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The Poet As Propagandist. A. S. Puškin and the Polish Powstanie Listopadowe of 1830: A Close Reading

Needless to say: Aleksandr Puškin is the epitome of Russian literature. Notwithstanding which ideology is ruling Russia, Puškin cannot be omitted, by reason of his literary, one might even say spiritual, importance he has to be integrated in the prevalent ideological system.

Thus, the proponents of bolševism when bolševism was the ruling ideology of Russia created *their* Puškin. Puškin the revolutionary, Puškin the democrat, Puškin the opponent of tsarism in whatever form it might appear. This necessitated that certain utterances and works by Puškin had to be ignored or passed by in silence.

One such work which has caused some trouble for ideologically committed interpreters and ideologists is Puškin's poem "Klevetnikam Rossii", written on the occasion of the Polish uprising of 1830, named by the Poles themselves Powstanie Listopadowe, since it started on the 29th of November 1830.

It can hardly be denied that Puškin here comes forth as a proponent of the policy of the tsar Nikolaj I, a policy which generally was looked askance at by the official Soviet Russia. It is an overtly political poem, defending the official policy on the Polish question, and may even have been written on commission, as it appeared in September 1831 in a special leaflet celebrating the victory of field marshal Ivan Paskevič over the insurgents, when Warsaw surrendered to him.[1]

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[1] Na vzjatie Varšavy. The leaflet contained three poems written by Puškin and V. A. Žukovskij. According to information given in the academic edition of Puškin's works of 1958 (*Polnoe sobranie sočinenij v desjati tomach*, izdanie vtoroe, Moskva 1958) the poem was written on the 16th of August 1831, that is ten days before the day when Warsaw actually was handed over to the Russian troops (on the 26th of August 1830).

In this year, when the 200th anniversary of A. S. Puškin is celebrated all over the world,[2] it seems fit to dwell for a time on this attempt by the great poet to achieve laurels as a political propagandist. Let us then try to make "Klevetnikam Rossii" the object of a close reading.

As appears from the title, the poem is an answer, a reaction, motivated by reactions in the West to the crushing of the Polish uprising, some tenth months after its beginning.

The Russian troops, and especially their supreme commander, Ivan Paskevič soon got a reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness. The Russian campaign was severely criticized in the West, and Puškin presumably was spurred to write his poem by the speeches of Lafayette and other members of the Chamber of Deputies in Paris.[3]

Even in far away Norway, the Polish uprising was the object of a considerable interest, which even inspired outstanding poets, like J. S. Welhaven in his poem "Republikanerne":

> Han viste sit Bryst,—hvor det var skrammet,
> af streifende Kugler, av Klinger rammet! —
> I Daarer! Det er Ostrolenkas Mærke!
> Har I vel fattet, hvor det kan værke?
> Det er ingen Lise for denne Kval,
> den kan ikke blunde for Sladder og Pral.
> Det er ingen Gjekk så vindig og svag,
> han sminker sig jo med mit dybeste Nag,

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[2] The article was originally conceived as a lecture in 1999 at the "November seminar" of the Department of Russian at the University of Tromsoe.

[3] It is interesting to note that also the Polish side criticized the policy adopted by the Western powers towards the Polish uprising of 1830. Thus Prince Adam Czartoryski, who commented on this question in a letter to general Karol Kniazewicz, maintained that: "revolucję belgijską jako 'legalną' i 'narodową' insurekcję w Polsce za 'nie przemyślaną' i 'przedwczesną', i podpowiadano, aby Polacy sami szukali ratunku w układach z Mikołajem, a nie w zwycięstwie nad wojskiem rosyjskim. Czartoryski nazwal tę grę 'niecną i niegodną' […] jeśli nie dadzą swojego poparcia, o które prosimy, imienia trudno znaleźć dla ich nieprzezornej i szkaradnej polityki." (cited after *Kronika powstań polskich* 1794-1944, Warszawa 1994, p. 126.).

min hedeste Bøn, mit eneste Gode,
er kommen på lallende Tunger i Mode. —
Til side, Drænge, Giver meg Rum
Himmelen har Stjerner, Natten er stum.

