

Colonising the Conditions of Thought: Civilisational Hierarchies and Literary Form in the Soviet Periphery, 1924–1929

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Abstract

This paper argues that Moscow's developmental classifications determined the institutional conditions of cultural production in the Soviet periphery and penetrated the epistemological conditions under which peripheral intellectuals could work, shaping which modes of understanding remained structurally expressible. Through a direct comparative analysis of Ukrainian writer Mykola Khvyli'ovyi's 1929 satirical short story *Ivan Ivanovich* and Uzbek intellectual Abdalrauf Fitrat's 1924 allegorical drama *Satan's Mutiny Against the Lord*, the paper finds that civilisational hierarchies produced fundamentally different timelines for cultural autonomy and different formal possibilities for how critique could be articulated at all. A five-year gap between ideological enforcement in Central Asia and Ukrainian suppression reveals that geographic positioning within the Soviet structure determined when, as opposed to whether, peripheral intellectuals faced systematic elimination, with civilisational classifications dictating the duration of autonomous thought. The literary forms available to each writer both reflected and reproduced the developmental logic that governed their respective republic's position within Moscow's imperial hierarchy.

Keywords: Soviet nationalities policy, civilisational hierarchies, comparative literature, Soviet periphery, cultural production

Introduction

The Soviet periphery has been studied primarily as a site of displacement and imposition. Scholarship has traced with considerable precision the policies that targeted peripheral intellectuals and the campaigns that eliminated them but has attended less carefully to the epistemological conditions under which they worked. This paper argues that Moscow's developmental classifications determined the institutional conditions of cultural production and penetrated the conditions of thought itself, shaping which modes of understanding remained structurally expressible. By placing two prominent peripheral writers in direct comparative dialogue, it demonstrates that civilisational hierarchies produced different timelines for cultural autonomy and different possibilities for how critique could be formulated at all.

During the 1920s, Soviet writers occupied profoundly different positions within Moscow's periphery. They served as indices of differentiated imperial control by demonstrating how developmental classifications structured both the temporal windows available for cultural production and the literary strategies through which intellectuals could sustain critical engagement with Soviet power.

Civilisational or developmental arguments, as this essay employs the terms, refer to how Soviet authorities drew on ethnographic expertise to position nationalities at different evolutionary stages, using these assessments to justify the variance in intervention across the periphery. A civilisational hierarchy in this context, far from a formally codified doctrine or a

neutral administrative taxonomy, refers to a structuring logic embedded in Soviet nationalities policy that positioned ethnic groups along a single developmental continuum—from ‘backward’ tribal formations to ‘advanced’ nations approaching modernity—and used those assessments to determine the pace, intensity, and character of ideological intervention in each region. Thus, characterising ‘backwardness’ was ‘the result of sociohistorical circumstances and not of innate racial or biological traits.’¹ Francine Hirsch probes ‘state-sponsored evolutionism’ as the mechanism through which ethnographers, having established themselves as scientific authorities, legitimated Moscow’s discrepant intensity of meddling and ideological enforcement on the grounds that certain regions required tutelage before achieving cultural maturity.² Comparing Ukrainian and Uzbek writers demonstrates clear inconsistencies in the conditions under which cultural production occurred. Ukraine appears to have occupied a relatively elevated position in 1920s Soviet evolutionary assessments. Uzbekistan’s cultural status was comparably lower, despite its Persian and Chagatai literary heritage. A five-year gap between ideological enforcement in Uzbekistan and Ukrainian suppression reveals that geographic positioning within the Soviet structure determined *when*, as opposed to *whether*, peripheral intellectuals faced systematic elimination, with civilisational classifications dictating the duration of cultural.

A comparative analysis of Ukrainian writer Mykola Khvyl’ovyi’s 1929 short story *Ivan Ivanovich* and Uzbek intellectual Abdalrauf Fitrat’s 1924 allegorical drama *Satan’s Mutiny Against the Lord* illustrates this essay’s argument productively. Khvyl’ovyi emerged as a prominent prose writer and literary personality, leading VAPLITE (Free Academy of

¹Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 9.

²Ibid.

