared by the narrator to that the Chechen people had to undergo in the Forties when they were deported to Central Asia. The narrator imagines the Chechens being moved in their sleep to a distant country, namely, the Russian Federation, perfectly identical to the one they used to live in, but where everything for them is unfamiliar:

Там, далеко, на чужих и пустынных землях, они построили точные копии наших городов и сел, они высадили тополя и ели, они даже проложили такие же дороги, какие были у нас - в рытвинах и ухабах. Только это была уже не наша страна. Это была их земля, и все здесь было для нас чужое. (Sadulaev 2006, 229-30)

Far away, in some foreign and desolate land, they built perfect replicas of our towns and villages, planted poplars and firs, even laid roads just like the ones we'd had before - covered in potholes and bumps. Only this was not our land anymore, it was their land, and everything here was foreign to us. (Sadulaev 2011)

Therefore, the recent collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent war, recalls the same emotions of a past trauma and ‘reactivates’ it even if the narrator – who was supposedly born in the Seventies – did not experience it directly. Several scholars (Hirsch 2012; Schwab 2010; Volkan 2014) have been reflecting in the last years on the transmission of trauma to the next generations. Indeed, this mechanism of ‘reactivation’, as presented in the short story, can be better understood resorting to the concept of ‘chosen trauma’. A chosen trauma is “a trauma chosen to become a most significant identity marker” (Volkan 2014, 24). Since it has not been worked through, it has become part of collective memory and passed down to the next generation.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the narrator seems to suggest that the collapse of the Soviet Union should be considered a new identity marker at least for a part of the Chechen population.

In the paramount essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud (1964) identifies, among others, the loss of one’s country or ideal as possible triggering causes for both mourning and melancholia, where mourning implies a successful working through of the loss, while melancholia a repression of it. However, what is repressed does not disappear, but continuously returns in a compulsive repetition of the traumatic experience. The traumatic experience cannot indeed be fully accommodated into consciousness and returns in the form of hallucinations, nightmares, flashbacks, or compulsive behaviour (Noordenbos 2016). It is no coincidence, therefore, that the narrators of Sadulaev’s works often seem, or explicitly declare, to hallucinate, have flashbacks, and are persecuted by nightmares.<sup>21</sup> All these symptoms, typical of a post-traumatic stress disorder, are the result of different and overlapping traumas, such as the disintegration of a familiar order and the subsequent wars, that affect the subject’s integrity and endanger the coherence of his identity narrative. Indeed, when the individual’s self-narrative starts to disintegrate under the pressure of a traumatic event, identity loses its unity and “life is experienced as fragmented, dispersed, and disconnected” (Polkinghorne 1991, 145).

On the compositional level, this is mirrored in the organisation of the plot which, in the considered works and in Sadulaev’s whole production, is usually characterised by fragmentation.<sup>22</sup> The above-mentioned *Odna lastočka*, with its emblematic subtitle *Oskoločnaja povest’* Осколочная

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**20** On the role of deportation as the chosen trauma in Chechen collective memory during the Chechen wars see Williams 2000 and Campana 2009.

**21** The narrators of *Odna lastočka* and *Šalinskij rejd* also declare to suffer from schizophrenia. The relation between schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is still much debated. Nevertheless, trauma has been found to increase risk for both schizophrenia and PTSD (O’Conghaile, DeLisi 2015).

**22** Ganieva (2009, 2007), for example, identifies fragmentariness as one of the main characteristics of the novel *Tabletka* and of *novyj realizm* in general.

повесть (A Tale in Fragments), is a striking example. Its 'plot', continuously going back and forth in time, does not evolve through a linear chain of events, but instead takes the shape of a *collage*, that "breaks' the spine of the narrative" (the chronological sequence of events), "disrupts' connections and casts the fragments into arbitrary patterns" (Assmann 2011, 271). Indeed, the narrator himself declares to write бессвязно, отрывочно, скомканно, спутанно, разбито, расколото... Нет сквозного сюжета (in a disjointed, sketchy, fitful, jumbled, fragmented, broken way. There is no linear plot. Sadulaev 2006, 79).

