

REREADING RUSSIAN CLASSICS IN THE SHADOW OF THE UKRAINE WAR

*How to reckon with the ideology of “Anna Karenina,”
“Eugene Onegin,” and other beloved books.*



Some groups have called for a total boycott of Russian writers. Others say, "The enemy is Putin, not Pushkin." Illustration by Karlotta Freier

The first and only time I visited Ukraine was in 2019. My book "The Possessed"—a memoir I had published in 2010, about studying Russian literature—had recently been translated into Russian, along with "The Idiot," an autobiographical novel, and I was headed to Russia as a cultural emissary, through an initiative of PEN America and the U.S. Department of State. On the way, I stopped in Kyiv and Lviv: cities I had only ever read about, first in Russian novels, and later in the international news. In 2014, security forces had killed a hundred protesters at Kyiv's Independence Square, and Russian-backed separatists had declared two mini-republics in the Donbas. Nearly everyone I met on my trip—journalists, students, cultural liaisons—seemed to know of someone who had been injured or killed in the protests, or who had joined the volunteer army fighting the separatists in the east.

As the visiting author of two books called "The Possessed" and "The Idiot," I got to hear a certain amount about people's opinions of Dostoyevsky. It was explained to me that nobody in Ukraine wanted to think about Dostoyevsky at the moment, because his novels contained the same expansionist rhetoric as was used in propaganda justifying Russian military aggression. My immediate reaction to this idea was to bracket it off as an understandable by-product of war—as not "objective."

I had years of practice in this kind of distancing. As a student, I had often been asked whether I had Russian relatives and, if not, why I was so interested in "the Russians." Was I perhaps studying the similarities between Peter the Great, who had Westernized Russia, and Atatürk, who had Westernized Turkey, where my relatives were from? Such questions struck me as narrow-minded. Why should I be studying whatever literature happened to have been produced by my ancestors? I was reading Russian literature from a human perspective, not a national one. I had chosen these books precisely for the universal quality expressed in titles like "Fathers and Sons," "Crime and Punishment," and "Dead Souls."

Of course—I saw, in Kyiv—you couldn’t expect people in a war *not* to read from a national perspective. I thought back to what I knew of Dostoyevsky’s life. As a young man, he had been subjected to a mock execution for holding utopian-socialist views before being exiled to Siberia. In the eighteen-sixties, after his return, he wrote “Crime and Punishment” and “The Idiot,” contributing to the development of the psychological novel. I remembered that a later work, “A Writer’s Diary,” included some dire tirades about how Orthodox Russia was destined to unite the Slavic peoples and re-create Christ’s kingdom on earth. Looking back, I could definitely see a connection to some parts of Russian state propaganda.

But wasn’t that why we didn’t admire Dostoyevsky for his political commentary? The thing he was good at was novels. Anyone in a Dostoyevsky novel who went on an unreadable rant was bound to be contradicted, in a matter of pages, by another ranting character holding the opposite view: a technique known as dialogism, which features prominently both in Russian novels and in my own thinking. In the months following my trip, I often heard the Ukrainian critique of Dostoyevsky replaying in my mind, getting in arguments with past me, and resonating with other reservations I’d had, in recent years, about the role of Russian novels in my life.

These questions took on a sickening salience late last February, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Once I was on the lookout, it wasn’t hard to spot Russian literature in the discourse surrounding the war—particularly in Vladimir Putin’s repeated invocations of the “Russian World” (“*Russkiy Mir*”), a concept popularized by Kremlin-linked “philosophers” since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Russian World imagines a transnational Russian civilization, one extending even beyond the “triune Russian nation” of “Great Russia” (Russia), “Little Russia” (Ukraine), and “White Russia” (Belarus); it is united by Eastern Orthodoxy, by the Russian language, by the “culture” of Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky—and, when necessary, by air strikes.

In early March, I wasn’t altogether surprised to learn that a number of Ukrainian literary groups, including PEN Ukraine, had signed a petition calling for “a total boycott of books from Russia in the world!”—one that entailed not just cutting

financial ties with publishers but ceasing to distribute or promote any books by Russian writers. Their rationale was similar to the one I'd encountered in 2019: "Russian propaganda is woven into many books which indeed turns them into weapons and pretexts for the war." The boycott wasn't totally consonant with the PEN charter ("In time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion"). PEN Germany quickly put out a press release to the effect that deranged twenty-first-century politicians shouldn't be conflated with great writers who happened to be from the same country. The header read "The enemy is Putin, not Pushkin."

