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Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 3,
Number 1, Winter 2002 (New Series), pp. 81-88 (Article)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2002.0001>



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Reaction

Whose Cultures?

Daniel Brower

On a Sunday afternoon in May 1996, I attended the graduation exercises of the national ballet school of the Republic of Uzbekistan. They were held in the Navoi Theater of Opera and Ballet in downtown Tashkent. The building, only 50 years old, was showing its age, and the conductor of the small orchestra could have taken (or perhaps had taken) his retirement decades ago. No wonder, for state subsidies in the post-Soviet age have shrunk drastically (rumor had it that the ballet company kept on thanks to a gift from a Turkish entrepreneur, owner of the posh fast-food café recently opened just two blocks away). Still, I was impressed by the quality of the dancing, and by the size of the audience made up of classmates, families, and friends of the graduates. They were as ethnically diverse as Tashkent itself, with Uzbeks in large numbers, but also Russians, Tajiks, Tatars, and more still. The musical program was almost entirely Tchaikovsky, with only a smattering of 20th-century music. At the time, I went away thinking that empires come and go, but Tchaikovsky is eternal. Later, I concluded that Tchaikovsky survives because people over the generations can make of his music what suits them. President Karimov may not fancy classical dance, but he is aware of the international prestige attached to high culture. Cultural messages are malleable, at the hands of both producers and consumers.

This idea seems to me to offer a rewarding manner of interpreting the three essays in this Forum. Sara Dickinson takes the readers with Catherine on her great trek into exotic Crimea, accompanied by an incredible wagon train of European luminaries and ambassadors. Austin Jersild and Neli Melkadze bring us behind the scenes of the infant Tbilisi theater, where imperial might accompanies the delights of European drama and opera for an audience as much imagined as real. And Serhy Yekelchuk leads us across the historical landscape of Ukraine, where its semi-mythical heroes, like Rip Van Winkle, reawaken just in time to perform in wartime Ukraine's officially sanctioned epic as a "great people." These essays fall, each in its special way, squarely within the domain of cultural history. The reader is served up a wealth of cultural messages.

This manner of rewriting the history of empire has drawn considerable inspiration from the Orientalist paradigm proposed by Edward Said. When this approach has tended (as often is the case) to the dogmatic, it has had the

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 3(1): 81–88, Winter 2002.

consequence of privileging “Western” systems of colonial knowledge, foreclosing analysis of the varied sources of production of that knowledge and the vast contested terrain of its consumption. It has created, in other words, an image of virtually timeless cultural patterns of domination. Laura Engelstein, writing in a recent issue of this journal, found “culture, culture everywhere” in recent historical writings on Russia, and suggested it might be too much of a good thing. Her wish is that scholars “historicize the components of culture, revealing their ... openness to change.”¹ The warning is well taken, and applies very much to arguments about imperial cultures. The focus of my comments will center on this issue of cultural mutability as it emerges in the essays under review here. To look for cultural change is to look for cultural agency, to search, out of the “tangled wires of causality and interdependence” that Engelstein finds hidden beneath the concept of culture, for the producers and consumers to whom the cultural messages belonged – by authorial right or by appropriation.

Brought to the domain of Russian borderlands history not so long ago, the cultural twist to imperial history has proven remarkably fruitful. The reasons why are complex, but one factor at play is a certain underlying style of imperial governance that permeates colonial policies, practices, and even to a certain extent colonizer-colonized relations. In the very apt words of David Cannadine, imperial Russia belonged in the ranks of the “theatrical empires.”² I would add that Stalinism created (and borrowed) its own version of imperial theater, less tasteful but no less gaudy than its tsarist predecessor.

Tsarist empire-builders were less committed to this art than the British, but still knew how to put on an impressive show. Catherine II’s parade across New Russia to Crimea and back belongs among the great displays of imperial pretensions to grandeur, up there with the Indian Coronation Durbar of 1911. Dickinson plays upon this theme, noting the empress’s “self-conscious, theatrical progress” through Governor-General Potemkin’s man-made stage settings in New Russia, and along Crimea’s glorious, naturally landscaped backdrop. She gives due credit to Potemkin for his contribution to the success of Catherine’s cross-country, down- and up-river jaunt. She very perceptively observes that “even the least substantial of [his] creations could be appreciated as theater.” His efforts at overnight urbanization and settlement did have a certain false-front atmosphere, but they were “‘real’ as a symbolic demonstration of the Russian empire’s wealth and power” (Dickinson, 7). With a distinguished audience “de

¹ Laura Engelstein, “Culture, Culture Everywhere: Interpretations of Modern Russia,” *Kritika* 2: 2 (Spring 2001), 393.