Proletarian Literature, 1925–1928) and combining communist and romantic ideology with strong nationalism.³ His literary reputation rested on collections of lyrical short stories in which he boldly criticised communist graphomaniacs and called on Ukrainian writers to reorient away from Russia and toward Europe as a source of authentic culture.⁴ His counterpart in the analysis, Fitrat, was the most influential reformist thinker in Bukhara before and after the revolution. Involved in the Ottoman press at the beginning of his writing career, his sympathies lay with those who sought to modernise Islam, which shaped his subsequent engagement with Soviet transformation.⁵ Both intellectuals were publicly venerated figures holding significant influence within their respective republics, making their work representative of elite cultural production. Their central positions ensure that the formal choices each made reflected institutional constraints, demonstrating that civilisational hierarchies structured the boundaries of acceptable expression even for privileged intellectuals at the apex of their republic's cultural establishment, consequently revealing how geographic positioning determined what remained expressible regardless of individual prominence within local contexts.

This essay's argument intervenes in scholarly debates about the implementation of Soviet nationalities policy. Historiography of Soviet nation-building recognises that the regime institutionalised ethnic particularism by classifying citizens according to biological nationality and linking ethnicity to developmental hierarchies. Yuri Slezkine demonstrates how the regime's 'chronic ethnophilia' promoted group rights through ethnoterritorial

³Mykola Khvylovy, "Pamphlets (excerpts)," in *Towards an Intellectual History of Ukraine: An Anthology of Ukrainian Thought from 1710 to 1995*, ed. Ralph Lindheim and George S. N. Luckyj (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 269.

⁴Ibid, 274.

⁵Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 54.

federalism,⁶ while Shoshana Keller reveals that developmental schemas justified differential treatment, with party officials showing little patience for gradual approaches in regions classified as backward.⁷ Together, these scholars establish that Soviet nationalities policy operated through a civilisational hierarchy that determined the pace and character of institutional transformation in different republics. Adeeb Khalid and Francine Hirsch document how this logic produced Central Asia's rapid institutional restructuring and immediate ideological enforcement, while George Luckyj identifies Ukraine's extended period of cultural debate lasting until 1928–1929.⁸ The resulting picture shows developmental classifications translating into divergent temporal trajectories, yet these studies remain geographically isolated in their examination of regional experiences sans systematic comparison. By directly comparing Uzbek and Ukrainian writers during the same decade, this essay observes that developmental hierarchies produced fundamentally different timelines for cultural autonomy. Writers occupied differentiated positions within this ethnic-developmental framework according to their republic's civilisational classification, and their literary forms illuminate how Moscow's tolerance for autonomous cultural production contracted earlier in regions deemed backward than in those recognised as advanced. What the existing scholarship appears to have addressed only thinly is how these observable variables of developmental classification determined the epistemological conditions under which peripheral intellectuals could work. Ethnographers who determined developmental status simultaneously established what counted as modern thought itself, making the

⁶Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–452.

⁷Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).

⁸George S. N. Luckyj, *Literary Politics in the Soviet Ukraine, 1917–1934* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

permitted literary forms of each republic a confirmation of the very evolutionary assessment that authorised those forms. This paper seeks to explore this circularity.

The discussion focuses on nationally oriented intellectuals navigating Soviet power, though the nature of this navigation varied profoundly. The analysis does not represent the broader republican literary fields that included party journalists, peasant correspondents, or proletarian writers. This narrowing is analytically productive because the category of writer was not uniform across the Soviet project. What constituted legitimate literary authority, which forms of cultural production carried political weight, and who qualified as an intellectual voice varied according to nationality and geography. Nationally oriented intellectuals like Khvyl'ovyi and Fitrat occupied particularly contested positions, though from fundamentally different orientations. Khvyl'ovyi positioned himself as communist guardian of authentic revolutionary ideals, claiming authority to judge the betrayal of Soviet power from within the revolutionary framework.⁹ Fitrat inhabited a more complicated position, as his trajectory in the 1920s hybridised pre-revolutionary Jadidist reform traditions with questions about religion that aligned neither with Soviet atheistic ideology nor with traditional Islamic orthodoxy. This produced work whose relationship to Soviet power remained interpretively ambiguous.¹⁰ These differences matter because they shaped what each writer could produce and how authorities read their work. Both writers nevertheless

⁹Olena Palko, "Between Two Powers: The Soviet Ukrainian Writer Mykola Khvyl'ovyi," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 64, no. 4 (2016): 580.