De saae paa hverandre. Han vandred sin Vei.
De havde Champagne, men rørte den ei.

Puškin seems to retaliate to what he interprets as "detractors of Russia" by stating a peculiar literary "Monroe doctrine", of the imperial Russian sphere of influence. He starts with a series of rethorical questions:

O čem sumite vy, narodnye vitii?
Začem anafemoj grozite vy Rossii?
Čto vozmutilo vas? volnenija Litvy?
Ostav'te: ėto spor slavjan meždu soboju.
Domašnij, staryj spor, už vzvešennyj sud'boju,
Vopros, kotorogo ne razrešite vy.

As we can see, the style is lofty ("narodnye vitii", "anafemoj grozite vy Rossii"), but at the same time the poet is somehow belittling his subject: What happens in Poland is merely "Volnenija Litvy" (just like the Hungarian uprising of 1956 in Soviet historiography was inevitably "vengerskie sobytija"). By shifting the focus from Poland to the faraway and less important Lithuania, he implies that the issue should be of less importance to Europe. The same is the case when Puškin plays the Slavonic card, implying that since Russians and Poles are linguistically closely related, the uprising and its subjugation is just an innocent little fight within the all-embracing family of Slavs. Anyway, the question is already closed by Fatum itself, "už vzvešennyj sud'boju".

It might perhaps be added that this excursion into Slavophilism on the part of Puškin seems somewhat peculiar in a chronological perspective, as the young Puškin liked to poke fun at the "slavenofily", Šiškov and his circle, "Beseda ljubitelej russkogo slova", whom he

called “slavenskie glupcy”.[4] Compared to those conservative lovers of the Slavonic roots, Puškin generally strikes one as a precursor of the “zapadniki”. But the Polish uprising evidently brought forth other qualities in him.

Puškin ties the Polish insurrection to the Lithuanian part of the old “Rzeczpospolita obojga narodów”. As we have pointed out, this probably is caused by his wish to diminish the dimensions of the uprising. Lithuania was the least important part of the Rzeczpospolita. But since it was also the one which—historically—was dominated by a non-slav people, it seems quite peculiar that he combines it so closely with his concept of the family of Slavs. Also it should be noted that it is not historically correct. The November uprising started as an officers revolt, when a group of young subalterns seized the Arsenal in Warsaw. Most of the big battles fought in this campaign are also to be found in the Kingdom of Poland, i. e. in the historically Polish parts of the Rzeczpospolita: Iganie Ostrolęka, Olszynka Grochowska etc.

Puškin goes on to develop this concept, and delves into details on the topic of the future relationship between the Slavonic peoples:

> Uže davno meždu soboju
> Vraždujut ėti plemena;
> Ne raz klonilas’ pod grozoju
> To ich, to naša storona.
> Kto ustoit v neravnom spore:
> Kičlivyj ljach il’ vernyj ross?
> Slavjanskie l’ ruč’i sol’jutsja v russkom more?
> Ono l’ issjaknet? Vot vopros.

The author here abandons the model of Slav harmony, to which he so far has stuck. On the contrary, he presupposes that the defeat of the Poles is a necessity for the further existence of the Russian state: The Slavonic rivers have to unite in the Russian sea, otherwise it will dry up. In other words: The amalgamation of the other Slavonic peoples into the Russian sea (and as a consequence their extinction as separate

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[4] Cf. *Slovar’ jazyka A. S. Puškina*, Moskva 1953, T. 4, entry “Slavenskij”.

entities) is a vital necessity for Russia. Probably a point of view to be definitely resented by the other Slavonic peoples; the more so as the Muscovites from a certain point of view may be regarded as slavicized fenno-ugrians rather than genuine Slavs.

In the comparison between Russians and Poles, Puškin gives the supremacy to the faithful Russians in preference to the snooty Poles. This is really the language of propaganda, and a rather coarse one at that. "Vernyj" is very positively loaded, "kičlivyj" has a pejorative ring.