² David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 130.

lighted to be duped” – and well enough educated in the style of the time to claim disbelief (the sardonic “Potemkin villages” being the best case in point) – Catherine’s message was bound to reach across Europe. That message, as Dickinson makes abundantly clear, emerged out of the ferment of ideas, images, and *bon mots* produced by her cosmopolitan traveling party.

Unlike the 1911 Durbar ritual, though, I find that Oriental exoticism was only one theme in the empress’s carefully stage-managed show of imperial might. I am not as persuaded as Dickinson that “[d]escriptions of Catherine’s trip to the Crimea stand as Russia’s first experiments with the systematic application of Oriental stylization to a specific landscape” (Dickinson, 22). She is careful to distinguish Western Europe’s Orientalism – *pace* Edward Said – from the outpouring of images and stereotypes generated by this cultural “production” of the new borderland. Catherine’s “enormous retinue” of courtiers, ambassadors, European men of letters, and even a few heads of state generated a veritable cacophony of comments and commentaries vividly summarized in the body of Dickinson’s essay. In that collaborative work, Dickinson favors the outpouring of the indefatigable aristocrat and purveyor of Enlightenment clichés, Prince de Ligne. It is easy to conclude that, for him as for his companions, Catherine’s voyage provided a marvelous excuse for philosophical ramblings, meditations on ancient Greece, and much more in the way of intellectual distractions.

Visions of Oriental delights were certainly part of the message. That is to be expected from an age newly enchanted by stories of *The Thousand and One Nights* and ornamental chinoiserie. But Catherine herself played up the Greek angle (classical and modern) with an eye to territorial expansion around the Black Sea. And Ligne himself sounded another prominent leitmotif, inspired by Crimea’s wondrous land. He and others were much fascinated, in a pre-Romantic manner, by visions of sublime nature (partly seen, partly wished for). Dickinson rightly stresses his “important role in the development of an imaginary Crimean geography” (Dickinson, 15). This latter message suggests the importance, in these various “readings” of Russia’s new conquest, of the contemporary vogue for natural history. In a recent conference paper, Edward Lazzerini aptly characterized these visions of Crimea as “images of Paradise.” Carried forward, this fascination drew European naturalists to launch scientific expeditions to Crimea and to settle there to create “a laboratory” for flora and fauna.³ Natural science had its own role to play in Catherine’s drama of imperial grandeur. One might easily conclude that her Crimean jaunt and its outpouring of cultural make-believe have as much to tell us of diverse forms of Occidentalism in Russia

³ Edward Lazzerini, “Images of Paradise: Crimea and the Fate of the Russian Empire” (paper presented at AAASS National Convention, Seattle, WA, November 1996), 6.

as of Orientalism. That in itself makes Dickinson's essay a worthy, as well as a delightful read.

A similar mingling of theatrical motifs emerged in the empire's Caucasus capital. Jersild and Melkadze take Russian colonial theatricality literally in delving into the origins and impact of the Tbilisi Imperial Theater. Theirs is a study in cultural products and participants, from the creators of a Western-style Georgian cultural world to its (purported) consumers. The authors stress throughout their essay that Russian empire-building in the East brought with it policies "to promote and foster rather than curtail cultural expression" (Jersild/Melkadze, 28). They present the reader with an impressive array of "cultural products" that resulted from the empire's cultural politics. Soon after the theater, founded in 1845, came a Georgian press, books, library, and museum. In the 1860s, plays appeared written by Georgian playwrights and performed by Georgian theatrical companies. Ultimately, these new manifestations of Georgian culture, like the legendary *jinni* let out of the bottle, created unexpected and – for the imperial lords – subversive stories of a Georgian national folklore and visions of a national identity. The consumers had become producers in their own right, and new forms of cultural politics shifted toward national politics.