¹⁰For sustained engagement with Abdalrauf Fitrat's work as both a literary and cultural phenomenon, and for methodological reflections on interpreting an intellectual figure for whom biographical evidence is limited, see Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); and Edward A. Allworth, *Evading Reality: The Devices of Abdalrauf Fitrat, Modern Central Asian Reformist* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

occupied contested spaces, making their cultural production revealing of how Moscow treated peripheral intellectuals differently.

The selected texts demonstrate the outer limits of what was possible in each republic at specific moments. *Satan's Mutiny* represents Fitrat's most politically charged work during his exile in Moscow, staging a religious-philosophical debate in allegorical form that Soviet publishers approved as atheistic propaganda while its theological complexity enabled readings that offered implicit critique of contemporary power relations. *Ivan Ivanovich* represents Khvyl'ovyi's most transparent satirical attack on Soviet bureaucracy, in which he anatomises New Economic Policy (NEP) corruption through realistic material practices. The texts can therefore be seen as the most charged cultural products of each writer's engagement with the Soviet project.

Satan's Mutiny Against the Lord

Satan's Mutiny Against the Lord is a drama in which Satan, occupying an elevated pulpit and serving as mentor to the Angels, openly challenges God's command to bow to Adam, the newly created deputy fashioned from clay. The mutiny fails, concluding that 'not a sign remains to be seen of Satan, of the man (Adam), of the Angels, or of the pulpit.'¹¹ Scholarly interpretation divides over whether this represents genuine intellectual crisis about Islamic authority, as Adeeb Khalid argues, or encoded political commentary about intellectual conformity requiring sophisticated decipherment, as Edward A. Allworth contends. The drama's polyvalence itself was purposeful. Fitrat wrote an allegory that was simultaneously anti-religious propaganda, philosophical meditation on legitimate authority

¹¹Edward A. Allworth, ed. and trans., "Satan's Mutiny Against the Lord," in *Evading Reality: The Devices of Abdalrauf Fitrat, Modern Central Asian Reformist* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 215.

and independent thought, and political commentary, because the immediate ideological pressure of 1924 Central Asia required Fitrat to address competing factions simultaneously, without any single faction grasping the full scope of the address. The polyvalence of the piece was therefore a structural necessity.

The drama belongs to Fitrat's 1923–1924 cycle of 'direct critiques of Islam,' published during forced exile in Moscow.¹² Soviet authorities had removed Fitrat from cultural institutions in Bukhara by 1923, enacting what Allworth observes to be 'the quintessentially Russian punishment of banishment' intruding upon Central Asian culture.¹³ Exile ironically freed him from direct Bukharan surveillance, creating space for theological experimentation that would otherwise have been impossible, yet physical proximity to Moscow demanded visible demonstrations of loyalty as the price of survival. The readings that follow draw on Allworth's English translation of the drama alongside Khalid's analysis of Fitrat's Uzbek and Chagatai materials; where formal features such as the aruz metre and archaic vocabulary are at stake, this essay relies on their philological observations and situates its interpretive claims accordingly.

Allworth notes that 'the work's static scene, wordy dialogue, abstract theological vocabulary, and unhuman characters might daunt any ordinary reader,' particularly given low Central Asian literacy rates.¹⁴ The modest print run of 5,000 copies addressed the narrow stratum of traditional scholars who would recognise theological references, Jadidist intellectuals capable of decoding allegorical correspondences, and Soviet cultural authorities

¹²Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, 249.

¹³Allworth, *Evading Reality*, 176.

¹⁴Ibid, 178.

evaluating ideological reliability.¹⁵ This restricted audience permitted dense encoding absent in works designed for broader circulation. Interpreting the drama requires engaging competing scholarly frameworks while attending closely to what occurs in the text. Khalid demonstrates through private correspondence and theoretical writings that Fitrat underwent genuine intellectual crisis about Islamic authority, as opposed to simply performing atheism for Soviet audiences. Allworth constructs an elaborate interpretive framework around ‘evasion,’ arguing Fitrat deploys Islamic cosmology as protective camouflage for anti-Soviet critique. Khalid's biographical evidence proves more persuasive for understanding Fitrat's intellectual trajectory, but Allworth correctly identifies the political dimensions embedded in theological form, and this essay extends the discussion by moving Fitrat beyond Uzbekistan and positioning him as a significant stakeholder in Soviet culture more broadly.

