ALTERNATIVE PREHISTORY

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This article is dedicated to Juri Voronov, a famous Caucasian archaeologist, who was assassinated on 11 September, 1995. For many years he fought against aggressive ethnocentrism. During the last few years he was vice-prime minister of Abkhazia.

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ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND THE IDEA OF THE PAST

Forty years ago, Fritz Saxl (1957:73) pointed out that 'we cannot fully understand our own times unless we pay heed to its unscientific tendencies.' The Russian historian Bitsilli (1928:351–52) demonstrated that the birth of a nation is always accompanied by some sort of mythology. The idea became especially useful recently with the current development of ethnonationalism, combined with a shift of the international community's sympathy with groups' rights, resulting in an unexpected phenomenon which I call an 'alternative prehistory'. This alternative prehistory is an explicitly ethnocentric vision of the past, namely, a glorification of the great ancestors of the given people, who are treated as if they made the most valuable contribution to the culture of all humanity. This obviously odd vision of the past flourishes especially at crucial moments of ethnic history: (1) when forceful assimilation and acculturation endanger an ethnic group with cultural and language losses, (2) when particular minorities are fighting against racial discrimination or its consequences, (3) when the people struggle for political liberation, (4) when new states are being built from the ruins of a former empire, (5) when a former imperial people suffers political, social, and other losses because of unfavourable changes in its status, (6) when two peoples claim rights over the same territory which they have inhabited for years, (7) when a new ethnic group is formed in a given territory out of newcomers of various ethnic origins, and (8) when a formerly united people finds itself under conditions of a diaspora. In all these cases, the myth of the past is aimed at inspiring self-esteem in order to withstand hardship and to mobilise people for decisive social and political action.[1] At the same time, as Wailes and Zoll (1995:24–25) point out quite reasonably, the myth of the past results in an explicit or implicit discourse about who has civilised whom which tends towards the construction of a hierarchy of groups headed by one of them as an 'elder brother' (Shnirelman 1996b:60). That is not just an

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intellectual game since quite often there are real political, social, and economic interests at stake. This paper is a result of my comparative studies made during the last few years dealing with contemporary ethno-nationalist myths of the past based on the idea of ethnogenesis.[2] In other words I have tried to investigate how contemporary ethno-nationalists manipulate materials (true, fictitious, or even consciously falsified) on the origins of peoples, how they invent ancestors and their glorious deeds, and why they do it. My analysis is based mainly on data from the former USSR and contemporary Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but information from some other countries was also considered (Shnirelman 1993a; 1993c; 1994b; 1995b; 1995c; 1995d; 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; in press a and b; Shnirelman and Komarova 1995). Here, I shall discuss the general features of this sort of mythology and its consequences. A problem is that, in order to make its claims for political rights and ambitions much stronger, a group has to demonstrate the deep roots of its culture, the distinctiveness of its language, and all its outstanding cultural achievements. Keeping these ends in mind, the cultural activists occupy themselves with what Eric Hobsbawm (1983) called 'an invention of traditions' (see also Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991). But the main strategy nowadays is the use and abuse of history and, in many cases, prehistory or proto-history.

For many peoples of the world the historical period is associated with colonial oppression and other well-remembered hardships, and they find nothing there but slavery. Logically enough, they assume that their Golden Age was somewhere back in prehistory. Amazingly, even some ethno-nationalist factions from the countries with a rich historical tradition refuse to acknowledge its value and seek instead in the remote prehistoric past for the origins of their ethno-cultural and political bodies. For instance, the contemporary Russian neo-pagans argue that the glorious Russian empire flourished long before ninth century and that a decline started at the Kievan Rus' period (see, for instance, Gusev 1993). The tremendous advances in contemporary archaeology and historical linguistics can provide ample resources for this sort of fantasies.

There is another reason for this trend to grow. In the nineteenth century, a true 'historic' people was universally associated with a state and, while appealing to the past, the conservatives of that time were satisfied with the medieval past, where a great many states were rooted (Nisbet 1986:18–19, 35–39). And yet, already in the past century, and more especially in the present, it was becoming obvious that there is no close association between a people and a state. Meanwhile many stateless peoples would today like to have their own states in order to maintain and to develop their own cultures. In order to legitimise these claims the intellectuals are willing to upgrade the status of their own peoples, and in the late twentieth century one of the most common strategies has been the search for deep prehistoric roots as far back as the Palaeolithic. The claims in question seem well grounded if they refer to some state already in existence in the remote past. That is why many ethno-nationalists are eager to find an ancient state within the territory now occupied by their people, and to establish links between this state and their ancestors. It is in this context that some 'prehistoric states' are invented in the evidently stateless environ-

ment such as, for instance, Aratta in the Chalcolithic Ukraine which was constructed recently by a Ukrainian archaeologist, Yurii Shilov (1995). Moreover, the growth of legal and political egalitarianism creates the illusion that an evolutionary approach is out of date.[3] The idea of successive stages of political and economic development gives way to a belief in the uniqueness of the historical experience of any given people. This obviously particularistic approach finds support in post-modernism, with its stress on alternative history. Indeed, a popular slogan of our days declares that an ethnic group or a people is identical with what it thinks about itself.[4] The key point of these thoughts is a specific version of one's own past. As one author (Rosenau 1992:66) stated, 'New History is populist, emphasising ordinary people rather than the elite; it privileges the point of view of the victims rather than the victimizers'. At the same time, an emphasis is shifting to the people, and this fits 'New Prehistory' with its culture-historical approach perfectly well. But one must consider that the victimisers also try to play the game while representing their remote ancestors as victims, in order to legitimate their own contemporary aggressive plans or actions. For instance, in the 1920s and 1930s the German nationalists represented themselves as victims (Poliakov 1985:157). The Russian ethno-nationalists do absolutely the same nowadays. Anyway, the ethnocentric versions of the past are not as innocent as they sometimes seem at first glance, since they can encourage confrontation and provide ideological arguments for ethnic cleansing.