Just what the theater embodied for Russian colonizers and the colonized (Georgians, Armenians, and also the mountain peoples in that multi-ethnic city) is a question that the authors might have explored more deeply. They are clear that "civilization" and the "civilizing process" were real cultural manifestations of the colonizers' presence, and that they quickly became instruments for "the emergence of a [Georgian] cultural voice ... previously unexposed" to these elixirs of progress (Jersild/Melkadze, 46). They note that "[t]heater in Russia, as in Europe, historically served as a symbolic representation of the social order" and of the ruling dynasty (Jersild/Melkadze, 31). Yet somehow it was also a forum for invention and innovation on the part of the colonized. Their argument assumes cultural dialogue, not domination; Orientalism has no explanatory force in their interpretation. Georgians (albeit planted in the middle of the "East") very soon make up their own plots and (ultimately) "take over" the theater. Cultural malleability is the key concept in their study, for which the Tbilisi Imperial Theater appears as both a location and an image for the mysterious processes of causality and interdependence to which Engelstein would like us to direct our attention.

Perhaps the "Russian ideology of empire" to which they refer in passing was not so monolithic and oppressive after all. We need to conceive of official (and officious) imperial practices and ideals in terms not of unanimity, but of diversity. Authoritarian and militaristically-inclined colonial officials had a long and venerable tradition to draw upon, but from the reign of Catherine II another, somewhat generous (or less domineering) version of this ideology emerged along

the eastern and southern borderlands. The authors quote an anonymous writer for a new Tbilisi newspaper who urges his readers in 1859 not to let the fledgling theater die, proclaiming that “the theater is a requirement of civilization (*grazhdanstvennost'*)” (Jersild/Melkadze, 35). From the era of Alexander II until World War I, appeals to *grazhdanstvennost'* conveyed a message for a colonial civilizing mission whose ultimate goal was to fuse borderlands and metropolis in a progressive (i.e., Westernized) empire. Its longevity was due in good part to its vagueness, encompassing a quasi-juridical vision of emerging civic-spiritedness among backward peoples, an idealized image of a model Germanic-type citizen, and a dream of civilization through shared, Western cultural values and tastes uniting the peoples of the empire (sharing, among other things, a love of theater). It constituted a sort of colonial ideology for a reformed, multiethnic, and orderly empire.⁴

Where did Shakespeare, Molière, or budding Georgian playwrights fit in? The Westerners' plays came endowed with the aura of “great works” (in Russian translation), but the Georgians came with their own language. In the hands of its possessors, “native” language proved a powerful tool (as the Soviet nation-builders discovered later). Jersild and Melkadze offer tantalizing clues to the unwitting encouragement given by the empire to Georgian cultural (and political) discourse. When Prince Vorontsov pontificated that “science and taste, and ... the refinement of [Georgian] morals” would flourish along with theater-going (Jersild/Melkadze, 37), he assumed that Georgia's cultural elite would become fluent in Russian. But when Georgians (and Armenians) set out to assimilate this theatrical tradition into their own linguistic world, they apparently encountered no obstacles from Russian officialdom. “[O]ur native language” resounding in “a single social place” to express “our entire life in all its wisdom and expectation” is how the Georgian writer Aleksandr Chavchavadze articulated the importance of theater for his people (Jersild/Melkadze, 38). Significantly, he also proclaimed the necessity to extend the name “Georgian” to all his people. An imagined national community in the making is how adepts of Benedict Anderson's theorizing would classify Chavchavadze's theatrical/cultural work-in-progress. Vorontsov, as all other progressive Russian colonial officials, lived and breathed an intellectual atmosphere of (selective) cultural pluralism. Little did they realize that they were helping to dig the grave of their empire.

Serhy Yekelchik would add Stalin to this list of unlikely subverters of empire. His fascinating inquiry into the emergence of stories of Ukraine's “heroic

⁴ Jörg Baberowski has recently made a strong case for an imperial civilizing mission on the borderlands in “Auf der Suche nach Eindeutigkeit: Kolonialismus und zivilisatorische Mission im Zarenreich und in der Sowjetunion,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47: 4 (1999), 482–504.

past" (once more within theater walls, as well in book form and on movie screens) in the years around the Great Patriotic War turns Soviet cultural politics into an arena of competing Stalinist script-writers. I find his reference to "imperial discourse" somewhat misleading, for his argument is about varieties of "historical [nationalist, in the occurrence] imagination." I admit to privileging hindsight here, since at the time no possible contradiction among these mythological constructs was imaginable in that monolithic ("totalitarian") state. Yekelchuk joins the ranks of critics of the model of Soviet totalitarianism. His search through the newly-opened archives, and his close reading of the literary publications of that period, give him solid evidence on which to argue his revisionist position. Dialogue (albeit *in camera*), not monologue, best characterizes his portrayal of Stalinist patriotism's incorporation of Ukrainian nationalist images and myths.

