Pushkin and the Caucasus: Literary Images of Russia’s Eastern Frontier

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By the closing action of the Crimean War in 1855, Russia was both one of history’s largest empires and most politically and socially backward power. Tsar Nicholas I’s reactionary policies resulted from the Westernizing trend in the Russian intellectual sphere. Despite the Tsar’s attempt to stamp out internal threats, his reign saw the development of an independent intelligentsia whose members are oftentimes associated with the burgeoning literary scene in Russia. Due to the state censorship, literature became the primary method of communicating critique of Russian society and politics. Russia’s national poet and progenitor of modern Russian literature, Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, whose works are seen by both his contemporaries and modern day readers as being critical of the Russian state and society, evokes the sense that the individual is dwarfed by the power of the state through his poetry and fiction. Pushkin’s “Prisoner of the Caucasus” presents two dynamically different societies, Russian and Circassian. For the prisoner, the Caucasus represents a land of freedom where he is able to retreat from all the pressures of high societal life. Despite the narrator’s belief in the freeing atmosphere of the Caucasus, he brings with him one of Pushkin’s common themes, namely, imperial domination. One must remember that “Prisoner’s” narrator is a soldier during the early years of the Caucasian War, which saw the expansion of Russian imperial might further into Asia and the genocide, forced removal, and subjugation of an entire people. Yet Pushkin’s depiction of the Caucasus as an untamable land full of savage and unadvanced peoples cemented itself in the Russian popular imagination and propelled other writers to take inspiration from this area. While historians and literary experts accept that Pushkin’s short stories and poetry provides social and political critique of Russia, his poem “Prisoner of the Caucasus” affirms Imperialism by creating an “us against other” opposition between Westernized Russian values, religion, and Enlightenment and the savagery of the Caucasian peoples.

The expansion of empire, dating back to Peter I, had already been well established in Russia when Tsar Nicholas I took the throne in 1826. Upon Tsar Nicholas I’s coronation, the empire included Finland, the three Baltic nations, most of Poland, Ukraine, Crimea, Georgia, Armenia, Siberia and Central Asia, with the push into the Southern Caucasus only having started a few years prior under Alexander I. Although the Russian nobility had been westernized decades earlier, the Russian diplomat and poet Aleksandr Griboedov describes the peasantry as being a “different tribe, wild, incomprehensible, and strange.” For many Westernized Russians, the Caucasus appeared exotic and foreign as it lacked the European lifestyle that the nobility had grown accustomed. Encounters with the Russian peasantry and especially non-Europeans in the Eastern Frontier helped define the nobility’s notion of the “us” in contrast to the uncivilized and wild “other.” The underlying question for Russia’s identity crisis was whether its future was with the West, within Russia, or somewhere else entirely. For this reason, the “other,” be it the West or East, was critical in the formulation of what Russians viewed themselves as being different than.

The task of understanding Russian literature’s relation to the Caucasus and how it played into Russian identity and empire proves difficult to ascertain, with arguments ranging from using history as a context for study to others taking an approach that incorporates Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism into contemplation. The issue with the historical approach is that it does not take into consideration the contemporary Russian response to literary depictions of the Circassians because it is not able to approach the delicate topic of identity and images without first regarding how Pushkin and other writers’ stories affected Russian popular opinion. Equally, Orientalism, developed by Edward Said, proves unable to meet the task, with Susan Layton arguing that by using Orientalism as a method of studying Russian perceptions of the Caucasus, we impose a modern ideology upon the conquest by creating an “us” versus “them” mentality. Yet despite Layton’s apprehension towards using this sort of manner to study Russian images of the Caucasus, there is value in taking on elements of Said’s Orientalist approach when incorporating it into the historical context of the conquest, because understanding how Russians self-identified relies very heavily upon how Russians saw themselves as being European, which made them unlike the Asian Circassians. As Layton points out, Pushkin and Ler- montov did not write with the intention to “control them [the Circassians]” through literature, but the writers works do reveal that they were actively aware of the Russian nobility’s identity as European being in contrast to the Circassian savagery. The presentation of the opposing values and manners of life in Pushkin’s poetry create the sense for the

