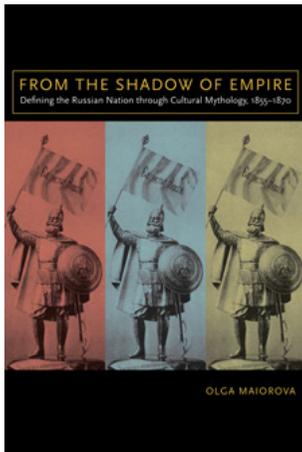


From the Shadow of Empire

Olga Maiorova, *From the Shadow of Empire: Defining the Nation through Cultural Mythology, 1855-1870*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2010, XV+277 pp.¹



One of the defining phenomena of the last few decades is the interdisciplinary alliance between literary scholarship and cultural studies. The main inconvenient facing this alliance has been the emphasis laid in cultural studies on the immediate present, to be contrasted with the long-lived affinity towards the past in literary studies. This is why doubts regarding the possible outcome of this scholarly encounter may still linger. However, thanks to books like *From the Shadow of Empire*, written by Olga Maiorova, American scholar of Slavic studies, one can assess the value of bringing culturalist insights into literary science and philological accuracy in the field of cultural studies. *From the Shadow of Empire* sets to investigate the unfolding of the nationalist project in the Tsarist Empire in the latter half of the 19th century. The book makes use of ideas and concepts elaborated by scholars such as Anthony D. Smith, Maurizio Viroli, Miroslav Hroch, Benedict Anderson, and others, and contributes an astute and sometimes bold reading of authors like Lev Tolstoy, Fedor Tiutchev, Fedor Dostoievski, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Turgeniev, N. Katkov, I. Aksakov, M. Pogodin, as well as of pieces of cultural discourse such as historical treatises, newspaper articles, elements of iconography and imperial protocol.

Olga Maiorova defines, in the Introduction, nationality as „a complex process of appropriation, negotiation, and contestation over the past, involving a broad range of actors”, and thus engaging a „collective memory” that it actively shapes (p. 13). The process of nation building never stops and it is even more active at a time of public discontent, such as it was in Russia in the wake of the Crimean War (1853-1856), after the ascension to the throne of the new Tzar Alexander II (1855) and during the Reform Era of the 1860s and 1870s. Maiorova’s thesis is that only now, during the Reform Era, the Russian nation finally emerges „from the shadow of Empire” and is being constructed polemically in a variety of imaginative ways, oftentimes by seeing the empire as the stage where the destiny of „Rus” (as many nationalists preferred to call it) unfolds. The ideological map of the period is very

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complex, „ranging from the romantic and religious nationalism of Ivan Aksakov and Fedor Tiutchev to the state and secular nationalism of Mikhail Katkov; from the imperial Pan-Slavism of Mikhail Pogodin to the federalism articulated by Nikolai Kostomarov; and from Stepan Gedeonov's chauvinistic justification for the empire's suppression of its non-Slavic population to Lev Tolstoy's ultimate denial of Russia's imperial mission" (p. 9). The author insists on the particularity of the nation-building process in Russia, different both from the colonial empires in Western Europe (as Russia had no overseas colonies) and from the small and politically marginalized nations in East and Central Europe (since Russia was by no means marginalized in the Russian Empire). Russians were, paradoxically, inclined to judge their own position within the empire as marginal because of the lack of social equality and also because of their century-long obsession with the European West, as is made clear in Ivan Turgenev's ideological novel *On the Eve* (1859, also a product of post-Crimea depressionism).

The first chapter of the book deals with the influence of the Crimean War on the patriotic imaginary. In the absence of mass participation to politics, the government was happy to provide the public with heroic images of the nation as a whole, coming together in battle. But this doesn't explain why, on the eve of the Crimean War, state propaganda massively uses recollections of the victory against Napoleon in 1813-1814, while dismissing the alternative propaganda images regarding the civilisatory fight against the Eastern „barbarian" (although its main enemy was the Ottoman Empire). As Olga Maiorova explains, this is an example of the „nationalisation of patriotism" (Maurizio Viroli), whereby the official line in political discourse shifts towards nationalism in order to gain a concentrated adhesion to a common cause. However, after the Russians' defeat in the war, writers sought new versions of representing the nation and of contradicting the official clichés. Thus, in his novel *The Cossacks* (1863), Tolstoy contrasts the state-endorsed image of the „heroic and submissive" Russian *muzhik* with a different version of „authentic Russianness": the fierce, energetic, independent and adventurous Cossacks in the Caucasus, fighting the Chechens out of a vital need for confrontation and not because they were so ordered by an abstract authority embodied in the ranks of an army.