Satan's Mutiny questions and allegorises the institutional dynamics of 1924 Uzbekistan through the spatial positioning of its characters. Satan occupies an elevated pulpit inscribed with golden letters proclaiming his blessed status as Azazil, while Angels prostrate themselves, mechanically repeating ‘Glory be to God.’¹⁶ Satan is ‘their mentor,’ translated from the Turkic *mudarris*, the term for seminary instructor in pre-revolutionary Islamic educational systems.¹⁷ The *mudarris* questions mindless repetition of prayers as empty ritual, a practice Jadidist reformers like Fitrat had long criticised, by demanding ‘What might this pettiness be for, this baseness, this dullness, this lifelessness, this blindness?!’ The cascade of accusatory nouns positions Satan as the voice of intellectual vitality against blind

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid, 199.

¹⁷Ibid, 200.

observance.¹⁸ This voice, built over millennia of pedagogy, faces sudden displacement. Divine tablets proclaim God will ‘now create a man from clay / Also, We make him deputy to Ourselves,’ announcing Adam’s status before his existence begins.¹⁹ Angels who have demonstrated faithful service must become subordinate to a being whose deputyship precedes his creation, who arrives ‘crowned and sceptred’ before any acts warrant such symbols. Satan’s declaration that Adam is regarded as ‘lower than mud’ weaponises Adam’s very composition to expose that authority cares not for the learned but for new, unproven creation.²⁰

Divine decree prioritising clay over intellectual authority maps directly onto cadre policy that privileged class origins over intellectual credentials. Khalid documents that Soviet authorities elevated former workers and peasants with minimal education to leadership positions based on proletarian origins, while pre-revolutionary intellectuals faced marginalisation despite their command of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary traditions, theological learning, and established cultural authority.²¹ Satan’s warning to Adam — that in compelling Satan to bow, God ‘wished to deceive you too’ — may suggest Fitrat viewed Soviet power as manipulating both old intellectuals and new cadres for ends neither group had agency over.²² Fitrat deploys classical aruz metre, revives archaic Chagatai vocabulary such as ‘tamugh’ for Hell, and writes dialogue that necessitates familiarity with Islamic cosmological debates, but these very choices enact the intellectual authority the narrative declares defeated.²³ Only readers educated in classical Islamic texts can decode the allegory,

¹⁸Ibid, 199.

¹⁹Ibid, 207.

²⁰Ibid, 211.

²¹Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, 68.

²²Allworth, *Evading Reality*, 213.

²³Ibid, 205.

meaning Fitrat addresses the very audience cadre policy sought to eliminate while depicting that demographic's obsolescence. Pre-revolutionary scholarly formation becomes the survival mechanism through the text's demand for learned interpretation.

Adam's persistent silence in the text signals the breakdown of shared intellectual exchange. He never speaks or demonstrates consciousness beyond mute embodiment. Theologically, silence signifies his status as clay not yet vivified by divine breath. Allegorically, muteness marks his exclusion from the intellectual culture the drama's language embodies. Angels and Satan debate in linguistically dense verse demonstrating the very education new Soviet cadres lack. Adam's muteness prevents the possibility of rational exchange between intellectual authority and new political power, and this absolute silence may signal fundamentally different conditions for cultural debate in Central Asia compared to Ukraine. Khvylovyy's 1925–1926 polemical pamphlets on 'cultural epigonism,' for instance, engaged party authorities through direct confrontation, presuming shared discursive ground despite disagreements.²⁴ Revolution appears to have functioned as a common denominator between Ukrainian communist intellectuals and officials, providing sufficient ideological foundation to permit extended contestation over cultural policy. Fitrat's mute Adam, unable to participate in dialogue, suggests no comparable foundation existed in Uzbekistan in 1924. Whether pre-revolutionary Uzbek intellectuals like Fitrat genuinely refused to embrace the revolution, or whether Moscow simply perceived their lack of engagement as confirmation of backwardness, remains ambiguous. Either reading suggests the breakdown of dialogue between centre and periphery worked on multiple levels. Civilisational arguments of backwardness may have justified immediate ideological