2 Ibid., 82.
3 Ibid.
Russian reader that they fundamentally differ from the foreign “other.”

While Pushkin was not the first Russian to write about the Caucasus, Scotto argues that his poem “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” had the biggest impact on how Russians perceived the area and marks the beginning of a period of “intensive appropriation of the region by Russian literature,” as writers began to flock to the Circassian mountains. Pushkin himself came to the region after writing a series of incendiary poems which, upon reaching the ears of the Tsar resulted in him being ordered to leave the capital for a provincial town in Ukraine on the charges of writing illegal revolutionary literature. In 1820, Pushkin travelled in the Caucasus after having left Ukraine on the suggestion of family friends. In comparison to Russia, Pushkin found the Caucasus more freeing and less constrictive than St. Petersburg, as it lacked both the highly regimented noble life and the political oppression from the Tsar’s agents and censors. This sense of gained freedom is crucial to Pushkin’s image of the Caucasus, as it became his refuge from Russian society. Serving as inspiration to his poetry, the mountains and plains of the Caucasus became a “mount of inspiration” to a generation of writers, including Mikhail Lermontov and later Leo Tolstoy that followed him in seeking out the Caucasus as a place of freedom and nature.

Before delving into Pushkin’s depiction of the Caucasus, it must be noted that Pushkin did not fully take in all of the ethnography and geographical locations of the Caucasus into consideration when writing “Prisoner of the Caucasus.” Layton argues that Pushkin mentally confuses the different peoples, locations, and even customs and religions of the Caucasus, forming one single imaginative picture of Caucasian life. Even the term “Circassian,” which Pushkin uses to describe the tribe that take his narrator captive is not completely correct, as the people from the Northwestern Caucasus, where Pushkin largely resided and wrote about, identified themselves as being Adyge. While the northwestern portion of Circassia was a predominantly Muslim region, which Pushkin highlights in his poem, it did not offer the same sort of religious-based resistance that Chechnya or Dagestan, the two regions most targeted by the Russian military, put up. Disregarding the actual differences between the various peoples of the Caucasus, Pushkin creates a romantic and idealized “Circassian” that only exists within literature and the imaginations of the readers at home in Russia who may have never been the region and know very little about it. Yet for the purpose of this paper, the terms Circassian, mountaineers, and Caucasians will be used as it is the terminology that Pushkin utilized.

Even with subsequent scientific and ethnographical studies that resulted from the expansion of empire in the Caucasus, which includes Semen Bronevskii’s book A New Geography and History of the Caucasus published in 1823, the romantic image of the Circassian continued to live on within the Russian popular imagination. The ensuing popularity of Pushkin’s reimagining of the Caucasus certainly says something about the power of literature being able to sway people’s views and beliefs about certain parts of the world. Prior to Pushkin’s poems about the Caucasus, this part of the world remained relatively unknown to most Russians. After Pushkin published “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” the Eastern frontier saw an increase in interest and travel by Russians who were enamored with Pushkin’s poetic description of the mountains.

Pushkin’s poem tells the story of a young officer who was captured while on duty and taken as a prisoner to a small mountain village in the unoccupied Circassian territory. As the victorious Circassians march their bound and half-alive Russian prisoner through the village, the townsfolk bombard him with curses and angry outbursts in a degrading scene that is reminiscent of the kind of victory parades of Ancient Rome. The allusion to a Roman styled spectacle in “Prisoners” has some relation to how the Russian high command in the Caucasus saw themselves as Roman generals combatting and bringing civilization to the barbarians on the fringe of the empire’s borders. Pushkin inverts the image of the glorious procession by reversing the roles of the savage as the victor and conqueror as the captive, thereby changing the event from a moment of celebration into one of shame, degradation, and dishonor on the part of the Russian officer. To further increase the narrator’s humiliation of being a prisoner, the Circassians leave the Russian outside on a hil overlooking the village with his wounds from the ambush left unattended. For an officer and a noble accustomed to European codes of honor and ethics in warfare, the Circassians’ disregard for the Western conception of the rights of prisoners reflect their status as savages in Pushkin’s poem. Charles King elaborates on this by saying that the official position of the Russian command was to “use barbaric tactics against the barbarians themselves,” revealing