This is the background for 'an invention of the past', which is widespread among many peoples today, who are fighting with each other for the most prestigious past. I will focus mainly on the methodology of these highly ethnocentric constructions in respect of some theoretical problems which are still to be solved by archaeologists. Before that, it is worth noting that the myths in question are being built mainly by amateur authors (writers, journalists, semi-educated people, or specialists trained in other fields rather than archaeology – philologists, historians, and the like) but sometimes archaeologists are also involved. For instance, further on I shall refer to philologists (Kadyrajyev and Geibullaiev), an economist and journalist (Adji), a geologist (Grinevich), a physicist-chemist (Znoiko), a former teacher of Marxism-Leninism (Bezverkhii), and historians (Mikeladze and Vaneev). The experts in the field are more restrained with a professional training, and ethno-genetic myths they create are more moderate in nature. The amateur authors do not have these sorts of professional obligations and place priority on the gratification of ethnic feelings (Shnirelman 1996b:58–59). In this paper I shall first discuss the versions of the past, forged mainly by the amateur authors, and secondly, those represented in popular or semi-popular literature such as, for instance, science-fiction. Indeed, it is this literature which forms the main sources of the consumption of archaeological information by the general public.

THE EVOLUTIONARY VS THE CIVILISATIONAL APPROACH

An ethno-nationalist approach to the past seems to share roots with the theory of isolated civilisations which treats particular cultures as closed entities having

nothing in common with each other. The fathers of this approach (Danilevskii 1871; Spengler 1921–22), and ethno-nationalists who followed them, tended to identify this kind of entity with biological organisms, basing their arguments, first, on the high congruence between somatic features, culture and language, and, secondly, on the great stability of the entities in question (for criticism see: Gellner 1983; 1987:6–28; Trigger 1989:163–67; Shnirelman 1995a). Of course, it is impossible to dismiss cultural changes which are visible, especially, in our own time. Therefore, the ethno-nationalist ideology stresses mainly a uniqueness of 'the folk spirit' as if it never changes. Indeed, if this spirit is eternal, then the people is eternal as well. This is how extreme ethno-nationalist rhetoric may insist that certain peoples existed on the earth since the very birth of humanity.[5] The concept in question drastically affects an understanding of the evolutionary process. Indeed, if cultures have nothing in common with each other and develop along their own unique lines, they are not comparable with each other at all and it makes no sense to talk about any general evolutionary regularities. Thus, a general evolutionary theory is dismissed in favour of a highly particularistic approach, which emphasises unique evolutionary cycles of the development of particular cultures or civilisations only. It is worth noting that this approach is used now even by some professional historians in Russia as a basis for textbooks (see, for instance, Semennikova 1994). Another result of this approach is a conclusion that convergent parallel development is impossible, and, thus, any innovation had a distinct origin and was introduced by particular people only. Logically enough, the particular people in question is treated by patriots as the bearer of the superior culture who has disseminated its particular achievements all over the world. In brief, the concepts of mono-centrism and hyper-diffusionism are the by-products of this ideology (on the case studies see Shnirelman 1996b:44–49; 1996a).

Since this ideology insists on a strong persistence and unbroken continuity of the given cultural tradition, on its tendency towards homeostasis and on the close functional relationships between various groups and subsystems within the given culture, it does not find any internal mechanisms leading towards cultural evolution. That is why, in order to explain changes, it has to emphasise external agents (a theory of catastrophes) such as natural disasters, wars, migrations, all of which are treated as the key historical events. Many of these concepts are based on the Manichaean approach and pay special attention to some 'world evil' against which the given people has to fight all the time.

More often than not, 'the world evil' is personified as a real people, which is treated as the cosmic enemy. It is a truism to say that the idea is deeply embedded in a great many anti-Semitic representations of history and prehistory; this is obvious from the well-known Nazi case (Hermand 1992; Goodrick-Clarke 1985; Conte and Essner 1995). But it is worth mentioning that this very idea is still exploited by aggressive Russian ethno-nationalists who trace a struggle between 'the Aryans', on the one hand, and the Semites in general or the Jews in particular, on the other hand, from prehistory and early history on (Kifishin 1977; Emel'ianov 1979; Gumilev 1989; Bezverkhii 1993). Moreover, this scenario was picked up recently by some Chuvash

(Egorov 1993:92–94) and Tartar ethno-nationalists (Nurutdinov 1993:335) for their ethnocentric, ethnogenetic constructions as well. All the aforementioned agents force a people to move from its original land and to disperse all over the world, while bringing its 'superior' culture to other 'backward' peoples.