That the Soviet Union had in Stalin's time become a latter-day empire is for Yekelchuk a self-evident proposition. He is also persuaded (as are Melkadze and Jersild) that modern empires have offered a seed bed for the flowering of nationalist imagery. He even suggests that territorial labels such as "Ukraine" were "homogenizing and essentializing devices" useful both to colonizers and to "indigenous elites" seeking a "broad domain that their cultural knowledge qualifies them to govern" (Yekelchuk, 5). He assigns Ukraine's Stalinist-era intellectuals to this latter category. They believed it was possible to reconcile "the construction of socialism and the Ukrainian national cause" (Yekelchuk, 6). In other words, he is prepared to attribute to them a large dose of idealism, along with a readiness to accept the substantial rewards (material and political) that came with belonging to the Soviet Ukrainian elite.

One might, in terms of the essay previously discussed, think of them as occupying a position of mediators for their ethnic community similar to that of Georgian intellectuals of tsarist times such as Chavchavadze. However, with only a smattering of autobiographical materials (such as Dovzhenko's diary) to back up his sympathetic portrait of this elite, Yekelchuk must draw conclusions about their idealism from predominantly circumstantial evidence. This line of reasoning leads him to speculate that "the republic's ideologues" vehemently denounced anti-Soviet Ukrainian nationalists because they realized "the tensions within their own historical imagination" arising from their inability to "fashion a Soviet Ukrainian historical mythology" reconcilable with the great friendship of peoples (Yekelchuk, 24). One might also explain their vitriolic polemics more simply by attributing to them the personality traits of "cogs in the Stalinist ideological machine" (Yekelchuk, 6). The issue must remain unresolved for lack of evidence, but it certainly will not cease stirring heated debates among historians.

With these postulates laid down, Yekelchuk can proceed to unravel (or decode) the patriotic stories that Ukrainian intellectuals turned out between 1938 and 1945. Their “window of opportunity” was in truth brief. Yekelchuk explains its appearance as a natural outcome of the Politburo’s 1937 rehabilitation (in a manner of speaking) of the Russian empire, no longer that “prison of peoples” of Marxist-Leninist notoriety. The bell-weather of the shifting views of Ukraine’s colonial past is Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi, national hero made to order, it seems, for playwrights, such as Oleksandr Korniiichuk, and movie directors who wished to glorify Ukrainian historical exploits without appearing to undermine the Muscovite/Russian/Soviet heritage. This interpretive margin of maneuver is crucial to Yekelchuk’s argument, since it creates the mythical space within which he can insert the (slightly subversive) cultural production of these patriotic, Sovietized Ukrainian writers. He makes clear that the outpouring of writings and media works constituted the greatest dose of nationalist lore since 1918.

To crown this Soviet version of Ukraine’s heroic past, Yekelchuk points to the slogan of “great Ukrainian people.” His discovery of the widespread use of the term, claimed otherwise only by Russians, situates the wartime place of Ukraine on a lofty perch far above the Soviet *hoi polloi*. Of all the ambiguities inherent in Stalinist encouragement of Ukrainian nationalist mythologizing, this is perhaps the greatest of all. We know that Stalin’s wartime opinion of the Ukrainians was brutally derogatory (too many of them to join the ranks of deported peoples, he is supposed to have remarked regretfully).⁵ Perhaps the perpetuation of the slogan through most of the war is one other indication of the desperate straits in which the regime found itself, and of the determination of some Ukrainian intellectuals to proclaim for as long and loudly as possible their country’s heroic past.

The image of theatrical empire remains a useful tool in evaluating the tale that Yekelchuk tells. The need for glorious public spectacles was an integral part of Stalinist cultural politics. Actors and script-writers had an important role to play, and I can easily conceive of some of them actually believing in their creative independence. Yet in the end it was play-acting. Yekelchuk’s reliance on the concept of imperial discourse is ultimately a convenient as well as fruitful approach, since it is so compatible with the idea of a monolithic culture. The author concludes on this note when he calls the “friendship of peoples” the “foundational myth” of the Stalinist empire (Yekelchuk, 30). His essay is a major contribution to our understanding of the emergence of ethnicity/national identity within, and encouraged by, the empires of the tsars and the Communists. We can now appreciate, thanks to all three essays in this Forum, how elaborate and influential

⁵ Mentioned in passing in Khrushchev’s 1956 secret speech, quoted in Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 144.

were the cultural elements of Russian and Soviet empire-building, and how easily that very process of building turned toward these empires' ultimate collapse under the weight of nationalism.

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