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 86.
that the military viewed the Circassian opposition to Russian rule as akin to barbarity. Since the mountain tribes did not fight in a European manner, the situation forced Russia to fight in an equality brutal fashion.\textsuperscript{12}

Yet for the Circassians, Pushkin suggests that severity was a way of life and a part of their nature. The festival scene in the poem highlights this fact exactly, where a group of men release their anger out on slaves. The Russian prisoner reasons that the Circassians exist primarily to wage war and that peacetime bores them, resulting in them turning towards “crueler sport.”\textsuperscript{13} Although the brutality that makes up mountaineer life serves as a shocking reminder to Russian readers that these people are not like “us,” Pushkin comes to respect Circassian strength and the pride they feel in their martial ability. Pushkin’s praise of the Caucasus peoples drastically differs from earlier accounts that vilified the Circassians as a band of violent tribesmen.

Contrary to Eighteenth Century expeditionary reports that describe the Caucasian mountaineers as being murderous pillagers and brigands,\textsuperscript{14} Pushkin’s Circassians are reimagined and endowed with a noble spirit that manifests itself in their strength and independence as a proud warlike people who live simplistic lives in the mountains. In the several decades that followed the Russian explorers’ remarks about the Caucasus that they delivered to Catherine II, what changed was not the Circassians themselves, but the manner by which they were perceived and the individuals who were studying them. Considering that under Catherine II, the Russian Empire expanded its borders into Europe and further into Asia, the military expedition in the Caucasus carried with it a different objective, consequently coming to different conclusions than Pushkin on the nature of the Circassians. The expeditionary forces were faced with political and military questions like how the Circassians would respond to Russian expansion, tactical movements, and potential for trade, among other matters crucial to Russia’s involvement in the Caucasus. While Layton provides little information on the expedition’s experiences in the Caucasus, their objective was not artistic, but rather practical.

Pushkin, unlike the soldiers sent out on an expedition, did not go to the Caucasus for economic or military reasons, but rather to experience the exoticness of frontier life. As stated previously, Pushkin found the Caucasus to be not only immensely freeing and invigorating in comparison to St. Petersburg, but also a source of inspiration. It was in the Cauceses where he first encountered the works of Byron, who had a tremendous impact on the young poet’s life.\textsuperscript{15} Byron’s depictions of the valiant Albanian’s conflict with the Ottoman Empire in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage served as a creative muse for Pushkin’s reimagining of the Circassians as a noble cast of savages defending their mountainous homes.\textsuperscript{16} Like the Albanians, the Circassians were also highlanders living in the remoteness of their mountain homes, independent of outside powers and influences, aside from their adoption of Islam and other aspects of Turkish culture centuries ago. The Circassian’s defense of their homeland and ways of life from invaders impressed upon Pushkin the sense that the Caucasian peoples felt proud of their independence from foreign domination.

The Circassians’ status as a warrior people is fundamental to Pushkin’s imagining of the notion of Caucasian freedom in that their very livelihood depended on continual conflict. Pushkin stresses that the Circassians’ natural occupation is war and that they are ready at moment’s notice to ride off to fight in order to preserve their way of life. While the Circassians’ inclinations towards violence have already been touched upon, warfare provides the mountaineers with an outlet for their natural propensities. Being that Pushkin claims that their natural state is in conflict, warfare affirms Circassian existence. In reality though, warfare was a constant source of survival for the Circassians, as their lands possessed very little resources, meaning that raiding the steppes to the north of the Caucasus was a viable method of securing food and goods.\textsuperscript{17}

In Pushkin’s depictions of Circassian life, war and violence is intertwined in every aspect. At several points, Pushkin describes the noble Circassians mounted on their steeds in armor as they ride off to another raid or the daring nighttime ambush on Cossack outposts. Even in village life, martial ability is praised above all else, which is shown when the young women sing a folk song, which Pushkin created entirely for the story, celebrating a Circassian raid. Above all else, Pushkin’s Circassians value war and the glory it brings them, such as the pride they felt by taking the narrator captive because they admire his courage and indifference to their savagery.\textsuperscript{18}