Consequently, an ethno-nationalist version of the past has a trend towards a megalomania. Indeed, if only a particular people is chosen to bring light to the rest of the world, this people has to travel extensively all around the world and cannot be content to limit itself to living quietly in any particular region. It is impossible to explain this *Wanderlust*, this universal culture-bearing mission, through logical, rational arguments. That is why an ethno-nationalist ideology has to use a mystical, irrational way of reasoning. For instance, Grinevich (1993:257) argues that the ancient Slavs were driven by 'a willingness to resettle, not characteristic of other peoples', propelled by 'a mysterious Slavic soul'. A Messianic idea often serves arguments of this sort. Without this idea, it is evidently impossible to explain the reasons why one people, in contrast to all the others, have extraordinary creative abilities and why they are obliged to lead all of humanity.

Of all cultural achievements, the ethno-nationalists mainly appreciate the formation of the state and the development of writing, which, in their view, provide the people with 'a superior culture'. More often than not, they manage to 'find' a state and writing deep in prehistory or, otherwise, appropriate other peoples' legacy through its identification with their own ancestors. For instance, the Russian neo-pagans 'invent' the Russian empire long before the Kievan Rus' had emerged and, more inventively, identify the Russians with the Etruscans, the Minoans, and the like. Some Ukrainian ethno-nationalists do the same. And a Chuvash author, Egorov (1993), simply identifies ancient Chuvash with the Sumerians. According to the mono-centric principle, only one particular people in the world was able to invent writing and to build a state. For ethno-nationalists, this means that the phenomena in question were the products of their own people alone. Indeed, the main methodological tool of an ethnic nationalism is patriotism, which interprets all the past events in terms of the glorification of their own people. Any contribution by other peoples to human culture is undervalued or ignored. As a rule, they are treated only as anonymous observers or taciturn consumers of the achievements and valuables which they were provided with by the culture-bearing people. In brief, an ethno-nationalist model of the past has an aspect of plundering, namely, an appropriation of the alien past, alien ancestors, alien cultural achievements (on particular cases see Shnirelman 1994b; 1995b; 1995c; 1995d; 1996b:60–61).

A theory of decline is another tool of the ethno-nationalist approach (Smith 1984: 104). Indeed, if after all the heroic efforts made by the chosen people to civilise and to unify the world, it is still divided into numerous 'less-enlightened' different cultures, and the chosen people is itself in trouble, one has to explain this failure. In order to explain it, ethno-nationalists stress the exhaustion of 'creative power' of separate communities because links with the homeland or with the main body of population were broken (Egorov 1993), of racial or ethnic inter-marriages which violated the 'purity' of a culture also undermined the 'spirit' (Bezverkhii 1993:74–75, 90–91), and

the like.

In any case, all these arguments are also infused with mysticism. And while all the principles in question are very much characteristic of the ethno-nationalist versions of the past that I have analysed, this does not mean that all the latter are identical. On the contrary, a comparative approach makes one distinguish between several different models which predominate among different peoples. For instance, an indigenist model is characteristic for the Ukrainians who are convinced that their ancestors lived in Ukraine from time immemorial (Maha Vira 1979). The Russian ethno-nationalists, neo-Pagans, prefer 'the prodigal son' model, which stresses continuous wanderings of the ancestors all over the world with a final return to the homeland (Grinevich 1993). The ideologists of pan-Turkism use 'the Genghis Khan' model, which emphasises the glorious deeds of the ancestor-conquerors (Miziev 1986; Adji 1994). Thus, they develop a concept of the glorious past considering the territorial argument as one of secondary importance. The Ossetians attempt to combine the autochthonous model with 'the Genghis Khan model' in order both to claim the local lands and to preserve the glorious ancient Iranian past ('the Janus' model) (Vaneev 1989; Tekhov 1994; for criticism see in Shnirelman 1995d). 'The reincarnation' model is popular among the Kazakhs and the Bashkirs, who stress their indigenous status accordingly in Kazakhstan (Akhinzhanov 1971) and in Bashkortostan (Usmanova 1993).[6] This they do despite the fact that the Iron-Age native inhabitants differed from the contemporary Kazakhs and Bashkirs both physically and in language (Bongard-Levin and Grantovskii 1983; Alexeev and Gokhman 1984:52– 63; Aliev 1986; Kliashtornyi and Sultanov 1992; Kozybaev 1993:119–24). Thus, this model permits a language shift and even a drastic change in physical appearance.

Finally, it is by no means true that ethno-nationalists stubbornly stick to only one of these models under consideration. Quite the opposite, usually they have two or more different versions of the past in their closets simultaneously and choose which to use depending on the current political situation. For instance, the Kazan' Tartars use the Bulgar and the Golden Horde versions (Shnirelman 1996b:52–56), and the Azeris – the Albanian and the Turkic ones (Dudwick 1990; Astourian 1994:52–73).