²⁴Khvylovyy, "Pamphlets (excerpts)," 271.

enforcement because Soviet authorities presumed no common revolutionary element existed with pre-revolutionary intellectuals. If revolution was not a shared denominator, as it was in Ukraine, then direct intellectual engagement became impossible from the outset. Geographic positioning within the civilisational hierarchy thus determined both viable literary forms and any basis for rational exchange with authority. Khvyl'ovyi's satirical realism presupposes a reader capable of recognising institutional corruption through observable material life.

Fitrat's theological allegory presupposes a reader formed by pre-revolutionary Islamic education. The cognitive equipment each text demands mirror the epistemological world each writer was permitted to inhabit.

Allworth reports the drama received 'tacit approval from the Russians, who published it in pamphlet form and displayed the pamphlet among the showpieces of Soviet Central Asian culture in exhibitions in Paris and New York.'²⁵ Simultaneously, 'Uzbek Communists, in step with the Russian Bolsheviks, lauded it as atheistic propaganda' while 'liberal nationalists understood it to be a clever piece opposing fanaticism and clericalism.'²⁶ In 1924, constraint itself became a tool, at least in part signalling a complex form of liminal agency. This agency complicates assumptions embedded in Moscow's civilisational hierarchy, which presumed a unidirectional relationship where the centre would transform the periphery. Fitrat's dialogue required Moscow to become an unwitting patron of the intellectual tradition it sought to eliminate. Soviet authorities approved, published and displayed internationally a work they could not fully comprehend, effectively underwriting the preservation of pre-revolutionary cultural authority while believing they were showcasing its uprooting. This

²⁵Edward A. Allworth, *Uzbek Literary Politics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), 63.

²⁶*Ibid.*

mutual incomprehension was itself a product of the civilisational hierarchy. Uzbekistan's perceived backwardness rendered its encoding practices illegible as resistance to authorities who had already determined that the region's intellectuals were insufficiently advanced to mount sophisticated critique. The very logic that subjugated the region may have subsequently and inadvertently created a protective opacity around its cultural production. In this way, Fitrat and fellow writers became unwitting collaborators in reproducing their own classification. Where Ukraine's recognised cultural potential made its intellectuals visible and therefore vulnerable to direct suppression, Uzbekistan's perceived backwardness permitted some survival of independent thought.

Ivan Ivanovich

Olena Palko describes *Ivan Ivanovich* as 'a satire on the entire social order, whose implementers existed in some parallel world, in which, it seemed, Communism had already triumphed.'²⁷ The reader follows Ivan Ivanovich, the story's titular hero and revolutionary party member, in his daily life as he inhabits a four-room apartment on Thomas More Street, attended by a French governess, surrounded by 'surprise' furniture requisitioned from landowners, and consuming Armenian vodka while proclaiming proletarian asceticism.

In 1929, Khvyl'ovyi was exposing the bureaucratisation of the revolution and the ideological hypocrisy of the NEP, the year collectivisation began displacing the policy itself. The text belongs to a mode of critique built from the accumulation of observable contradictions, one that presupposes an audience sharing both institutional familiarity and sufficient distance from immediate ideological enforcement to recognise the satirised target.

²⁷Palko, "Between Two Powers," 580.

That such conditions persisted in 1929 is itself an analytically significant fact. Khvyl'ovyi could still attack NEP corruption eight years after its introduction to revive a collapsed post-war economy. This suggests that Ukrainian intellectuals could engage in ongoing criticism that evolved and accumulated weight as contradictions compounded. Historians examining Ukrainian literary production in the 1920s can thus trace how disillusionment with the Soviet project developed and arguments shifted, a practice structurally unavailable to Central Asian writers.