By positing warfare as the essence of Circassian nature, Pushkin’s tribesmen affirm their existence through conflict and fighting. Russia’s subjugation of the Caucasus, the “putting aside the arrows of war” as Pushkin terms it,
renders their purpose as a nation invalid, making them another subject under Russian imperial rule.\textsuperscript{19} Contrasting Pushkin's certitude about the Circassians' purpose, the raison d'etre for Russian nobility appears less clear than that of the mountaineers. Despite giving the reader only a small amount of information about the narrator's relationship with Russian society, it is extremely telling of how life in St. Petersburg dynamically differs from life in the Caucasus. For the narrator, society had been nothing but a source of grief, betrayal, and anger, where his activities consisted of dueling, drinking, romancing, and intrigue. The narrator reminisces of the arguments and fights that he had with others at home in Russia; however, the sort conflict the prisoner engaged in lacked the danger and excitement of the Circassian's struggles for independence. Without the sort of existential threat to their lifestyle, the Russian purpose becomes much more superficial and inherently lacking in meaning in comparison to the natural man of the Caucasus. By living in closer connection to the perceived European idea of a natural state, the Circassians lack the sorts of social constrictions and etiquette of the Westernized Russian nobles, which is what Pushkin means by the term Circassian freedom; the freedom from the lack of social and political constraints placed upon the individual by society and the state.

Despite the freedom the Circassians experience through war, Pushkin gives insight into their experiences during peaceful times. When all of the warriors leave the village on a raid, we see the daily life of the Circassians; great-grandfathers smoking while the young women work and sing.\textsuperscript{20} Pushkin also describes the village children as during peaceful times. When all of the warriors leave the village on a raid, we see the daily life of the Circassians; great-grandfathers smoking while the young women work and sing.\textsuperscript{20} Pushkin also describes the village children as being "naked, dark skinned," which is the first instance of any racial distinctions of the Circassians, where they had previously all been cultural and religious. Another difference was that the Russians perceived Asians as being a people who survived only through pillaging and hunting;\textsuperscript{21} however Pushkin shatters this belief by referencing that the villagers tended to their fields during the day.\textsuperscript{22} Through breaking the Russian stereotype of Asians being too savage and uncivilized to farm, Pushkin brings his readers closer to the Circassians and leaves them with the understanding that they are capable of civilized to some degree. In another instance of this, Pushkin relays a story of the hospitality given to a warrior upon returning from battle by a different village as he makes his way home. Keeping in mind the question of Russian identity, the inclusion of these vignettes of Circassian life serve as a reference point by which the nobility is able relate them to the simpler element of their society, the peasantry, who was often regarded as equally foreign as the Circassians. Like the Circassians, the Russian peasantry was seen by many urban nobles as uncultured and backwards rural dwellers. By relating Circassian agriculture and hospitality to the Russian serfs, Pushkin draws a parallel between their lives and experiences.

For his Russian readers, the Circassian with his bow and his exotic festivals and mannerisms seem completely foreign when compared to the high society life that both Pushkin and his narrator come from. Layton even cites one Russian reviewer by the name of Nikolai Grech as having said that "Prisoner of the Caucasus" sends the reader to a "poetic land which saw Prometheus's suffering and the sojourn of the Greek Argonauts.\textsuperscript{23} With reviews like this, it is no wonder that many young Russian nobles imbued with "daydreams about the Caucasus's pristine terrain and valiant tribesmen" joined the military in order to travel to the Caucasus and experience the robust Circassian freedom.\textsuperscript{24} Mikhail Lermontov even states that at the military academy in St. Petersburg, Pushkin's "Prisoner of the Caucasus" was read more frequently than the officer training materials.\textsuperscript{25}

Yet for many of these young and idealistic officers who fled to the Caucasus, life there did not resemble Pushkin's poem. Instead, the freedom they sought was replaced with highly regimented military life and bureaucracy. While expecting valiant battles with the Circassians and free time to explore nature, the majority of the soldiers' time spent was in waiting.\textsuperscript{26} The misjudgment of these young military men obsessed with the romantic Caucasus resulted from Pushkin's poetic depictions and his own overestimation of the threat that the Circassians posed to Russia. Although depicted as bloodthirsty savages who attack any foreigner, the reality was that for the larger part of the northern Caucasus, where the Russian administrative machine was fully functioning, very little conflict actually took place and was not seen as a primary threat in terms of Russian foreign policy.