A LESSON FOR ACADEMICS FROM ETHNO-NATIONALIST DISCOURSE

It is worth noting that, in order to look plausible, these sort of versions of the past have to be based on some academic background and to appear well-founded. It is at this point that a myth-builder has a serious problem. How can one combine an *a priori* idea with facts which either cannot provide it with a solid background or contradict it completely? In order to solve this problem, a mythologist has to manipulate the scientific data, using some particular approaches which are popular among academics as well. This fact alone should encourage specialists to re-evaluate the reliability of some of their methodological tools.

Since the mythology in question deals mainly with the most ancient past, it uses primarily archaeological and linguistic data. Here I will focus on the archaeological aspect. Usually the mythologists use the common approach of identifying an archae-

ological culture with an ethnic group (see, for instance, Mikeladze 1974). The debates on the meaning of an archaeological culture, which involved many Soviet archaeologists in the 1960s, have brought very disappointing results (Mongait 1967; Kamenetskii 1970; Klein 1970; 1991:125–208). Some scholars demonstrated a conventional and elaborate technical meaning of the concept in question, to the effect that an archaeological culture could be constructed quite differently depending on the time period or regions (see, for instance, Anikovich 1996:63). Moreover, the archaeological cultures of a particular area at a given period of time could be constructed differently as well, depending on the criteria used by particular archaeologists.

But even if all the experts agree on the establishment of an archaeological culture, there is still the problem of the social reality which it represented. First, both archaeological cultures and ethnic entities are highly hierarchical constructions (Klein 1991: 192–97). Secondly, at least in some cases, an archaeological culture could represent a complex interaction system which involved various non-related groups who had different native languages. Finally, it is often not easy to interpret the evolution of an archaeological culture, or to understand the meaning of culture change – do they still represented the same culture or does one have to talk about cultural shifts within the same territory (Arutiunov and Khazanov 1979a; 1979b; Shnirelman 1993b)? In all these cases, a scholar has to solve the problem whether one is dealing with a continuous evolution of the same population, or with its interaction or even integration with some newcomers, or with a population change.

Unfortunately, many scholars, but by no means all of them,[7] who use the concept of an archaeological culture avoid asking these questions, let alone discussing them extensively, and indiscriminately use a simplified notion of the congruence between an archaeological culture and an ethnic group. In particular, this is characteristic for the rapid growing approach which is seeking the archaeological traces of the most ancient speakers of proto-language groups (see, for instance, Gening 1983; Safronov 1989). Amazingly enough, some other authors (see, for instance, Dolukhanov 1994), who reject the concept of archaeological culture, still do not discuss a crucial issue – on what ground one has to establish a correspondence between archaeological data and linguistics. But it is just here where a choice of appropriate methodological tools is especially important.[8]

True, it is possible to assume that, in some cases, one can identify an ethnic group with an archaeological culture. But if this is the case, how can one reveal which language was used by the culture-bearers? Is it honest to argue that we have a reliable methodology for this sort of conclusion? Moreover, if an archaeological culture does not coincide with an ethnic group, what sort of framework are we to use to discuss the problem of correlation between linguistic and archaeological data? It is my belief that one has to acknowledge that contemporary methodologies are far from satisfactory (Shnirelman 1994a).

This situation is exploited by ethno-nationalist historiography, which identifies an archaeological culture with an ethnic group and provides it with that very language which is required by their pre-defined concept of the past (see, for instance, Mikeladze 1974; Grinevich 1993:101). It is against this background that the identification

of Slavs as bearers of Late Neolithic-Chalcolithic Tripolje culture was developed, although there are no strong arguments for this but one – that the Tripolje culture developed on the territory where the East Slavic tribes settled much later. Another line of reasoning worth discussing is exploited in this case as well – the notion of an unbroken population continuity in a given territory regardless of any cultural changes (see, for instance, Maha Vira 1979).[9]

Although this argument contradicts the idea of the identity between an archaeological culture and an ethnic group, the myth-builders are by no means confused by that. It is in this way that phantoms appear like 'the Mezin-Tripolje culture', which has been constructed by the Ukrainian émigré poet, Lev Sylenko (Maha Vira 1979), who has mechanically combined the upper Palaeolithic site of Mezin with the Neolithic-Chalcolithic Tripolje culture on no more grounds that both of them were situated within Ukrainian territory. Recently, some Ukrainian archaeologists have taken Sylenko's theory of the Ukraine quite seriously as the most ancient and the most important centre of human civilisation and are making attempts to confirm that. They argue, in particular, that already by Neolithic-Chalcolithic times proto-towns had emerged in the Ukraine, an early state was built and the earliest writing system was invented which was later taken to Mesopotamia (Chmykhov 1990:81–103, 354–55; 1992:89, 95; Shilov 1992:110–13; 1995). It is worth noting that 'the Aryan studies' (Poliakov 1974) are reviving once again under this umbrella, and once again, like in Germany early this century, they are closely related to occultism. Thus, it is instructive that Shilov (1995:621) sympathises with Elena Blavatskaia and other occult researchers, which sounds rather alarming.