#### 4 Narrating as a 'Mechanism of Compensation'

The disruptive force of trauma, however, is frequently opposed by Sadulaev's characters through the articulation of narratives. In Sadulaev's works indeed the activity of narrating often attempts to perform a therapeutic effect both for the individual and the community.

For example, in *Kogda prosnulis' tanki* the act of remembering and narrating, as painful as it is, is perceived by Din'ka as the only way to recover his integrity:

Я создаю, все заново, склеиваю, собираю. И иногда мне светло и спокойно. А иногда больно, очень больно, я даже не хочу думать об этом, не хочу вспоминать. Но я должен. Иначе мне не найти себя, не выстроить, не собрать целиком. (Sadulaev 2006, 150-1)

I am resurrecting everything, picking up the pieces, sticking them together again. And at times I feel serene and calm. But at times it hurts, it hurts very much and I don't even want to think about it, don't want to remember it. Yet I must, otherwise I won't be able to find myself, to become complete, to make myself a whole. (Sadulaev 2011)

The same could be maintained for the narrator of *Odna lastočka*. Indeed, he hopes that writing a story – although fragmented and disconnected – about the catastrophic events of the war could possibly help him work through the trauma:

Где-то внутри, наверное, я, скрывая это от всех и от самого себя, верю в то, что я должен написать об этом повесть и поставить точку. И тогда все закончится. Сны, память, война. Все мои страхи, а я закрою глаза, я поставлю точку, и паука больше не будет, и все кончится. (Sadulaev 2006, 96-7)

Somewhere inside, no doubt, though hiding this from everyone,

even myself, I believe - still believe - that I should write a story about this and put an end to it. And then it will all stop. The dreams, the memory, the war. All my fears. See, they are my fears, but I'll close my eyes, I'll put an end to it, and the terrifying spider will disappear, it will all be over. (Sadulaev 2011)

Moreover, in *Šalinskij rejđ* the narrator refers to “conspiracy theories and utopic projects” that were spreading in Chechnya during the second Chechen war as “mechanisms of psychological compensation” (Sadulaev 2010, 188). As far as conspiracy theories are concerned, Noordenbos notes that conspiracy thinking, knotting together unrelated historical events as well as mental, social and cultural lines “in a new, imaginative narrative frame, is itself in many cases a reaction against a perceived trauma of lost cultural identity and (psychic, social, historical) cohesion” (Noordenbos 2016, 175).

Indeed, it is in the creation of stories, in the emplotment of lived experiences and past events, that Sadulaev’s characters hope to find the possibility to hold together their collective and personal identities. In other words, the activity of narrating - that implies selecting elements from the amorphous mass of events, endowing them with relevance, and configuring them to provide meaning and so to create a ‘story’ (Assmann 2011) - becomes a way to try to work through the loss and to give sense to the past and to the present.

In Sadulaev’s works this activity often takes the shape of historical reconstructions that characters and narrators make about events of Chechen and Russian past. This interest in history can be better understood taking into account Sadulaev’s non-fictional work *Pryžok volka. Očerki političeskoj istorii Čečni ot Chazarского kaganata do naših dnej* Прыжок волка. Очерки политической истории Чечни от Хазарского каганата до наших дней (The Jump of the Wolf. Essays on the Political History of Chechnya from the Khazar Khanate to Nowadays, 2012). In the preface, the work - an account of Chechen history from the Khazar Khanate to the Chechen wars - is defined by Sadulaev as part of a broader mission aimed at working through the trauma of the all-Russian community:

Обществу нашему, находящемуся в состоянии посттравматического синдрома, нужно «проговорить» свои самые болезненные темы; исследовать, проанализировать, «снять» - в психологическом смысле преодолеть. И если читатель увидел во мне рассказчика равнодушного, искреннего и старательного, способного в этом помочь, я должен с благодарностью и смирением совершить свой труд. И не только в виде художественных произведений [...]. Но и в виде прямого высказывания, каковым является эта книга. (Sadulaev 2012, 11)

Our society, being in a state of post-traumatic syndrome, needs to 'utter' its painful themes; to investigate, to analyse, to 'remove' – in a psychological sense to overcome them. And if the reader saw in me an interested, sincere, and diligent narrator who can help in doing this, I have to accomplish this task with gratitude and humility. Not only in the form of literary works [...], but also in the form of an explicit statement as this book is.

