

Russian Humanism of the early 1800s – Poetry, Revolution, and California (really!)

After the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, Russian humanists set their hearts on improving Russian society, particularly getting rid of serfdom and the absolute rule of the Tsars. Inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment and yet repelled by the violence of the French Revolution and the tyranny of Napoleon, many were attracted to the ideals of the American Revolution, particularly limited government in which individual freedoms were protected by law. Such ideas were severely repressed by the Tsar's government. For example, the text of the US Declaration of Independence was not legally published in Russia until 1863. (The Russian liberals were, of course, well aware that the United States, where millions of people were slaves, wasn't exactly living up to its ideals at the time.)



Pushkin

While the ideas of the Russian liberals were perfectly reasonable and could be well expressed by straightforward prose, the Russians often preferred to express their ideas in poetry, sometimes including extravagant imagery. The greatest Russia poet of this period, many Russians would say of any period, was Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837). Pushkin wrote his poem "Ode to Liberty" in 1817, when he was 18 years old. The poem was immediately banned by the government and Pushkin was sent into exile. Despite being illegal, the poem was widely circulated and often imitated. Russia had many secret societies devoted to circulating poetry and plotting the overthrow of the government. So, what was this poem that got so much attention?

The "Ode to Liberty" is just what the title says.

Pushkin: Ode to Liberty

Listless Cytherean princess, sing [Cytherean = Aphrodite]
No more. Begone out of my view!
But you, great scourge of tsar and king,
Proud Muse of Freedom, where are you?
Come rip my laurels off. Bring stones
And crush this coddled lyre. Let me
Sing to the world of Liberty
And shame that scum upon the thrones. [No surprise the Tsar hated this poem]

Reveal to me the noble path
Where that exalted Gaul once strode,
When you in storied Days of Wrath
Inspired in him a dauntless Ode.
Now, flighty Fortune's favored knaves,
Tremble, O Tyrants of the Earth!
But ye: take heed now, know your worth
And rise as men, ye fallen slaves!

[Pushkin scholars aren't sure who
the "exalted Gaul" was]

I cannot cast my gaze but see
A body flayed, an ankle chained,
The useless tears of Slavery,
The Law perverted and profaned.
Yea, everywhere iniquitous
Power in the fog of superstition
Ascends: Vainglory's fateful passion,
And Slavery's gruesome genius.

[50% of Russian were serfs]

Heavy on every sovereign head
There lies a People's misery,
Save where the mighty Law is wed
Firmly with holy Liberty,
Where their hard shield is spread for all,
Where in a Nation's faithful hand
Among mere equals in the land
The sword can equitably fall

[Calls for a constitution higher than any person]
[Protection of individual rights]

To smite transgression from on high
With one blow, righteously severe
In fingers uncorrupted by
Ravenous avarice or fear.
O Monarchs, ye are crowned by will
And law of Man, not Nature's hand.
Though ye above the people stand,
Eternal Law stands higher still.

But woe betide the commonweal
Where it is blithely slumbering,
Where Law itself is forced to kneel
Before the Masses, or the King.

[Pushkin is afraid of kings but also populists]

Here is the Man: witness he bears
To his forebears' infamous error
And in the storm of recent Terror
Laid down royal neck for theirs.

who may win elections, as Napoleon did,
but then ignore the Law, as Napoleon did]

King Louis to his death ascends
In sight of hushed posterity,
His crownless, beaten head he bends:
Blood for the block of perfidy.
The Law stands mute, the People too.
And down the criminal axe-blade flies
And lo! A ghastly purple lies
Upon a Gaul enslaved anew.

[Louis XVI of France guillotined 1793]

[ghastly purple = Napoleon]

You autocratic psychopath,
You and your throne do I despise!
I watch your doom, your children's death
With hateful, jubilating eyes.
Upon your forehead they descry
The People's mark of true damnation.
Stain of the world, shame of creation,
Reproach on earth to God on high!

[This was written in 1817, five years after
Napoleon's 1812 invasion which killed
about a million Russians.]

[Pushkin really doesn't like Napoleon]

When on the dark Neva the star
Of midnight makes the water gleam,
When carefree eyelids near and far
Are overwhelmed with peaceful dream,
The poet, roused with intellect,
Sees the lone tyrant's statue loom
Grimly asleep amid the gloom,
The palace now a derelict,

[Pushkin's lodging in 1817 looked out on
the Neva river and the palace where Tsar
Paul I had been murdered.]

And Clio's awesome call he hears
Behind those awesome walls of power.
Vivid before his sight appears
The foul Caligula's last hour.
In stars and ribbons he espies
Assassins drunk with wine and spite
Approaching, furtive in the night
With wolfish hearts and brazen eyes.

[Clio = muse of history]

[This section describes the murder of Tsar
Paul I in 1801. The Tsar was unpopular with
the military leaders, several of whom banded

And silent stands the faithless guard,
The drawbridge downed without alarm,
The gate in dark of night unbarred
By treason's mercenary arm.
O shame! O terror of our time!
Those Janissary beasts burst in
And slash, the Criminal Sovereign
Is slaughtered by unholy crime.

together and, apparently while quite drunk, bludgeoned the Tsar to death. Paul's son Alexander I, who was Tsar when Pushkin wrote the poem, forgave the killers and tried to cover things up. The fact that Pushkin knew the facts shows the coverup failed. Pushkin doesn't like Paul at all, but thinks this is a horrible way to run a country.]