The same principle stimulates a search for close relationships between the contemporary people occupying a given territory and the ancient peoples mentioned as living there by classical writers. With the help of this trick, the Ukrainian ethnonationalists (Znoiko 1989) identify 'the Slavs-Russes' with the Iranian-speaking Scythians and Sarmatians, the Turkic-speaking Huns, the German-speaking Goths, and many other groups who lived in eastern Europe in various proto-historic periods. The Azeri scholars (Yusifov 1988; Geibullaiev 1991) use the same methodology in order to identify the direct Azeri ancestors with the Scythians, the Sarmatians, and the Huns as well as the Albanians who inhabited Azerbaijan in the early Iron Age and early medieval period. Meanwhile, an illusion of continuity is supported by physical anthropologists who frequently trace the continuous development of particular physical features on a given territory. Sometimes this contradicts the archaeological data, which demonstrate unequivocally that a cultural shift occurred (Alexeev 1989:146–47, 241–80, 308–09). In fact, there are no contradictions here, since sometimes an ethno-cultural process takes complex forms: a complex cultural interaction and merging could take place and, as a result, some groups could shift to the dominant majority culture and language, or otherwise, those of the elite (Renfrew 1989:118–30). Finally, in contrast to what racists and ethno-nationalists maintain, mixed marriages were characteristic for all periods of human evolution.

It is still not clear which elements of an ancient culture were the most reliable and stable ethnic markers. Therefore, an evaluation of their ethno-symbolic role is still

highly subjective and depends on the extent to which they seem appropriate for the *a priori* concepts of a given researcher. Thus, a Balkarian archaeologist, Miziev (1986), a proponent of the idea of unbroken ethnic continuity of Turkic-speakers in the Eurasian steppes since the Bronze Age through to the Middle Ages, treats burial rites as the most stable cultural trait. By contrast, an Ossetian historian, Vaneev (1989), who attempted archaeologically to confirm the continuity between the Alans and the modern Ossetians, stated that burial rites and even physical appearance were certainly not important ethnic markers. His view was preconditioned by the early medieval phenomenon of remarkable cultural and physical heterogeneity in the Central Caucasus at a crucial period of Ossetian ethnogenesis.

Attempts to use ceramic traits for ethnic identifications lead to even greater disparities. A long dispute between Kazan' Tartar and Chuvash archaeologists about the ethnic identity of the pre-Mongol sites of the Chuvash Republic is a well-known case (Shnirelman 1996b:32–33). The Chuvash archaeologists, who base their views on ceramic data, are inclined to identify pre-Mongol sites of northern and western Chuvashia as Bulgar ones, since that helps them to claim the Bulgar background of the Chuvash people. In their turn, the Tartar archaeologists reject these conclusions emphatically while emphasising that the Bulgar ware has spread in the given regions only in the Mongol period (Smirnov and Kornilov 1971:498–504). Regardless of any evaluations of this particular discourse, it is obvious that ethnogenetic concepts based on ceramic traits are by no means conclusive.

Long ago, scholars realised that the complex composition of the various peoples of the world were the product of an interaction between very different groups. That is why it is impossible to find a coincidence between somatic features, language, and culture in great many cases (Boas 1928:82–89; Alexeev 1986:5; 1989). Even this phenomenon is used for manipulations of ethnic history. In some cases, the ethnocentric versions of the past, especially those developed by specialists, struggle over the priority of some particular component in the people's composition rather than insist on the 'purity' of blood. This topic is a hot issue in the Tartar-Chuvash discourse dealing with their ancestry (Shnirelman 1996b:22–35). Indeed, if a people were formed out of the merging of local inhabitants and newcomers, it is tempting to determine the relative share of each different component and which has made the most important contribution to the formation of the given people and its culture. For instance, the Tartar version of Chuvash ethnogenesis insists that the latter was formed mainly from the local Finno-Ugric substrate, the role of the Turkic newcomers being of subsidiary importance. Naturally, the Chuvash view contains quite the opposite message, namely, that the Turkic-speakers formed the core of the future Chuvash. In another example, the Tartar Bulgarists argue that the Bulgars made up the lion's share of the Kazan' Khanate population, the Kypchaks being only a minor component. In order to divorce the Kazan' Khanate from the Bulgars whom they treat as their own ancestors, the Chuvash, on the contrary, insist that the main body of the Kazan' Khanate population consisted of the Kypchaks. Paradoxically, rejection of the regularities of cultural evolution has resulted in objection against any functional relations between particular culture traits. Proponents of the evolutionary

approach recognise close links between the origin of writing and emergence of civilisation (Childe 1950; Gelb 1963; Masson 1989:10). But for the ethno-nationalist approach, this problem does not exist at all. Indeed, if all the cultural achievements were the products of 'the folk spirit', they did not require any social or material pre-requisites. This means that ancestors of a given people could invent writing in the most distant past independent of any socio-economic complexity, let alone a state. Thus, there are limitless perspectives in a search for a 'deeply-rooted' ethnic writing system, a point not missed by patriotic-minded authors. In addition, they ignore regularities in the evolution of writing and argue that it could emerge in alphabetic form from the very beginning. Moreover, they treat any signs as 'writing', regardless of the functions the latter could have in practice. This has resulted, for instance, in the idea of an ancient Slavic writing system dated by some authors to the Stone Age (Znoiko 1989; Grinevich 1993), of 'the Indo-Aryan alphabet' of the late third – early second millennium BC (Rao 1984), or of 'the Armenian alphabet' of the early second millennium BC (Aivazian 1967:82–104).