Although scarce, scholarly interpretations of *Ivan Ivanovich* praise it for its critical essence. In the introduction to the 1960 translated edition of *Stories from the Ukraine*, which features *Ivan Ivanovich*, George Luckyj celebrates Khvyl'ovyi's 'changing strategy' following a forced recantation of his 1927 novel *The Woodsnipes*. He emerged 'as the master of a new style, very different from that of his earlier romantic and impressionistic stories.'²⁸ Decades later, Palko identifies that this new style exposed the 'pervasive corruption of the long-anticipated social order, where every opportunist considers himself protected by a membership card, where communism is already flourishing, but only for the chosen.'²⁹ This section interrogates *Ivan Ivanovich* as an ostensibly strategic literary product responding to suppression, arguing that it reveals profound disparities between Soviet borderlands and their respective cultural production in the 1920s.

Satire relies on recognisable and observable reality, making the medium of expression easily conducive to critique. Compared to Fitrat's theatrical allegory five years earlier, *Ivan Ivanovich* reveals that what Ukrainian intellectuals may have experienced as suppression

²⁸George S. N. Luckyj, introduction to *Stories from the Ukraine* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 10.

²⁹Palko, "Between Two Powers," 580.

necessitating strategic redirection remains incomparably more favourable than the cultural conditions Central Asian writers already navigated. This reinforces the civilisational spirit of Moscow's differentiated imperial control, demonstrating Ukraine's cultural importance relative to the centre and revealing that developmental logic translated into fundamentally different possibilities for literary production across the Soviet empire, as well as into different conceptions of what constraint itself entailed.

Scholarship addressing Khvyl'ovyi's cultural and literary contributions reconstructs how he maintained the ability to critique Soviet power, yet his role in the broader dynamics of Soviet peripheries remains unexplored. Luckyj identifies 1928–1929 as a terminal phase before systematic repression began, which raises the question of what enabled extended debate in the first place. Palko answers this by demonstrating that Khvyl'ovyi positioned himself as guardian of authentic revolutionary ideals betrayed by NEP corruption,³⁰ a stance that enabled critique from within the revolutionary project judging Soviet power's fidelity to its own proclaimed values, but one that leaves open what this stationing permitted formally in written work. George Grabowicz's concept of 'symbolic autobiography' addresses this gap, revealing how writers inscribed themselves directly in fictional forms rather than displacing authorial presence into neutral mouthpieces.³¹ Positioning Khvyl'ovyi in comparative dialogue with another Soviet periphery exposes what remains unexplored, namely that civilisational arguments determined which forms of intellectual and cultural life could survive Soviet transformation.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹George G. Grabowicz, "Symbolic Autobiography in the Prose of Mykola Khvyl'ovyi (Some Preliminary Observations)," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1998): 165–180.

Khvyl'ovyi's transparent self-inscription reveals how Soviet institutions transformed revolutionary commitment from political conviction into bureaucratic obligation measured through payment schedules. Grabowicz argues symbolic autobiography grants repressed psychic forces 'narrative extension and autonomy,' allowing writers to examine their shadow selves as observable fictional problems rather than confessional revelation.³² Ivan Ivanovich embodies Khvyl'ovyi's own experience of revolutionary identity's reduction to accumulated memberships, made visible through escalating emphasis on dues payments: 'he was punctual in paying his membership fee to the printers' union, and equally punctual in paying his membership fee to the union of employees in institutions of public catering, and again equally punctual – if not more so – in paying his Party membership dues.'³³ The qualifier 'if not more so' reveals heightened anxiety around Party dues emerging not from deeper ideological commitment but from greater institutional consequences for delinquency. Revolutionary loyalty becomes quantifiable, converting conviction into administrative performance. The narrator interjects by observing that the dues amount to less than two percent of the hero's earnings, 'but what matters is quantity not quality.'³⁴ The deliberate inversion of Marxist dialectics weaponises revolutionary language against itself, for revolutionary identity now requires endless organisational affiliations without ever producing security or authentic political standing. Palko's portrait of Khvyl'ovyi as guardian of authentic revolutionary ideals is thus confronted with its own limit, since the guardianship operated under conditions where revolutionary authenticity had become structurally unavailable. The self-inscription is a formal index of geographic position, a diagnostic that

³²Ibid, 176.

³³Mykola Khvylovy, "Ivan Ivanovich," in *Stories from the Ukraine*, trans. George S. N. Luckyj (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), 167.