Henceforward, Monarchs, learn ye well:
No punishment, no accolade,
No altar and no dungeon cell
Can be your steadfast barricade.
The first bowed head must be your own
Beneath Law's trusty canopy
Then Peoples' life and liberty
Forevermore shall guard your throne.

[Kings! Support constitutional monarchy!]

[Obey the Law!]

[You won't get murdered!]

It really is no surprise that the Tsar suppressed the poem. Nor is it surprising that generations of Russians have revered Pushkin. Russia has never succeeded in establishing the sort of liberal, law-abiding government Pushkin wanted. His perspective is still relevant for many people in Russia, and in lots of other places including the United States.

California

One of the most important of the secret societies was the Northern Society, which met in the offices of the Russian-America Company, the government supported private company which operated the Russian colony in California. In December 1825, these poet/conspirators, who included many young military officers, made a serious attempt to overthrow the government, the so-called Decembrist revolt. Their failure ended Russian government support for the California colony, which had been exposed as a nest of traitors. The fact that multiple copies of Pushkin's "Ode to Liberty" were found in the California company's offices got Pushkin into even more trouble.

The Russian-American Company had been chartered in 1799. Its business plan was to hunt seals and sea otters off the coast of California and sell the furs in China. This was very

profitable for a while. In 1812, a permanent base was established in Fort Ross, on the Pacific coast about 65 miles north of San Francisco, the northernmost Spanish base in California. At its peak, the colony had maybe 400 people, a mix of Russians, local Native Americans and a substantial number of Inuit hired from Alaska for their hunting skills.



Fort Ross today. In the 1800s there were more buildings After the hunting greatly reduced the marine mammal population, the base became unprofitable and was closed in 1841. Today the restored site is a state park.

For whatever reason, many of the young officers who adored Pushkin were interested in the new Russian colony in California. Perhaps it offered a new world far from the estates of the entrenched Russian aristocracy. Or perhaps business offered a way to make a living other than owning land or serving in the army. One particularly enthusiastic poet/revolutionary/officer was Dmitry Zavalishin (1804-1892). As a 19-year-old midshipman, he visited California in 1823-4 and was captivated by its possibilities. He later described the company's plan for settling California with freed serfs.

Zavalishin: For the development of secure colonization in California, the Russian-American Company proposed to recruit experienced agriculturalists, mainly with families; in order to find volunteers more easily, it was proposed to redeem them among serfs, and by no means were exiles to be sent as settlers. These volunteers would be contracted for seven years, counting a stay of five years on site. It was proposed that they be supplied with all necessities by the Company. If at the end of seven years they wanted to leave, they would be returned without delay; [but] if they wanted to settle permanently in California, everything that they had received would be given to them, and they would also be given a certain amount of land.

After Mexican independence in 1821, the company proposed that the Russian colony should ally with the Californios, Spanish-speaking Californians, to resist possible future US invasion.

Zavalishin: It is true that for some time the Californios labored under the delusion that European intervention in 1823 in the internal affairs of Spain would extend to the return to Spain of its colonies and that they would then enter into their former relationship with

Spain and receive subsidies, etc., but it was not difficult to show them that all of this was an unfounded hope and also to make them understand and realize that they faced one future—falling prey to either England or the United States, and most likely to the latter. It should be said that they feared this most of all. In their eyes, the Americans were heretics, and the specimens of United States citizens that they had come to know—adventurers and petty traders—had done little to recommend their nation. Furthermore, it was rumored that neither in Louisiana nor in Florida, which had recently been unfairly taken from Spain, had the United States recognized Spain's former rights to its landed possessions. As they themselves realized, almost the only means of deliverance from the terrible danger and at the same time from their disastrous situation, was union with Russia. Everything that they could have reasonably wanted would have been secured. Russia's several million Catholics were proof to the friars of her tolerance; the soldiers could be put in active service, and the permanent stationing of ships would increase the means of the inhabitants and stimulate the economy, making it more profitable, and so on.

[The claim that the Tsar had Catholic subjects was true enough. Zavalishin doesn't mention that most of them were in Russian-occupied Poland and hated Russia.]

Zavalishin: In case our government did not agree to annex this province, there still remained a way for it to defend itself against encroachment by the United States. For this there had only to be an expansion of the territory of the Russian-American Company's colony of Ross so as to position it between California and the boundary of the United States and make it an obstacle to the complete merger of California with the territory at 42° already ceded to the United States. It should be said that such a deal would have been liked more by the Californios than a complete annexation of the whole province. This [prospect] flattered them with the hope of preserving some degree of independence with the attendant advantages and without at the same time undergoing the disadvantages of defenselessness against the attempts of the Americans of the United States.

These were the dreams of the company's supporters. Before the unsuccessful Decembrist revolt of 1825, there was a small chance the Russian government might have been persuaded to support them. After 1825, there was no chance. The Tsar severely suppressed Russian liberals. Zavalishin himself was exiled for his part in the failed revolt. When the Tsar was eventually overthrown, the revolution produced leaders who did not share Pushkin's humanist ideals.

Of course, one can always wonder how the world would have been different if the 1825 revolutionaries had succeeded. They planned to free the serfs, establish a constitutional monarchy, and promote large-scale Russian settlement in California. It would have been a different world.

In 1994 the Russian cemetery at Fort Ross was repaired, with the Russian Orthodox church placing new crosses on the old graves. In the Russian Orthodox tradition, a grave should be in sight of a church. As you can see, these graves are in sight of the chapel.



Fort Ross as seen from Russian Cemetery. Picture taken two weeks ago.