In 1817, Russia began its first serious push into the Caucasus, which would spark a conflict that officially lasted until 1864, although opposition to Russian occupation continued on into modern times. In terms of foreign policy, the guiding factor in Russia's actions was, as Paul Valliere contends, an Eastern Question.\textsuperscript{27} Tsar Nicholas I is famously

\textsuperscript{19} Pushkin, "Prisoner of the Caucasus," 147.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{21} Layton, "Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies," 86.
\textsuperscript{22} Pushkin, "Prisoner of the Caucasus," 136.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Layton, "Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies," 91.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
attributed as having referred to the Ottoman Empire as the “sick man of Europe,” and, after a series of disastrous wars and financial hardships, it had become apparent that the Ottomans were in decline. Waning Turkish power and influence provoked Russia to look more carefully at its borders and dealings with the Turks in the Black Sea region, as this area was Russia’s primary trade outlet to its partners in the West. For this reason, Russia saw itself as having the potential to step up and become the primary and dominant power in the area. While Persia claimed a significant portion of the Caucasus prior to making territorial concessions to Russia at the conclusion of the Russo-Persian War, the Ottomans had the greatest influence in the region due to their close proximity and religious and cultural ties to the Circassians. The campaign in the Caucasus that Pushkin’s narrator is a part of must be viewed as an operation intended to remove Turkish influence and presence in the region in order to establish Russian imperial rule. Because of this, Layton rightly contends that Pushkin overplays the threat posed by the Circassians towards Russia and that the antagonism between the two comes not from the Caucasus, but from Russia.

Pushkin’s arrival in the Caucasus took place three years after the beginning of the brutal campaign of subjugation by General Aleksey Ermolov, whose name to this day conjures up hatred from people in the Caucasus. Charles King describes Ermolov as being “the quintessential frontier conqueror” and having led an extensive campaign of terror in an attempt to break the Circassians and bring them under Russian rule. The policies undertaken by Ermolov and his officers consisted of a series of systematic deportations, destruction of villages, kidnappings, and mass killings, which became the blueprints for Russia’s further expansion and the removal of native peoples in the Caucasus in the years that followed. As an esteemed veteran of the Napoleonic Wars and a skilled artillery commander, Ermolov brought with him modern firepower, tactics, and technology, and in the process, made the battlefield completely uneven for the Circassians. While Pushkin refers to the Caucasus mountaineers’ ancestors as being related to Mongols and even refers to the horsemen riding off to war as a horde, the only military action the reader is presented is the story of the stealthy Circassian sneaking up on a drowsing Cossack guard at night. Considering that the Russian and Circassian irregular guerilla forces were unequal in terms of technology and ability, the resistance to occupation transformed into a full on guerilla war for the Circassians.

Guerilla ambushes and nighttime raids changed the dynamic of Russian warfare from the open fields combined arms European model that arose during the Napoleonic Wars to a smaller scale which emphasized a series of forts where mobile Cossack units could be deployed to engage raiders. Yet this method was complicated by the Circassians’ development of alternative strategies to raid forts using stealthier means. While Pushkin praises the Circassians’ martial abilities and cunningness, the effects prove degrading, and in the long run, deadly. Following the triumphs of the Napoleonic Wars, Russian military machismo was at its zenith, and having been accustomed to that style of warfare, the frustration and the uncertainty that comes with guerilla warfare caused resentment amongst the Russian and Cossack ranks and a tendency to associate the mountaineers with negative traditionally feminine characteristics such as cowardice and lacking honor. The gendering of the “other” plays a prominent role in Said’s Orientalism argument, which purports that while weak, the “other” poses as a dangerous threat to “us.” In Pushkin’s “Prisoner,” the Circassians certainly prove themselves as a capable foe to the Russian occupiers, but their methods of combat can be considered stealthy, treacherous, and scheming in comparison to the Russian forces. Equally, the behavior of the Circassians at the Bairam festival that Pushkin vividly describes can also be viewed as a gendering moment, where tribesmen decapitate slaves because they lacked emotional restraint, a characteristic noble males would be expected to take into account. The narrator contemplates the Circassians violence and his own past of fighting duels, but remarks that his were fought under a code of honor that demanded that he receive satisfaction from a wrong doing, all of which have been constrained and determined through a chivalrous code. The behavior of the Circassians lacked the honor and dignity of the European model and resulted from an utter lack of restraint, which was codified in the European noble’s honor system, further dividing the line between the “us” and the “other.”