Again Puškin here uses (with serious intentions) certain concepts which he earlier has ridiculed, or at least used in a very facetious way, like the denotation "ross" for Russian. Look how disparagingly he uses it about his fellow poet S. A. Širinskij-Šachmatov:

> I ty Slavjano-Ross nadutyj
> O besglagol'nik preslovutyj,
> I ty edva ne poblednel,
> Kak budto ot Šiškova vzgljada
> Iz ruk upala Petriada,
> I dikoj vzor ocepenel.

In the third stanza Puškin moves on to elaborate on the opposition "insiders versus outsiders". Russia and Poland are insiders. The peoples of the West are outsiders. Again, the high pathetic style is preserved, with plenty of Church Slavonic words and other words with a solemn ring:

> Ostav'te nas: vy ne čitali
> Sii krovavye skrižali;
> Vam neponjatna, vam cužda
> Sija semejnaja vražda;
> Dlja vas bezmolvny Kreml' i Praga;
> Bessmyslenno prel'ščaet vas
> Bor'by otčajannoj otvaga—
> I nenavidite vy nas...

Quite peculiar in this stanza is the juxtaposition of Kreml' and Praga, so peculiar as to make one ask if it has been prompted rather by metrical reasons than by reasons of meaning. Kreml', the age-old center of Muscovite statehood, and Praga, the ugly and ill-reputed workers' suburb of Warsaw. Certainly there can be no doubt which side deserves to be admired!

In the fourth stanza Puškin, after having explained matters, returns to rethoric questions of the same kind as in the introduction of the poem:

> Za čto ž? Otvetstvujte; za to li,
> Čto na razvalinach pylajuščej Moskvy
> My ne priznali nagloj voli
> Togo, pod kem drožali vy?
> Za to l', čto v bezdnu povalili
> My tjagotejuščij nad carstvami kumir
> I našej krov'ju iskupili
> Evropy vol'nost', čest' i mir?..

Here we have got an excellent example of how poetical and political argumentation repeat themselves from century to century. Napoleon is meant, but not called by name here (don't call the name of the wolf in the woods!). But if we look closer, we note that his name and that of Moscow could as well be substituted by the names of Hitler and Stalingrad.

Incidentally, the same argument could be used by the Polish side, flying its famous slogan from the time of the Polish legions in Italy: "Za waszą i naszą wolność!"

In the two last stanzas of "Klevetnikam Rossii" Puškin leaves the present day, to go on to future and describe the terrible lot to befall those who dare to defy Russia on the Polish question:

> Vy grozny na slovach—poprobujte na dele!
> Il' staryj bogatyr', pokojnyj na postele,
> Ne v silach zavintit' svoj izmail'skij štyk?
> Il' russkogo carja uže bessil'no slovo?

Il' nam s Evropoj sporit' novo?
Il' russkij ot pobed otvyk?
Il' malo nas? Ili ot Permi do Tavridy,
Ot finskich chladnych skal do plamennoj Kolchidy,
Ot potrjasennogo Kremlja
Do sten nedvižnogo Kitaja,
Stal'noj ščetinoju sverkaja,
Ne vstanet russkaja zemlja?..
Tak vysylajte ž k nam, vitii,
Svoich ozloblennych synov:
Est' mesto im v poljach Rossii,
Sredi nečuždych im grobov.

Again Puškin is back where he started, with a series of rethorical questions, himself giving the final answer in the concluding four lines, thus finishing the circular structure of the poem in an elegant puente formally as well as in regard to philosophical content: If the French politicians do not stop with their empty phrases, if they try to enter into military intervention in the Polish question, the great Russian people will see to it that their sons will end up in the Russian soil beside their precursors from la Grande Armée. The lofty, outspoken style of the author is here and elsewere in the poem effectively combined by the use of allusion and understatement. By alluding to the Russian victory over the Turks at Izmail in the delta of Danube (1790), Puškin alludes to the power of the Russian arms, and tells us that defeat is certain not only to the French, but to anyone who tries to defy Russia. Certainly he also has in mind the popular saying ascribed to field marshal Kutuzov, the chief architect of the victory of Russia over Napoleon: "Pulja—dura, a štyk—molodec".