Pushkin was at the center of the storm. Widely revered as the founder of Russian literature, he serially published "Eugene Onegin," often considered the first great Russian novel, starting in the eighteen-twenties, at a time when much of Russian aristocratic life was conducted in French. Pushkin's own relationship to the Russian state was not untroubled. In 1820, at the age of twenty, he was banished from St. Petersburg for writing anti-authoritarian verses (notably "Ode to Liberty," which was later found among the possessions of the Decembrist rebels). In 1826, he was allowed to return to Moscow—with Tsar Nicholas I as his personal censor. He eventually went back to St. Petersburg, where he died, at the age of thirty-seven, after an eminently avoidable duel. The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union went on to erect bronze Pushkins all over the world, from Vilnius to Havana to Tashkent. Many monuments were built during the height of Stalin's purges, in 1937: the hundredth anniversary of Pushkin's death.

In April, a movement known as Pushkinopad—"Pushkin fall"—began sweeping Ukraine, resulting in the dismantling of dozens of Pushkin statues. A pair of Ukrainian I.T. workers created a chatbot on Telegram (@cancel_pushkin_bot) to identify Russian writers who didn't deserve to have things named after them in Ukraine. It describes Pushkin and Dostoyevsky as Russian chauvinists. (Tolstoy—a vocal pacifist for the last three decades of his life—gets a pass.)

Around that time, I received an invitation to give a talk on Russian literature in Tbilisi, Georgia. It came from a Russian-language study-abroad program that normally took place in St. Petersburg but had relocated, along with its founder, a British educator named Ben Meredith. The invitation gave me pause. There was

surely much to be learned at this rich juncture of geospatial and historical currents. But was I really going to inflict myself, in my capacity as an eternal student of Russian literature, on *another* former territory of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union?

Georgia's tangled history with Russia seemed to open out before me like another pathway in an ever-forking maze. In 1783, King Erekle II signed a treaty with Catherine the Great that secured Russian protection of Georgian lands against the Persian Empire (and the Ottoman Empire, and various neighboring tribes and khanates). Russia never fulfilled the treaty and, in 1801, began its annexation of Georgia. Tiflis, as Tbilisi was then known, became a colonial capital, with printing presses, schools, and an opera. It also became the base for Russia's expansion into Chechnya and Dagestan. In response to Russian incursions, many of the North Caucasus highlanders came together to form a Muslim resistance army, led by a series of Dagestani imams, the last of whom, Imam Shamil, surrendered in 1859. During the war, generations of Russian literary youths—among them, Pushkin and Tolstoy—went to the region. They wrote about their experiences, forming what came to be known as the Russian literature of the Caucasus: works I had been hugely excited to learn about in college, because they often included Turkic words. As the nineteenth century progressed, Georgian literary youths began to study in St. Petersburg, read Pushkin, and adopt Russian Romantic rhetoric to describe Georgian national identity.

Georgia was conquered by the Red Army in 1921, and seceded from the U.S.S.R. in 1991. The country annually mourns April 9, 1989, when the Soviet Army quashed a pro-independence demonstration in Tbilisi. Stalin's birthday is still commemorated every December in his hometown of Gori. In 2008, Russia sent troops into Georgia to support the separatist republics South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Memory of the ensuing war has done much to bolster popular Georgian support of Ukraine. Nonetheless, the ruling Georgian Dream Party, founded by the Russian-made billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, hasn't joined the international sanctions against Russia.

After the invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens crossed the Georgian border, for a wide range of reasons, both ideological and pragmatic.

Tens of thousands reportedly took up residence in the capital, reviving historic memories and driving up apartment prices. Meanwhile, because so many study-abroad offerings in Russia had been cancelled, enrollment in Meredith's normally tiny program shot up by an order of magnitude, to more than eighty.

Contemplating the invitation, I wondered how people in Tbilisi would feel about their city becoming a destination for Russian philological study.

It was "Anna Karenina" that first got me hooked on Russian novels, back in the nineties. As an only child, going back and forth between my divorced parents (both scientists) during the school year, and spending summers with family in Turkey, I grew up surrounded by different, often mutually exclusive opinions and world views. I came to pride myself on a belief in my own objectivity, a special ability to hold in my mind each side's good points, while giving due weight to the criticisms. I fell in love with "Anna Karenina" because of how clearly it showed that no character was wrong—that even the unreasonable-seeming people were doing what appeared right to them, based on their own knowledge and experiences. As a result of everyone's having different knowledge and experiences, they disagreed, and caused each other unhappiness. And yet, all the conflicting voices and perspectives, instead of creating a chaos of non-meaning, somehow worked together to generate *more* meaning.