In doing so Sadulaev perfectly echoes in the real world what his characters attempt to do in fiction.

In *Šalinskij rejd* Tamerlan, the narrator, leaves Saint Petersburg (where he moved to attend university) to come back to his hometown Shali after the end of the first Chechen conflict. Being child to a Russian mother and a Chechen father and feeling himself a Soviet rather than a Chechen or a Russian, he first avoids taking an active part in the conflict. However, the violence of Russian attacks, especially towards the civilian population, eventually leads him to join the resistance. What he witnesses in Chechnya – before and during the second war – is so disruptive that causes him a post-traumatic stress disorder. Indeed, the reader soon understands that the whole narration is a monologue that the narrator entertains with an interlocutor he refers to as 'doctor' years after the beginning of the second conflict.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the narrator alternates flashbacks, nightmares and hallucinations of traumatic past events with a precise account of the Chechen wars. The narrator carefully reports historical events in a strict chronological order giving detailed information on dates, and names of people and places. Indeed, the whole novel revolves around the narrator's attempt to understand the reasons of the conflict and so to make sense of his personal life and of that of the Chechen people. An event in particular becomes his obsession: he is sure that only after having understood why the raid on Shali<sup>24</sup> happened, he will recover from his illness.

However, this event seems to resist any attempt made by the narrator to 'emplot' it, to give it an order and so to make sense of it:

Но я снова не вижу логику. Даже посматривая свои записи, сделанные в строгом хронологическом порядке, перечитывая пожелтевшие газетные вырезки, я не вижу последовательности, закономерности. Эта история не про состав из локомотива и вагонов, сцепленных друг за другом. Это скорее другое.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted that sometimes the narrator refers to the interlocutor calling him *graždanin sledovatel'*, 'interrogator' or simply *brat*, 'brother', *dorogoj moj*, 'my dear'.

<sup>24</sup> The narrator refers to the launch of a tactical missile by federal forces in 2000 that hit a crowd of people in front of the local administration building killing about 150 civilians.

Снежный шар, катящийся по полю, подминающий снег и налепляющий его на себя вместе с поломанными веточками и прошлогодней травой, с мелкими камешками и мусором. Вот так это было – не сцепление, но налипание событий. (Sadulaev 2010, 149)

But I don't see a logic again. Even if look at my notes, written in a strict chronological order, if I read again yellowed newspaper clippings, I don't see an order, a logic. This history is not made of a locomotive and wagons chained one to the other. It's something else.

A snowball rolling on a field, pressing down snow and sticking it on itself together with broken twigs and last year's grass, little stones and trash. That's what it was: not a chain, but a sticking of events.

Indeed, Tamerlan is not able to reconstruct the chain of events that led to the decision of bombing of Shali. Moreover, after some years of collaboration with the resistance, he eventually decides to sell to the federals the information on the location of the President of Ichkeria Aslan Maschadov. The protagonist is convinced that only Maschadov's death will put an end to the conflict and so to the killing of thousands of innocent people. When in 2005 Maschadov is finally assassinated, Tamerlan decides to leave the country and move to France in order to start a new life.