FIGHTING FOR ANCESTORS AND INTER-ETHNIC TENSION

The ethno-nationalist methodology may be used successfully only for internal con-sumption. Indeed, when its version of the past crosses an ethnic boundary, it im-mediately confronts a competing version which is built on the same principles but is focussed on another people. An unavoidable clash is the result; cases are well known to everybody who studies ethno-nationalist myths of the past and their political role in the contemporary world (see, for instance, Dudwick 1990; Astourian 1994; Kohl and Tsetskhladze 1995; Shnirelman 1995c; 1995d; 1996b). For instance, according to Sylenko (Maha Vira 1979), the Ukraine was the homeland of the Indo-Europeans where their formation began as early as 25,000 BC! On their side, the Armenian ethno-nationalists are convinced that the Indo-European homeland was situated within the territory of Greater Armenia (Ishkhanian 1979; 1980). And, for some Indian authors, including archaeologists (Talageri 1993), it goes without saying that it was located in the Indus River valley. They argue that the Harappan civilisation was built by Indo-Aryans who introduced and then further developed the most ancient alphabet there (Rao 1973; 1984). In contrast to the widespread opinion of the Indo-European identity of Bronze-Age cultures in the Eurasian steppe zone, the Turkic authors, including some archaeologists such as Miziev (1986), insist that they were the Turkic speakers. Another area of confrontation deals with the discovery of iron technology. According to the Georgian historian Mikeladze (1974), iron-smelt-ing was invented by the Chalibs/Chalds. He treats them as the direct ancestors of the Georgians, the pre-Hittite population of northern Central Anatolia. The Abkhazian version (Ardzinba 1983) carries a different message – iron was discovered by the ancestors of the Abkhazian-Adyghe peoples, who lived in the second millennium BC just where Mikeladze located the Chalibs and some other 'Georgian' tribes. In the view of an Ossetian historian, Vaneev (1989:127), it was the ancient Iranians, i.e. the Ossetian ancestors, who brought the tradition of iron-working to the Caucasus. The

Tartar Bulgarists argue that the first metallurgists in the world were the Bulgars (Nurutdinov 1993:326–27). Finally, a Russian writer, Yugov (1975), argued that iron production originated on the Kerch peninsula, which was supposedly populated by Slavs in the final Bronze Age. It is even more interesting to compare the myths built by the Russian and the Ukrainian ethno-nationalists (Shnirelman 1995d). Both sides use the same resources and construct very similar schemes. The only difference between them is that the Russian ethno-nationalists identify the early Slavs with 'the Slavs-Russes', implying a triple unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorussians, and the Ukrainian ones – with the Ukrainians only. Accordingly, Russian ethno-nationalists make strong efforts to prove the idea that the ancient 'Slavs-Russes' dispersed all over the territory of the former Russian empire and beyond (Grinevich 1993). And the Ukrainians are satisfied with just the Ukrainian territory where, on the contrary, they do like to have the Ukrainians settled from the Palaeolithic (Maha Vira 1979:111, 117–19). The Russian model does not recognise any particular Ukrainian prehistory. In contrast, the Ukrainian myth argues that the Russians and the Ukrainians had already bifurcated in deepest prehistory. At its most extreme form, this myth includes the idea that their languages are quite unrelated (Anon. 1984:15–16, 30–43).

Finally, ethno-nationalist versions of the past are used extensively in order to legitimise land claims, including those for alien territories, even if in a symbolic form only. Thus, a lot of peoples argue that their most distant ancestors lived in Palestine before the Jews. This notion is an important component of the anti-Semitic vision of the past produced by the contemporary Russian neo-Pagans (Shnirelman 1996a). For the Ossetians, this idea deals with their 'participation' in the emergence of early Christianity (Khamitsev and Balaev 1992). And the Afro-American sect of the 'Black Israelies' uses this idea in order to obtain their own homeland (Weisbord and Kazarian 1985). The archaeological versions of ethnogenesis are sometimes used for more serious international territorial disputes. For instance, in the 1970s and early 1980s, the state recommended that Soviet archaeologists avoided any display of Chinese artefacts found from the Golden Horde sites and played down the close links between the peoples of the Russian Far East and China. On their side, the Chinese authorities quite recently closed access to foreign archaeologists to the remarkable finds in Xinjiang, where rich graves with Caucasian skeletons were discovered dating to the late second millennium BC (Hadingham 1994). Archaeology can also be involved into serious political disputes, as is demonstrated by inter-ethnic conflicts in the territory of the former USSR. For instance, in terms of their land rights in northern Georgia, the South Ossetians consider the problem of an ethnic identification of the Koban archaeological culture (KAC) as a crucial one (on the political background of the discourse about KAC see Kohl and Tsetskhladze 1995:159–60). The culture in question flourished in the southern Central Caucasus in the late Bronze Age (fifteenth to tenth centuries BC). Its close relationships with contemporary sites in the Colchis plain are well-attested. That is why until very recently the South Ossetian archaeologist Tekhov (1977:192–93, 214) considered that the KAC was established by the Kartvelians (i.e. Georgian ancestors) who expanded from the south and mixed with the local northern Caucasian inhabitants, whereas