When I learned that some critics considered "Anna Karenina" to be a continuation of Pushkin's verse novel, "Eugene Onegin," I decided to read that next. It opens with the title character, a world-weary cosmopolitan, inheriting a large country estate. There, he meets Tatiana, a provincial, novel-obsessed teen, who writes him a declaration of love. He rejects her—only to encounter her three years later, in St. Petersburg, where she is now the supremely poised wife of a great general. It was a turn of events that I, a provincial, novel-obsessed teen, found strangely compelling.

At the time of my trip to Ukraine, I was already in the middle of a reckoning with these books—for reasons unrelated, I thought, to geopolitics. It had started in 2017, the year I turned forty, began identifying as queer, published "The Idiot," and went on a book tour amid the swirling disclosures of #MeToo. Like

many women, I spent a lot of 2017 rethinking the story of my own romantic and sexual formation. As I tried to map out various assumptions about the universality of heterosexual love and emotional suffering, I came across Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." In it, Rich identifies a tendency in Western literature to suggest "that women are inevitably, even if rashly and tragically, drawn to men; that even when that attraction is suicidal . . . it is still an organic imperative."

I thought back to "Anna Karenina" and "Eugene Onegin." How clearly Tolstoy and Pushkin had shown that, by falling in love with men, Anna and Tatiana foreclosed their already direly limited life choices! And yet, that ruinous, self-negating love was made to seem inescapable and glamorous. Anna dies, but looking fantastic, and thinking insightful thoughts up to the moment of her death. Tatiana's love letter to Eugene Onegin causes nothing but heartache—but what a great letter! Had such novels encouraged me to view women's suffering over men as an irreducible, even desirable part of the human experience—as something to be impartially appreciated, rather than challenged?

In Ukraine, in 2019, confronting an unfamiliar critique of Dostoyevsky, I had instinctively reverted to the idea that novels should be read objectively. But what constituted an objective attitude to Dostoyevsky? "The enemy is Putin, not Pushkin": was *that* objective? Such thinking had long formed a part of my own mental furniture. Putin had come into power the year I started my Ph.D. in comparative (mostly Russian) literature, which thus coincided roughly with the beginning of the Second Chechen War. That war was still going on eight years later, when I finally filed my dissertation. I don't remember making any clear connection between my studies and the war. Certainly, it would have seemed facile to me to use Russian literature to explain Putin's actions. What was next, mining James Fenimore Cooper for insights into Donald Rumsfeld? (But what *would* "The Last of the Mohicans" look like, read from Baghdad in 2003?)

The idea that great novels disclose universal human truths, or contain a purely literary meaning that transcends national politics, wasn't evenly distributed across the world. I had seen no signs of it in Kyiv. After the 2022 invasion, it was voiced both by Western groups, like PEN Germany, and in Russian outlets. "Writers

don't want war, they don't want to get involved in politics," reads a pro-invasion open letter signed, last February, by hundreds of self-identified "writers," that was published in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, a newspaper with Pushkin's portrait on the masthead.

It made me think: if the books I loved so objectively were actually vehicles of patriarchal ideology, why wouldn't the ideology of expansionism be in there, too? Was that something I could see better from Tbilisi?

It was in Tiflis, I reflected, that the twenty-three-year-old Tolstoy, having expended much of his youth on gambling and what is sometimes called "women," started writing his first novel. He had gone there to enlist in the military, and had eventually served in present-day Chechnya and in Crimea. In one of his last works, "Hadji Murat," Tolstoy returns to the Tiflis of 1851. There, he had crossed paths with the real Hadji Murat, a rebel commander who fell out with Imam Shamil and offered his services to Russia, but ended up getting decapitated. His head was sent to the Kunstkamera museum, in St. Petersburg. (Hadji Murat's descendants and Dagestani politicians have long been petitioning for its return.) In the novel, Tolstoy likens Hadji Murat's severed head to a beautiful Tartar thistle he uprooted one day from a ditch.