In the final stanzas of "Klevetnikam Rossii" Puškin creates a continuum of purple patches, a lofty salute to the power and glory of imperial Russia.

As we have shown, the poem may be characterized as a propaganda piece, an interpretation which is supported by the mode of publication. But most likely it also reflects sentiments which were genuinely felt by Puškin at the time when "Klevetnikam Rossii" was conceived. Similar

notes can be heard in the poem written immediately before “Klevetnikam Rossii” (“Pered grobniceju svjatoj!” (On Kutuzov)) and immediately after it (“Borodinskaja godovščina”), as well as in some of his letters from the same time.[5]

Thus, the poem is part of what may be called the imperial theme of Puškin’s literary oeuvre. “Klevetnikam Rosssii” strengthens the reader in the belief that Puškin despite his somewhat troubled relationship with the establishment of his Russia, was a faithful son of the Empire. He may pity the victims of the despotic politics of tsarism, but still seems to recognize their tragic fate as an unavoidable necessity for the progress of Russia. For instance in “Mednyj vsadnik” he pities the poor Evgenij, crushed by the consequences of the policy conducted by Peter, but his tribute to Peter and his work nevertheless deafens the cry of the unhappy madman:

Ljublju tebja, Petra tvorenie!

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[5] Cf. letter to E. M. Chitrovo, of 9th of December 1830 and of 9th of February 1831, and to P. A. Vjazemskij, of 1. of June 1831. Erkki Peuranen purveys a detailed analysis of these letters in his academical dissertation *Lirika A. S. Puškina 1830-ch godov. Poėtika: temy, motivy i žanry pozdnej liriki*. Jyväskylä 1978 (pp. 64-74). After having drawn attention to Dobroljubov's mention of Puškin's warlike (brannye) poems of the given period, Peuranen goes on to cite several passages from the letters to Chitrovo (who, by the way, was the daughter of field marshal Kutuzov), citations which amply demonstrate that Puškin was, if anything, even more aggressive and warlike in his private letters than in his poems. E.g. ”Izvestie o pol’skom vosstanii menja soveršenno potrjaslo. Itak naši iskonnye vragi budut okončatel’no istrebleny […] my možem tol’ko žalet’ poljakov. My sliškom sil'ny dlja togo, čtoby nenavidet’ ich, načinajuščajasja vojna budet vojna do istreblenija – ili po krajnej mer dolžna byt’ takovoj […] No na etom svete vse zavisit ot slučaja, i 'delenda est Varsovia'.” On this background Peuranen’s conclusion strikes one as rather bewildering: ”Nikakoj nacional’noj vraždy protiv poljakov v nich net.” (Op. cit. p. 70). After all, even Paskevič or emperor Nikolaj I himself never advocated, not to mention implemented, a policy which implied extirpating the Polish population.

And in “Pamjatnik”, written a few years later, he describes his own reputation and immortal existence through his poetical work as directly dependent on the existence of the Empire:

> Sluch obo mne projdet po vsej Rusi velikoj,
> I nazovet menja vsjak suščij v nej jazyk,
> I gordyj vnuk slavjan, i finn, i nyne dikoj
> Tungus, i drug stepej kalmyk.

As a matter of fact, Puškin’s delineation of the boundaries of Imperial Russia in “Pamjatnik” is reminiscent of the one he gives in “Klevetnikam Rossii”.

In “Klevetnikam Rossiii” Puškin creates an expression which is as well deeply Russian in character, as related to popular saying. Probably, this is why similar expressions were so eagerly exploited during the second world war in literature and oral comments. For instance several Krokodil cartoons in several picturesque ways dwell on the ability of the Russian soil to receive any invader, notwithstanding his number.

Most likely it is no exaggeration to maintain that sentiments similar to those expressed in Puškin’s poem are very frequent in Russia to this day. Many Russians who do not look at the former regime with special sympathy are still deeply concerned by Russia’s loss of imperial (read: superpower) status, and may even feel this loss as a deeply personal matter.