The mythos of the feminine Circassian “other” which Pushkin helps create dynamically opposes the masculine image of the Russian officer. This feminine force is represented by the Circassian maiden character that falls in love with the officer during his imprisonment. Layton argues that the village girl’s love for the Russian is representative of a greater trend in Western literature that was inspired by colonial encounters, where a native woman falls for a European

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29 Scotto, “Ideologies of Imperialism,” 249.
31 Ibid., 16.
32 Ibid., 47.
33 Pushkin, “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” 139.
man even without speaking to him.\textsuperscript{34} This would suggest that the feminine character sees something inherently dominant and superior in the masculine European which causes her to gravitate towards him. While Layton disagrees with looking at Russian literary depictions of the Caucasus through a purely Orientalist lens, the relationship between the Russian and the native has much in common with how the Russian Empire viewed its relations with its dominions. The Tsar was the autocratic and patriarchal figure within Russia before whom the foreign non-Christian savages were expected to bow down.\textsuperscript{35} Through conversion to Orthodoxy and acceptance of Russian culture, conquered peoples could become Russian and accepted into the empire. This process of transformation parallels the actions in "Prisoners," whereupon the maiden accepts that her Russian lover could not reciprocate her love and drowns herself to become Russian. Suicide by drowning had become embedded in the Russian literary tradition since its origins in Nikolai Karamzin’s “Poor Liza,” and by ending her life in such a manner, it Russifies her in a literary sense, making the Russian reader empathize with her and pity her tragic situation of having been brought up amongst the savage Circassians. At the moment before her death, the narrator begs her to leave “this terrible country together,” to which she declines by saying that he has already given her happiness.\textsuperscript{36} By committing suicide, the maiden rejects her Circassian birth in favor of loving the narrator, but because of their different backgrounds, they are unable to be together in the end. Here, Pushkin appears to be suggesting that if real Russian feeling and emotion can be conveyed to the savages, then they will give up their native ways in favor of the apparent superiority of Russian life, culture, and art.

The maiden’s death heralds the metaphorical death of the Caucasus by the hands of the Russian Empire. In his epilogue, Pushkin glorifies the conquest and subjugation of the Circassians using violent language and comparing the destruction in the Caucasus with the likes of the Black Death.\textsuperscript{37} His accounts of the slaughter in the mountains horrified many of his readers, with one veteran of the 1812 campaign and literary critic by the name of Petr Viazemskii writing in a letter that “poetry should never be the ally of butchers.”\textsuperscript{38} In that same letter, Viazemskii ponders whether Russia’s mission in the Caucasus was to spread Enlightenment or senseless slaughter. Despite Viazemskii’s objections to the violent measures taken in the Caucasus, the official Tsarist purpose for Russia’s expansion into the Caucasus was earlier discussed as being based around the Eastern Question in Russian politics, but the campaign that Ermolov and his following successors waged sought to establish a modern administrative system to ensure the safety of trade in the region with its close ally Persia.\textsuperscript{39} Pushkin sent his brother a letter in 1820 that celebrates the work that Ermolov has done in the region by stating that the roads are safer for travel and that he hopes that through further expansion, closer ties with Persia and India will be made.\textsuperscript{40} In the Caucasus, Russia experienced its first encounter with modern imperial rule, as the policies carried out in the Black Seas region represent a first for Russian imperial rule.