My college fascination with the Russian literature of the Caucasus hadn't lasted—the books I liked best seemed to be the ones set in the center, not the peripheries—but I had once written a term paper comparing Hadji Murat's head at the end of "Hadji Murat" with Anna Karenina's head near the end of "Anna Karenina." When Anna jumps in front of a train, having grasped, in the course of a revelatory stream-of-consciousness carriage ride, the futility of human relations and of her love for Vronsky, her body is mutilated—but "the intact head with its heavy plaits and hair curling at the temples" continues to exercise its magnetism, "the lovely face with its half-open red lips" wearing a terrible expression. In both cases, the human head, detached from its customary function and milieu, is represented as a static image for contemplation—rather than as a symbol of a potentially avoidable human-rights incident.

Now I dug up my old copy of "Hadji Murat" and reread the pages set at a newly

opened theatre in Tiflis, where Hadji Murat stoically endures the first act of an Italian opera. The description of him limping into the theatre in his turban recalls the scene in which Anna Karenina, wearing a rich lace headdress, defies social norms by appearing at the opera in St. Petersburg. Will the Russian viceroy protect Hadji Murat's family? Will Karenin grant Anna a divorce? Considered side by side, the operas of Tiflis and St. Petersburg seemed to become more than the sum of their parts—as when two photographs, taken from different angles and viewed stereoscopically, cause a three-dimensional image to spring from the page. The hidden mechanisms of patriarchy and expansionism suddenly came into focus as two facets of the same huge apparatus. What other aspects of the “universal” Russian novel might be visible from a trip to the former imperial peripheries?

My flight from Istanbul was overbooked and delayed. I headed straight from the airport to the program orientation in a courtyard in Old Tbilisi, arriving just in time to hear an audience of thirty-odd, mostly British university students receiving instruction in how to practice their Russian without triggering the local population. A list of Russian-friendly bars was distributed. (There had been stories of Russian speakers being ejected from bars.) I was introduced to the students as a guest lecturer. The lectures, I learned, would be followed by something called “_(ref)_lectures.”

“It’s terrible! It’s so bad!” Meredith said gleefully of the name, which he had made up himself. He had also, despite objections by the lecture coöordinator, Katya Korableva, called the program “We Must Believe in Spring.” When I asked Korableva about the name, she shook her head and looked down, eventually saying that she thought it was too optimistic. (I would later encounter a similarly visceral-seeming lack of optimism in other antiwar Russians I met. Once, in a rustic courtyard in Telavi, I heard an expatriate podcaster from Moscow mutter, “I can’t even,” as he turned his back on a picturesque wooden window shutter: the boards happened to form a letter “Z,” a symbol of Putin’s war.)

At breakfast the next morning, I felt nervous about speaking Russian, which

limited my ability to exchange niceties with some people making pancakes in the kitchen. I stress-ate several pancakes, while trying to figure out what to prioritize: rereading Russian novels, reading Georgian and Ukrainian novels, meeting Georgian people, meeting Russian people, visiting historic sites? What was the right way to untangle the relationship between Russian imperialism—arguably a forerunner of both Soviet and post-Soviet expansionism—and the novels I'd loved growing up?

I was staying at the Writers' House of Georgia, an Art Nouveau mansion said to be haunted by the ghost of the poet Paolo Iashvili, a member of the Georgian Blue Horns symbolist group, who had shot himself there in 1937. Lavrentiy Beria—who orchestrated Stalin's purges in Georgia—had been making writers testify against one another. Tbilisi's Pushkin monument was a short walk away, and I decided to pay it a visit. I'm the kind of person who can get lost anywhere, so I spent a long time wandering around the Writers' House, trying to find the exit. In one hall, I came upon a wooden door with a plate that read "Museum of Repressed Writers." I tried the door handle. It was locked.

Once I had escaped from the building, I turned right, onto a street named after Mikhail Lermontov. Lermontov had been exiled to the environs of Tiflis as a military officer in 1837, for writing a poem that implicated court slanderers in Pushkin's duel-related death. He went on to serve in the Caucasus, which furnished the materials for his ironically titled novel "A Hero of Our Time." (The opening line is "I was travelling post from Tiflis.") Pushkin, too, had first come to the region as a political exile, in 1820. Inspired by his surroundings, he wrote "Prisoner of the Caucasus," a narrative poem in which a Circassian girl falls in love with a Russian prisoner of war, who is too brooding and Byronic to return her feelings—until she risks her life to set him free, at which point he implores her to go with him to Russia. No longer capable of happiness, she drowns herself instead. It's considered the first major work of the Russian literature of the Caucasus, and I had reread it in preparation for my trip.