³⁴Ibid.

performs intellectual authority in the very act of exposing its conditions of impossibility. Ukrainian readers needed only institutional familiarity to decode this critique, whereas Fitrat's authorial positioning required hermeneutical labour of an entirely different order, one shaped by pre-revolutionary Islamic formation than shared revolutionary reference. The divergence in decoding demands is itself evidence of how geographic positioning within the Soviet peripheral network determined the literary strategies and the fundamental terms through which intellectuals could represent their own relationship to revolutionary transformation.

Khvyi'ovyi's representation of cell meeting preparation reveals that Soviet ideological identity functioned through material enactment as opposed to internal conviction, with revolutionary authenticity becoming a matter of assembling correct physical signifiers through wardrobe curation. This capacity to ground critique in observable material practice is symptomatic of a tolerance extended to Ukrainian intellectuals well into the 1920s. The hero Ivan and his wife Marfa Halaktionovna attend weekly communist cell meetings on Thursday evenings to discuss party business and demonstrate commitment to the revolution.³⁵ An analytically productive element of their attendance is the ritualistic wardrobe change prior to the meetings, specifically curated for the occasion, revealing that proving revolutionary credentials had become a matter of assembling correct visual tokens of proletarian identity. The spouses respectively don an old suit with red scarf to resemble 'a factory worker in the tobacco plant' and 'an ancient military tunic' from War Communism.³⁶ The narrator frames this practice through explicit comparison to religious ritual, as though witnessing a scene 'in

³⁵Ibid, 175.

³⁶Ibid, 183.

front of the altar,’ while simultaneously inverting its material logic.³⁷ Priests don vestments to enter consecrated space designed for spiritual transformation, yet Ivan and Marfa’s ritual ‘was performed in an ordinary hallway,’ suggesting no space remains exempt from the obligation to perform ideology.³⁸ The hallway becomes as much a site of ritual transformation as any altar, but this universalisation paradoxically strips the ritual of any special significance. The ancient military tunic carries analytical weight because Ivan retrieves *this* specific garment for attendance. The text suggests garments from the revolutionary period authenticate proletarian credentials more effectively than contemporary clothing because they speak to proximity to the revolution. The tunic reveals that revolutionary identity under the NEP was materially enacted through artefacts drawn from approved historical moments. Whether Ivan originally preserved the tunic anticipating such institutional requirements, or whether its authenticating value emerged retrospectively, matters less than what the preservation itself reveals about how Soviet power colonised material culture. Objects became repositories of political capital whose value derived from historical provenance as opposed to present utility, requiring subjects to curate personal archives of revolutionary participation. This differs fundamentally from religious vestments whose sacred authority derives from consecrated status, revealing how Soviet ideology, despite materialist claims, functioned through the fetishisation of objects bearing witness to correct historical periods.

Slezkine documents how the Soviet regime ‘equated ethnicity with development,’ which institutionalised hierarchies through classifications distinguishing *natsii* (nations) from

³⁷Ibid, 184.

³⁸Ibid.

narodnosti (peoples understood as small or underdeveloped) and *plemena* (tribes),³⁹ while Hirsch excavates how professional ethnographers of the 1920s mapped peoples onto developmental stages.⁴⁰ Together, they establish that ethnographic expertise provided the mechanism translating abstract developmental hierarchies into concrete administrative differentiation. What remains unexamined is how these classifications penetrated the epistemological conditions under which peripheral intellectuals could work, given that ethnographers who determined developmental status simultaneously established what counted as modern thought itself. The divergence between Khvyl'ovyi's satire, grounded in observable material practices such as wardrobe rituals and membership payments, and Fitrat's theological work as the available means for navigating comparable critique, suggests Ukrainian writers operated under classifications that positioned them as capable of rational material engagement, while Central Asian writers were perceived as barely reaching the threshold of modernity. Moscow's system of classification thereby achieved a self-reinforcing circularity, in which it determined the literary forms available to peripheral intellectuals, and those literary forms in turn reproduced the developmental logic that had authorised them. Examining what Khvyl'ovyi and Fitrat could write exposes how ethnographic expertise colonised the epistemological conditions of thought itself, determining which modes of understanding remained structurally expressible for intellectuals navigating Soviet transformation across the periphery.

³⁹Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," 427.

⁴⁰Hirsch, *Empire of Nations* (2005).