Historian Charles King places responsibility of Russia’s becoming a modern imperial power in terms of the methods used to subdue native peoples and the incorporation of conquered lands into a centralized state squarely on Ermolov.\textsuperscript{41} Prior to Ermolov, Russia’s approach towards the Caucasus had been to allow the native inhabitants to have autonomy and follow its own traditions of self-rule so long as they pledge loyalty to the Tsar. Autonomy had generally been the Russian Empire’s rule of thumb for the majority of its imperial possessions, as it eased the need for a large imperial structure and hierarchy of rule; however, in the case of the Caucasus, the Tsarist policies diverged from the past and are representative of the newly devised system. While citizenship remained a touchy topic in Russia because it was seen as a dangerous Western European Republican concept, in the Eastern provinces, a sort of proto-citizenship began to emerge through the Russian lead development of civic institutions that incorporated the local native nobility. However, this process proved difficult for Russia as the natives did not always take the European values that were being imposed upon them well.\textsuperscript{42} Russia’s Eastern provinces proved difficult to incorporate into the European model of empire that it was trying to emulate, the same one that Great Britain and France had been implementing in Africa and East Asia. Further frustrating Russia’s efforts in the Caucasus, the empire’s relative success in achieving stability in Finland and the Baltic provinces left authorities questioning why progress was stalled in Black Sea Region.

Interestingly enough, the Russian imperial approach to the Caucasus completely contrasts the situation of Finland under Tsarist Russia. Following the defeat of Sweden at the hands of Russia in 1809 during the Finnish War, Finland was

\textsuperscript{34} Layton, “Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies,” 87.
\textsuperscript{36} Pushkin, “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” 145.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{38} Layton, “Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies,” 88.
\textsuperscript{39} King, The Ghost of Freedom, 46.
\textsuperscript{40} Scotto, “Ideologies of Imperialism,” 249.
\textsuperscript{41} King, The Ghost of Freedom, 46.
transferred to Russian rule, which in turned established the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland. In an appearance in the Finnish Riksdag in 1809, Tsar Alexander I addressed the future of Finland within the empire by saying that he would rule Finland in accordance with its traditions and laws, allowing them full autonomy so long as they remained loyal to him. Like the Caucasus, Finland was also relatively backwards in comparison to more advanced Western nations; however, unlike the Caucasus, for the majority of Finland’s history, it had been under foreign rule and had not experienced the same sort of self-rule as the Caucasus peoples. Yet despite this, Russian imperial authorities argued that since Finland had been under Swedish rule for so long and the ruling elites were either Swedish or Swedish speaking Finns, the Finns would be capable of running their own affairs.

Conversely, Russia’s decision against granting the Circassians autonomy hits upon the question of whether or not Asians were able to progress historically like Europeans. The imperial authorities’ belief in the inability of the Circassians to progress historically has its origins in the theories of social evolution that were in vogue amongst Europe’s intellectual scene. In the specific case of Russia, the philosopher Petr Chaadaev contemplated Russia’s place in history and whether it, like Western Europe, was also capable of the sort of progress taking place in the West or doomed to a non-historical status like that of the peoples of Asia. Chaadaev concluded that Russia, like the Caucasus, was a nation forgotten by history and unable to move forward collectively. To many educated and Western-minded Russian intellectuals, Russia appeared to lag behind the West, as it still clung to increasingly antiquated social and political systems, namely the lack of political participation, the authority of the autocracy, and the institution of serfdom. Chaadaev’s foreboding assertion that Russia lacked the means to progress caused a wave of unrest within the Russian intelligentsia, dividing it internally between those who found Russia’s destiny in the West and those who looked inward to Orthodoxy and Slavic traditions, and resulted in Chaadaev being declared mentally insane by the court system. While the Russian intelligentsia debated the future of Russia, they generally considered the Caucasus as what Scotto refers to as a “blank [spot] on the map,” meaning that it had little to no significance in world affairs and historical progression.

The argument for Russia’s lack of history contended that the Caucasians’ social relationships had not progressed past familial and tribal ties, whereas the West had already moved from civil society into the modern state with a robust and active citizenry. From this arose the dynamic between nations with a history and those who were historical in themselves, which was differentiated by the prior being capable of progression while the latter existed as their ancestors had. The language that Pushkin uses in “Prisoner of the Caucasus” emphasize that the Circassians still retained every aspect of “their ancestral ways,” and that only through Russian domination that they will lay down their ancient mode of life and be assimilated into the Russian Empire. Assimilation could take place only after Russia had crushed any indigenous opposition, and once this process had taken place, then inoculation of Western values, administration, and values would soon follow.