In the epilogue, Pushkin implies a connection between the Circassian girl's fate and that of the North Caucasian peoples. The most ominous line—"Submit, Caucasus, Ermolov is coming!"—had recently been quoted to me by the

Ukrainian Telegram bot. General Alexei Ermolov, a Russian commander whose brutal tactics contributed to the elimination of some nine-tenths of the Upper Circassian population, once declared, “I desire that the terror of my name shall guard our frontiers more potently than chains or fortresses”—an ambition in which he was arguably assisted by Pushkin.

I turned onto Pushkin Street, which led to Pushkin Park, and there was Pushkin, or at least his bust, perched on a pink marble plinth. I felt somehow relieved to see him. Then I felt ashamed of feeling relieved. I wondered what Pushkin had felt—whether shame had entered into it—after getting banished by a tsar, at twenty, for a poem he had written as a teen-ager. “Returning to St. Petersburg from his exile, Pushkin stopped criticizing the Russian throne, and started to write great-power odes, glorifying imperial aggressive acts of tsarism against neighboring peoples”: that’s the chronologically reductive, but not totally inaccurate, interpretation offered by the Ukrainian chatbot. For the rest of his life, the Pushkin who championed individual freedom was always alternating with the Pushkin who celebrated the Empire.

Take the preface of Pushkin’s poem “The Bronze Horseman” (1837), which shows Peter the Great contemplating the swamp, dotted by the blackened hovels of “miserable Finns,” where he plans to found St. Petersburg. (It was by establishing a westward-facing capital with access to the Baltic Sea in 1703, as well as by radically Westernizing military and civic institutions, that Peter transformed Russia into a major European power.) “From here we shall threaten the Swede,” Peter reflects. It wasn’t like there was nothing there that could remind you of Putin. At the same time, “The Bronze Horseman”—a nightmarish fantasia in which the most famous statue in St. Petersburg, an equestrian Peter, leaps off its pedestal and terrorizes a clerk to death—is surely, among other things, a testament to Pushkin’s ambivalence toward monuments. In its way, it’s a poem about a monument that dismantles *itself*. What would Pushkin have made of the Pushkinopad movement in Ukraine? It might depend on which Pushkin you asked.

I headed back toward the Writers’ House on a street named after another Blue Horns poet, Galaktion Tabidze. Having lost both his wife and a cousin in the

purges, Tabidze had eventually jumped to his death from the window of a psychiatric hospital. It occurred to me to wonder whether I was already inside the Museum of Repressed Writers. Maybe that locked door hadn't been keeping us out but locking us all in.

One place I had really wanted to see in Tbilisi was the Tiflis Imperial Theatre, opened in 1851 to promote Russian culture and to distract people's attention from the North Caucasus war. The young Tolstoy had attended the Italian opera there, and I felt certain it was the same theatre that he imagined Hadji Murat visiting. Unfortunately, the building turned out to have burned down in 1874. Instead, I stopped by its original site, in Freedom Square, where Pushkin Street meets Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue. Standing in the busy square, gazing from the City Assembly building, constructed in the nineteenth-century Moorish Revival style, to a Courtyard by Marriott Hotel, renovated in the early-two-thousands Courtyard by Marriott style, I felt the words "center" and "periphery" slowly losing their meaning. In Tolstoy's career, was Tbilisi peripheral, or was it central? Tolstoy's first novel, "Childhood," was written in Tiflis but set in Russia. Fifty years later, "Hadji Murat" was written in Russia, but set partly in Tiflis.

Historical phenomena—revolution, modernity—are often said to start at a center, and then to spread to the peripheries. But that hierarchy or chronology—center first, periphery second—can be misleading. Technically, capitalism wasn't born in a self-sufficient Western Europe and then transmitted to the rest of the world. It was, from the beginning, enabled by the wealth streaming into Western Europe from non-European colonies. The peripheries were always already playing a central role.

I thought of Edward Said's "Culture and Imperialism" (1993)—a classic text that I read for the first time only after my Ukraine trip—which makes a similar case about novels. As Said points out, novels became a dominant literary form in eighteenth-century Britain and France, precisely when Britain was becoming the biggest empire in world history and France was a rival. Novels and empires grew symbiotically, defining and sustaining each other. "Robinson Crusoe," one of the

first British novels, is about an English castaway who learns to exploit the natural and human resources of a non-European island. In an influential reading of “Mansfield Park,” Said zooms in on a few references to a second, Antiguan property—implicitly, a sugar plantation—belonging to Mansfield’s proprietor. The point isn’t just that life in the English countryside is underwritten by slave labor, but that the novel’s plot itself mirrors the colonial enterprise. Fanny Price, an outsider at Mansfield, undergoes a series of harrowing social trials, and marries the baronet’s son. A rational subject comes to a scary new place—one already inhabited by other, unreasonable people—and becomes its rightful occupant. What does a story like that tell you about how the world works?

