

Title: The Chechen Wars, Ramzan Kadyrov, and Chrystal Callahan: Staging Captives in Literature and Life

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Focusing on the prisoner as a thematic feature of Romantic captivity narratives, numerous scholars—including Paul Austin, Thomas Barrett, Susan Layton, and Bruce Grant—have explored Pushkin’s literary Caucasus as a seminal topos in Russian cultural production. Whereas Austin, Barrett, and Layton focus on the nineteenth-century prisoner as a theme, and Grant does so as a myth, my proposed paper will concentrate on the twentieth-and twenty-first-century prisoner as a gendered metaphor of paramount importance to knowledge production of conflict in the Caucasus—and “new wars” in general.

Beginning with the premise that contemporary cultural discourses frequently depict female civilians, combatants, and suicide-bombers as gendered variations of the prisoner trope, I analyze diverse local and international media discourses, focusing on representations of “fighters” and “beauty queens.” I consider various portrayals of Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov—and his publicized love of both boxing and beauty contests—alongside the stylized persona of Chrystal Callahan, a Canadian model who moved to Grozny in 2009 and now hosts a Chechen news program (Highlights of the Week with Chrystal Callahan), blogs (“Grozny Gossip”), and sings. Against this backdrop, I address the recent media controversy about celebrity appearances (by Hilary Swank, Mike Tyson, and others) at Kadyrov’s birthday party in October 2011.

In short, I interrogate how, since 2007, Kadyrov’s political spectacles and personal entanglements simultaneously have enforced and inverted normative gender roles—and why these re-articulations of the prisoner metaphor might matter to knowledge production of violence in the Caucasus. My discourse analysis, by integrating literary history with contemporary politics, contributes to an ongoing discussion of how post-cold-war conflicts are gendered.