In terms of empire, theories of social progress and history enabled the Tsarist authorities to justify expansion by claiming that their mission was to spread Enlightenment in order to help advance, which is typified by Viazemskii’s letter that questioned whether Enlightenment could be spread through the violence depicted in Pushkin’s work. For many young and liberal thinking Russians, the Caucasus represented the possibility for the fruition of their social and political ideals, which Yaroshevski provides examples for by describing the social policies of frontier administrators. In attempts to establish a civil society, provincial governors often followed the social philosophy of the Russian philosopher and historian Konstantin Nevolin, which sought to establish a trickle-down social order with the bottom rungs of the tribal society working in a hierarchy with the Russian imperial authorities at the leading position. Nevolin believed that Russians were naturally superior in terms of social and historical progression, and therefore, the Circassians would naturally follow the Russian lead. This same argument was also used for the incorporation of the Baltic provinces under a similar assumption that after time, small and backwards people within the empire would slowly be assimilated into Russian culture and society. The Circassian maiden in “Prisoners” provides a clear example of belief in the natural superiority of Westernized Russians, as she gives herself to the narrator and professes her undying love for a man with whom she can barely even communicate. Despite the Russian’s status as a being a prisoner of the Circassians, the true captive ends up being the young girl who selflessly sacrifices herself for the noble Russian officer may go free after having experienced his love.

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
50 Pushkin, “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” 147.
51 Ibid.
The reality of Russia's campaign to spread Enlightenment to Caucasus proved deadly for both the natives and the Russian military forces. The brutal and systematic destruction that Ermolov brought to the region set in motion resentment that still lasts to this day within Chechnya and Dagestan. Upon returning to the Caucasus in 1829, Pushkin faced the grim reality of the Caucasian War which he had glorified nine years earlier. In a travel journal entry, Pushkin notes that “The Circassians hate us. We have forced them from their pasturelands; their villages have been devastated, whole tribes destroyed.”

The deteriorating situation in Caucasus forces Pushkin to reconsider the methods used by Ermolov, seeing now that there may be a higher moral means to bring the Circassians under Russian control through conversion to Orthodoxy. On the contrary, religious differences between the Russian conquerors and Muslim strongholds in Chechnya and Dagestan proved inflammatory and a major source of resistance for the natives. Equally, conversion to Christianity did not earn the Circassians any more respect from the Russian authorities aside from the promotion to a slightly higher social standing in the frontier hierarchy, where pagans and Muslims occupied the lowest rung.

While under the imperial system, religion played a large role in the formation of non-Russian ethnic identities and place within the hierarchical system, other factors such as military service, lifestyle, and taxation were taken into account, which meant that only through adoption of Russian culture, religion, and language could the Circassians elevate themselves to even be considered Enlightened by Russian terms. This consequently meant the death of their native ways.

Pushkin's “Prisoner of the Caucasus” provided his contemporary readers with a temporary mental retreat from the superficialities and overbearing nature of Russian society to somewhere far removed from the Western world and closer to nature. His romantic Caucasus lived on within the Russian popular imagination and was the source of inspiration for other writers who sought to appropriate the “Circassian freedom,” alongside all of the youthful officers who joined the military enamored by his poetic waxing of this lost and natural world. Yet in the process of reimagining the Circassian as a noble savage living in nature, Pushkin creates a binary opposition between the Enlightened Westernized Russians and the tribal and vicious Asians. Playing greatly into the social theories and insecurities felt by Russian intellectuals about Russia's future, the Caucasus and its people in “Prisoner” provide the foreign “other” for which Russia's identity as a European power can be based upon. The expansion of empire and the direct contact with non-Russians allow for Pushkin to formulate this “other.” The continuation of the romantic image of the Caucasus bending its knee to Russia, as in the epilogue, affirms the acceptance of empire within Pushkin's “Prisoner of the Caucasus.”

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52 Scotto, "Ideologies of Imperialism," 250.

Bibliography