Conclusion

The comparison undertaken in this paper reveals that the nature of intellectual work possible under Soviet transformation varied profoundly across the periphery and the experiences resist integration into unified narratives. Scholars who attempt such integration risk reproducing the civilisational logic they seek to examine.

The discussion has argued that the role of writers in 1920s Soviet politics was enveloped in developmental schemas borrowed from contemporary ethnographers, a dynamic that produced a revealing analysis of hierarchies, the availability of literary expressions, agency or its absence, and the decentralisation of cultural production away from Moscow. By examining how Khvyl'ovyi and Fitrat navigated Soviet power from fundamentally different positions within the imperial hierarchy, this paper has sought to demonstrate that civilisational classifications functioned as more than administrative categories. They determined the epistemological conditions under which critique could be formulated, the temporal windows during which autonomous thought remained expressible, and ultimately whether any shared discursive ground between intellectuals and Soviet authorities could exist at all. The five-year gap separating Fitrat's allegorical drama from Khvyl'ovyi's satirical realism indicates that Moscow's ethnographic logic operated at a deeper level than the determination of permissible subjects in the literature being produced on its periphery, reaching into the cognitive conditions under which literary expression became conceivable at all.

The scholarship engaged throughout has compellingly established that developmental hierarchies structured institutional transformation across the borderlands, illuminating the immediately observable variables of Soviet differentiation such as nationality policy, cadre

politics, institutional reorganisation, and the chronology of ideological campaigns. Scholars and historians who venture into cultural production — such as Khalid, Allworth, Palko, and Grabowicz — analyse how writers circumvented and negotiated Soviet power within their respective contexts. What remains systematically under-addressed is how the observable variables of developmental classification determined the evasive realm of cultural possibility. Placing these regional studies in direct conversation suggests that the temporal disparities scholars have documented reflect a unified logic of differentiated imperial control that colonised the conditions of writing itself.

What remains striking is how constraint also became a relative condition. Khvyl'ovyi could ground his 1929 satire in observable material practices because eight years of cultural debate had accumulated sufficient disillusionment to make NEP corruption a collectively recognisable subject. This possibility for evolving critique, for building arguments that compounded weight as contradictions became visible, was structurally unavailable to Uzbek writers who faced immediate enforcement that foreclosed any analogous developmental trajectory. Moscow's contrasting imperial logic produced profoundly uneven epistemological terrain, and any comparative scholarship that treats the Ukrainian timeline as the standard against which Uzbek experience is measured inadvertently replicates the developmental ranking it purports to analyse. The analytical task is not to integrate these experiences into a single chronology but to hold their divergence as a finding in its own right.

This essay has interrogated the influence of developmental evolution on Soviet peripheral culture only in part. Concentrating on Khvyl'ovyi and Fitrat cannot holistically account for other Ukrainian and Uzbek writers and how they would have navigated the same hierarchies, nor can it claim to have done so by default of analysing only a small portion of

each writer's corpus. The latter is both an unavoidable choice given the parameters of the essay and a necessary limitation due to the largely unavailable material for both Khvyl'ovyi and, especially, Fitrat. Most 'national' intellectuals and their relationship to Soviet power remains unexplored but could constitute a fruitful study illuminating or countering the findings presented here.

The focus on literary texts similarly obscures whether the patterns identified extended across cultural production or remained specific to written forms. Theatre practitioners, visual artists, and composers may have faced analogous constraints determined by civilisational classifications, or different media may have navigated those dynamics through alternative logics that complicate the paper's arguments about form and epistemological possibility. Attending to voices beyond elite intellectuals would demonstrate whether this cognitive colonisation was homogenous across different strata of cultural producers, requiring substantial archival work that may reveal gaps in available material. The central claim of this paper — that civilisational hierarchies penetrated the conditions of thought and therefore the written word itself — suggests that future comparative work across Soviet peripheries should attend to both what was suppressed and to the formal properties of what survived. The latter bears the imprint of the developmental logic that permitted the existence of the criticism implicit in the word. Consequently, this discussion opens pathways for understanding Soviet cultural control as emanating from a dependence on theories of differentiation that scholars must resist flattening into unified narratives, even as the unevenness of available evidence constrains how systematically such understanding can be pursued across the full Soviet landscape.

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