the Iranian-speakers came there only somewhat later. The Georgian-South Ossetian conflict forced him to change his position. Now he argues that the Indo-Europeans and, especially, Iranians were the indigenous inhabitants of the Caucasus, particularly in its central part (quoted in Chichinadze 1993:13). In his new concept, Tekhov (1994) maintains that the KAC was formed mainly by the Indo-Iranians who came from the north. Gaglojty (1994) develops his arguments along the same line, while attempting to trace a continuity between KAC, the Scythians-Sarmatians-Alans, and the Ossetians. Finally, archaeological arguments can serve as a metaphorical language for discussion of the uneasy contemporary problems and tensions. In a book, which has come out recently, an Abkhazian archaeologist, Tsvinaria (1990), described 'an aggression' of the Kura-Arax culture against western Transcaucasian population and its forced assimilation in the early Bronze Age. For those who are familiar with the situation in Abkhazia in 1989–1990 it is obvious that the Georgians were meant by 'the Kura-Arax culture' in this context, and the archaeological text sounded like a warning and, actually, like a prophecy – it predicted the Georgian-Abkhazian war of late 1992.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the past serves an important component of ethnic identity in our time. In fact it has an even wider social and political implication, it is functional since significant values are at stake. It is glorious past rather than just any past which is being eagerly sought by many ethnic-oriented intellectuals. It has to include at least three main aspects: indigenous origin (in order to claim territorial rights); early state (in order to claim political sovereignty); and glorious ancestors, preferably, great conquerors (in order to feel comfortable within the international community).

In other words, it is no accident that mythologies dominate ethnic consciousness. They can have various goals: the ideological background for ethnic consolidation; the justification of territorial claims and politics of ethnic stratification and domination; or, on the contrary, resistance to such claims or domination. It does not mean, though, that all the ethnocentric myths are forged quite consciously. Emotions play a very important role in this activity.

Emotions are especially obvious if one considers a methodology which is popular among the myth-builders. The following approaches are most frequently practised:

1. discussions centre on opinions rather than original facts; selection of the most appropriate opinions and omission of what seems 'non-patriotic';
2. referring to famous scholars or to respected people who are by no means experts in the particular field under consideration;
3. overloading the text with facts and citations that have no direct relationship to the issue in question; in other words, a demonstration of pseudo-erudition;
4. using of the most complicated sources which permit different interpretations since there is still no highly elaborated methodology for reliable conclusions to be obtained (for instance, toponymics and ethnonymics are favourite fields for many scholars studying ethnogenesis);

5. relying too much on the retrospective methodology originally introduced by Gustaf Kossinna (on Kossinna's methodology see Trigger 1989:165–67; Anthony 1995:91–92);[10]

6. attempting to protect their own position from criticism through appeals to power structures and political authorities;[11]

7. and finally it is also popular to charge opponents with 'bourgeois nationalism', 'imperial approach', and the like.

It is not difficult to notice how close this methodology is to that of the 'cult archaeology' which was first described and analysed by the American archaeologist John R. Cole (1980; on pseudo-methodology, see also Toporov 1988:267). I disagree with Cole (1980:7) with respect to only one point, namely that 'cult archaeology' is far from politics. Indeed, this is even in contrast with his own conclusion on ethnocentrism and racism (1980:9). It seems impossible to explain myth-building while referring only to ignorance and non-professionalism. A political goal plays a crucial role in this development. The myths in question are highly stereotyped (Smith 1984) – they are based on the same system of reasoning, the same way of construction, the same sort of conclusions, and all can easily be predicted. The only difference is that in any given ethnic tradition a particular people stands as 'a hero'. The main features of the myths are hyper-diffusionism, migrationism, emphasis on the crucial role of exogenous agents of changes, megalomania, extreme particularism, stress on the hierarchical relationships between various cultures, and a Manichaean approach to ethnic or cultural interrelationships.

It is obvious that ethno-nationalist methodology is very contradictory. It insists at the same time on the long-term stability of cultures and on its drastic changes, on its identity with two or more different peoples, on the unbroken ethnic continuity regardless of any cultural changes at all, on extreme functionalism and disfunctionalism, and so on. This means that the idea of ethnic patriotism predominates in the ethno-nationalist mentality far over any logical system of reasoning. It is understandable since, more often than not, ethno-nationalists are seeking political ends remote from true scholarship. The data being analysed above force one to doubt the objectivity of many ethnogenetic constructions (but by no means ethnogenetic studies in general) and to ask whether they can remain within the academic framework or, instead, constitute a sort of an ethno-political game, a means to affect the main body of the population for political benefits. In a sense, ethnogenesis is turning into a substitution for religious beliefs, which are in decline in our days. To put it differently, the erosion of the frontiers between academic disciplines and myth building activity has started now. This is a very disturbing symptom that can have consequences no less dangerous for humanity than ecological catastrophe since ethnocentric mythology of the past can serve a basis for the ideology of confrontation and feeds xenophobia (Shnirelman 1995d).