In the second chapter of the book, Olga Maiorova analyses the „democratic commodity" (p. 12) that is historical mythology, dwelling on the singular nationalist myth of the foundation of Rus' by prince Riurik in 862. The chapter discusses extensively an iconographical national representation in stone erected in 1862 in Novgorod by order of Alexander II, namely the „Millenium of Russia" Monument. Although an example of state-endorsed nation building, the monument was not lacking in subtlety and ambiguities: for instance, its bell shape was meant to evoke at the same time the bell of the Romanovs (a dynastic symbol) and the cathedral bell of Novgorod, as a symbol of the independence of the Russian city from the tyranny of Ivan the Terrible. The chapter contrasts three political readings of the founding myth of the Russian state by summoning a foreign dynasty, the Varangians, „from across the sea". The Varangian legend had been used by Tzar Nicholas I as a testimony of the Russian people's „innate" obedience to authority,

ethnic tolerance and, more importantly, heartfelt devotion to the czar. But the journalist N.I. Kostomarov preferred to emphasize the first part of the legend, which presented the Russian tribes as bannishing the invading Varangians, a fact which showed, in his opinion, the primordial will to freedom and independent spirit of the Russians. The nationalist S.A. Gedeonov liked to believe that the Varangians were a West Slavic tribe, thus prompting to the political program of Pan-Slavism, which hoped that Russia would one time engulf all the Slavic nations in Europe. The third, the conservative Mikhail Katkov, sought in the founding myth the traces of an imperial „vocation” of the Russian people; he pointed that the Varangians had been summoned not only by Russian tribes, but by some Finnish tribes as well. Maiorova’s comparative analysis proves the versatility of historical mythology and the political predicament of any nationalist discourse that relies on myth.

The third chapter analyses the nationalist representations brought about by the Polish Uprising of 1863-1864 on all sides of the ideological spectrum. While some Russians were impressed by the resurrected nationalist spirit of the Poles, which they thought was lacking in Russia, others saw the suppression of the uprising as an opportunity for the empire to be „nationalized”. Manipulation of history was also at hand, since the state press used memories of the Great Patriotic War of 1812-1813 to justify the suppression of the Poles. The author dedicates most of this chapter to an analysis of the Tzar Alexander II’s symbolic gestures on several occasions, which show him as one of the great manipulators of Russian nationalism, an actor on the same par with the great writers and ideologues of the time. From choosing to coronate himself (in the aftermath of a lost war) on the day that celebrated the battle at Borodino (1812), to arranging the celebration of the Millennium of Russia to make him appear as a reincarnation of the mythical prince Riurik, and especially to encouraging myth-like representations of his escape from an attempt to his life in the spring of 1866, Alexander II appears as the master story-teller of his time. He speculated the growing nationalism of Russians to consolidate his autocratic regime and to endlessly postpone state reforms, thus perpetuating social and political conflicts that would never come to be effectively resolved.

The fourth and, in my opinion, best chapter of the book is a contextual and historical analysis of two literary works, Tiutchev’s poem „A horrid dream has been burdening us”, and Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace*. The metaphors in Tiutchev’s ode are traced to their point of origin in the journalistic and political texts of the time (the Polish struggle, described as a vampire’s resurrection). By this, the poet projects Russia’s destiny in an ahistorical and supratemporal horizon, within an apocalyptic landscape and a religious frame of reference. Even more complex is the reading of Tolstoy’s masterpiece as a discourse on the nation that comes to contradict official theses. Tolstoy’s philosophy of history informs a vision of the nation based on the instinct of community, maternal nurturing and the power to suffer, defying the worn up clichés of devotion to the dynasty and brotherly solidarity. Also, the novel uses metaphors of biological life such as that of the „beehive” or „anthill” in order to highlight the randomness that governs individual life, thus making collective (and political) life more a result of divine intervention than of „ideas” enforced by people. Drawing on a good deal of Tolstoy scholarship,

the author makes sure that the novelist's fatalism is not confused with political deceptionism, even though there are connections between the two, and this fact contributes to the accuracy and sharpness of the analysis in this chapter. At the same time, there are in the novel numerous instances of a discourse in the first person plural, functioning as a device through which the novelist includes his readership in a national community and also in the fictional reality of his prose: several concurring dates (for instance the date of the battle of Borodino), as well as the studied resemblance between the war tactics of general Kutuzov, the stern behavior in battle of prince Andrei, Pierre's allegoric dream and Platon's down-to-earth philosophy. Tolstoy constructs the nation as separated from the empire, but avoids the trap of aggressive nationalism by choosing suffering as a national identity trait: the nation has to redeem itself through mutual suffering and motherly love. This chapter is a good model of a literary analysis on a cultural theme, although the part about Tiutchev's poem functions differently than the one about Tolstoy's novel and could have been placed in another section of the book.

The fifth chapter discusses the „myth of spiritual descent”, which has to be differentiated from the myth of blood origins: it is the legend of receiving the Christian teachings from the Greek monks Cyril and Methodius, in the 9th century, which in the 1860s and 1870s became a justifying legend for Pan-Slavism. Neglecting all historical or linguistical inaccuracies, the nationalists used this common mythology to embark on an expansionist project that involved the cultural annexation of various Slavic peoples, both East and West European. The conclusion of Olga Maiorova's book is that the legacy of 19th century nationalism is heavy, as it has a bearing on antisemitism and the glorification of war throughout 20th century, even during the communist regime, enstating an antidemocratic tradition in Russia. The lack of a political space is a drawback of Russian life even today, Maiorova argues, when the policies of the regime encourage adversarial representations of the nation rather than admitting a plurality of points of view in the political discourse. The contemporary relevance of this study is obvious, but it does not limit its scope. Olga Maiorova's book is a fine piece of literary scholarship, with excellent input from cultural theory and illuminating results about the birth of late 19th century cultural nationalism in Russia.

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