Nevertheless, if the narrator at the end of the novel succeeds in his attempt to work through the trauma remains highly questionable. The novel ends with the umpteenth account of a nightmare the protagonist recently had and that he wants to tell the doctor: while he is sitting in his father's yard, he sees human bodies falling from the sky as if they were bombs. Tamerlan explains that such dreadful phenomenon can happen when an airplane falls to pieces because of an explosion. Passengers are thrown out the aircraft and die even before crashing into the ground. Then he communicates to the doctor his imminent departure to Paris and his intention to tell him all his future dreams:

Я долечу, обязательно долечу.

И напишу вам, как только доберусь до Франции. Обязательно напишу. Я расскажу вам про свои новые сны.

Иначе моя история закончится этой строчкой. (Sadulaev 2010, 303)

I'll arrive, of course, I'll arrive.

And I'll write you as soon as I get to France. Of course, I'll write you. I'll tell you my new dreams.

If I won't, this line ends my story.

The fact that the narration ends with these words could imply that the narrator finally breaks free from the nightmares of his past, or more likely that he dies before arriving to Paris as the airplane's nightmare seems to have foreboded.

## 5 Conclusion

In the case of Sadulaev's characters, the end of the Soviet Union, the following wars and the emergence of nationalisms created a short-circuit between their identification with Russian culture and their Chechen origin. Indeed, their belonging to two different cultural spheres, that in Soviet times was not experienced in a conflictual manner, became suddenly impossible.

Therefore, after the collapse of the USSR Sadulaev's characters more than ever find themselves occupying a paradigmatic in-between position. If, on the one side, they can take advantage of this position to enact deconstructive mechanisms aimed at showing any national identity and their narratives as *discursive devices* articulated in space and time (Hall 1992; 1996); on the other, they experience an inner struggle that leads them to idealise a reality that no longer exists.

Indeed, Sadulaev's characters are not absorbed in projects that involve imagining a new community, but rather mourn the lost one. They depict the Soviet Union as a 'lost motherland' and the trauma caused by its collapse can be considered a *sui generis* identity marker that unifies those people who, as Sadulaev's characters, do not identify in any new collective narrative. Indeed, the revitalisation in post-Soviet times of a common Soviet identity in which they can accommodate their multiple and contradictory belongings seems to be the failed attempt to fill the gap of that same identity. An emblematic example is provided at the end of *Den' Pobedy*: on May 9th, the two veterans Aleksej Pavlovič and Vacha Šultanovič, who live in Tallinn, as every year go out celebrate the victory over the Nazis. Once they arrived at a bar to have a hundred grams of vodka, they are insulted by a group of Estonian skinheads who calls them "Russian (*ruskie*) pigs" (Sadulaev 2006, 250). The fight triggered by the skinheads eventually ends with the death of the two veterans. Celebrating together the victory over the Nazis, one of the founding elements of the Soviet identity narrative, and especially reactivating it during the fight, Aleksej Pavlovič and Vacha Šultanovič enact an anachronistic attempt to restore such identity that for a moment, before their tragic end, makes them not to feel strangers in what they once called 'home'. Indeed, as already mentioned, the fact that an all-inclusive Russian identity has not been elaborated yet led both to the growth of nationalist or imperial sen-



timent (Tlostanova 2004), and to nostalgia of an overidealised past.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, another reason why Sadulaev's characters tend to idealise the Soviet past could be found in the impossibility of working through their traumas. As it has been shown, the end of the Soviet Union and the following wars shattered the characters' identity narratives. As a response, they usually try to react enacting 'mechanisms of psychological compensation', that is, they attempt to create new narratives that could help 'emplot' traumatic experiences into a linear chain of events and make sense of the past and of the present. However, Sadulaev's characters usually do not succeed in the operation of knitting together different parts, that of history and of the self, into a coherent unity and so to recover their lost integrity.

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<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, however, that, as Astvacaturov maintains, many contemporary writers born in the Seventies, such as Prilepin, Elizarov and Sadulaev himself, share the nostalgia for the USSR as an ideal, therefore not for what it actually was, but for what it could have been (*Kruglyj stol 'Rossijskie pisateli v osmyslenii žizni sovremennoj Rossii'* 2015).

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