To conclude, it is worth turning back to where Wailes and Zoll (1995:34) stopped their discussion of the political implications of the ethnocentric visions of the past. They state that 'maybe scholars bear some responsibility' but never discuss what this responsibility actually means and what can be done in order to improve the situa-

tion. I think that in order to avoid the unfortunate results which were discussed above, first, one has to focus much more seriously on the methodology of interpretation of archaeological data, and second, the problem of the ethnocentric mythologies of the past and of their political implications has to be extensively discussed in the general archaeological and anthropological courses in universities and in all appropriate forums of public archaeology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND NOTES

1. A notion of the Golden Age is very popular in this environment (Smith 1984:103–04). True, it can be expressed quite differently, being based on various resources. Under some conditions some ethno-nationalist factions use facts from medieval history for this Golden Age, as was clearly demonstrated by Robert Nisbet (1986). But for many people of the world, especially, for non-Europeans, medieval history cannot provide appropriate resources. Even Europeans resort sometimes to prehistory or, at least, to pre-Christian history as an additional source for self-esteem or indigenisation. The Poles acknowledge the Lauzitzer legacy; the Celts are important for the Czechs; a myth of the Druids is still exploited in the Great Britain; the Viking Age is an important point of reference and a crucial symbol of identity in Sweden, in Norway and in Denmark; the Hungarians are grateful forever to their pagan ancestors for their appropriation of the homeland, not to mention Nazi manipulations with the Aryan past. These and many other similar facts were collected by me through interviews with archaeologists from various countries. Also see an illuminating discussion in Anthony Smith (1984) and Don Fowler (1987) where one can find an extensive bibliography. Bruce Trigger's (1989:174–86) treatment of national archaeology could be highly recommended as well.

2. See Shnirelman (1996b:1, 8–12) on the problem of ethnogenesis and on the differences between Western and Soviet/CIS approaches to it.

3. In order to avoid being misinterpreted I have to point out that I am an advocate of the highly differential approach to evolutionary regularities. In my view, one has to distinguish between at least three different levels of reasoning: general, specific and unique ones. For instance, my own studies of the origins of food production (Shnirelman 1989) demonstrate, first, that a transition to a food-producing economy was a mainstream of event within human evolution, secondly, that the process had its own specific characteristics in any given center, and finally, that each prehistoric community can be treated as a unique highly integrated cultural body with its own way of life and line of development. I strongly believe that this approach can be exploited beneficially for a comparative analysis of various cultures and civilisations as well.

4. I am sympathetic to post-processual archaeology to the extent that it seeks to locate cultural agents which may direct human behaviour regardless of, say, ecological or socio-economic environment. That is why I rate ethnoarchaeology highly (Shnirelman 1993b), although I have some reservations about the usage of ethnic terminology ('ethnic group', 'ethnicity', and the like) for prehistoric or proto-historic periods. I think that the social groups were of a quite different nature at that time (see, for instance, Shnirelman 1982a, 1982b). Regardless of all these problems, what I am combatting here is an abuse of archaeological treatment of ethnicity by various sorts of ethno-nationalists. Of course, these abuses started long before post-modernism came into being. But it is post-modernism which adds more fuel nowadays. Actually it is not post-modernism as such which is wrong, but its trend to treat popular ethnic constructions in the same terms as the academic ones. I see a dangerous tendency here. I agree completely with David Anthony (1995:84–85) in that 'having lost its former objectivist guideposts, prehistoric archaeology has opened itself to innumerable popular reinterpretations of the past, ranging from nationalist bigotry to fantasies of spiritual root-seeking'.

5. See, for instance, on the Russian case: Grinevich (1993); on the Chuvash case: Egorov (1993); on the Tartar case: Nurutdinov (1993); on the Kumyk case: Kadyrajiyev (1992).

6. This view is shared officially by the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan, whose scholars argue that the Kazakh *ethnos* emerged mainly from the local ancient population which was extensively modified after the Turkic-speakers arrived from elsewhere (Kozybaev 1993:131). In 1995 this concept was incorporated into general educational instruction, disseminated by the highest Kazakhstan authorities, as a principal point of the historical education in the republic (Kontseptsiia 1995:22). The message is that, in order to claim for the territory of Kazakhstan, the Kazakhs have to prove that they are truly the indigenous population deeply rooted in the local early history and prehistory.

7. On an illuminating case see Kovalevskaia (1995).

8. In collaboration with some historical linguists I tried to elaborate a more sophisticated approach, which we called 'linguo-archaeology' (see Militarev et al. 1988). For the bibliography of our joint projects see in Shnirelman (1994a).

9. This methodology was exploited extensively by the academician Boris Rybakov, who headed the Institute of Archaeology of the Russian Academy of Sciences for many years. See, for instance, Rybakov (1979; 1981a; 1981b; 1987).

10. For Westerners, it can look odd that Kossinna's ideology was and is still popular among many CIS archaeologists and non-archaeologists who occupy themselves with ethnogenetic studies. There are two reasons for this popularity. First, this ideology is deeply rooted; it was introduced to Russian archaeology at the end of the nineteenth century. It was revived in the late 1930s and 1940s when ethnogenetic studies started (Shnirelman 1996c). Secondly, until very recently, nobody in the country was familiar with anything like post-modernism. And even now there are only few archaeologists, let alone amateur authors, who really know what is it about.

11. Before the fall of 1991, in order to approve their mythological constructions many Soviet authors used numerous citations from Marx, Lenin, and their ilk, referred to the documents of the Central Committee of the USSR Communist Party, and, in the late 1980s especially, to the ideas of 'perestroika'.

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