In college, I had studied Said’s earlier and more famous book, “Orientalism,” which is often assigned alongside the Russian literature of the Caucasus. (It’s about how Western descriptions of the East, whether scientific or artistic, end up reinforcing modes of Western domination.) But I had never read “Culture and Imperialism,” or considered the role of imperialism in novels like “Anna Karenina.” Post-colonial criticism, which Said helped pioneer, originally focussed on the legacy of British and French colonialism, meaning that places like Russia, Turkey, and the former Soviet Union tended to get left out. Said himself omitted Russia from his book, claiming that the subject was too big, and that, because the Russian Empire grew contiguously, and not by overseas conquest, imaginative projections didn’t play the same role as they did in Britain or in France. (Russian literature curricula are already changing, in the wake of the Ukraine war. The Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, a leading professional organization, has dedicated its 2023 conference to the theme of decolonization.)

In Tbilisi, it seemed clear that the Russian Empire had required vast resources of imagination to build and to sustain—and that my favorite novels might have played a role. In “Eugene Onegin,” I kept coming back to Tatiana’s husband, a war hero “maimed in battle.” Though mentioned only briefly, he’s the catalyst for Tatiana’s transformation—the reversal that makes Onegin fall in love with her. We never do learn whom the general himself may have maimed. The maiming that we do see: Tatiana gazing emotionlessly at Onegin; Onegin corpselike and

grovelling, as the general's spurs clink in the hallway. Tatiana reminded me now of the Circassian girl in "Prisoner of the Caucasus," who also loves in vain, until she aligns herself in a self-annihilating way with the interests of the Russian Empire. And wasn't that Pushkin's arc, too? Tatiana wrote a rash declaration to Onegin; Pushkin wrote a rash ode to freedom. Tatiana became the social queen of St. Petersburg, Pushkin its foremost poet.

As for "Anna Karenina," it really does start where Onegin ends: with a flawlessly dressed heroine married to an influential imperialist. The tension between center and periphery is woven into the plot. The character of Karenin, a statesman involved in the resettlement of the "subject races," turns out to be partly based on Pyotr Valuev, the Minister of the Interior from 1861 to 1868. Valuev oversaw the Russian appropriation of Bashkir lands around the Ural Mountains—and also issued a notorious decree restricting the publication of Ukrainian-language educational and religious texts throughout the Empire. (It reads, in part, "A separate Little Russian language never existed, does not exist, and shall not exist.")

Unlike Tatiana, Anna doesn't remain faithful to her empire-building husband. She leaves Karenin for Vronsky, who turns down a prestigious military post in Tashkent in order to travel with her to Italy. But the Imperial Army gets Vronsky back in the end. That final image of Anna's lifeless head is actually a flashback Vronsky has, on his way to join a Pan-Slavic volunteer detachment fighting the Ottomans in Serbia. With Anna dead, and the love plot over, his only desire is to end his own life, and to kill as many Turks as possible in the process. To quote a recent think piece titled "Decolonizing the Mysterious Soul of the Great Russian Novel," by Liubov Terekhova—a Ukrainian critic who was reassessing "Anna Karenina" from the United Arab Emirates, as Russia bombed her home city, Kyiv—"Russia is always waging a war where a man can flee in search of death."

Literature, in short, looks different depending on where you read it: a subject I found myself discussing one afternoon over lunch, in a garden overlooking Tbilisi, with Anna Kats, a Georgian-born, Russian-speaking scholar of socialist architecture, who immigrated to Los Angeles as a child. We talked about the

essay “Can the Post-Soviet Think?,” by Madina Tlostanova, an Uzbek-Circassian proponent of “decoloniality,” a theory that originated in Latin America around the turn of the millennium. A key tenet is that “thinking” is never placeless or disembodied. The first principle of thought isn’t, as Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am,” but “I am where I think.”

I remembered the first time I read Pushkin’s travelogue “Journey to Arzrum,” the summer I turned twenty—during my own initial foray into travel writing, for a student guidebook. I had requested an assignment in Russia, but my Russian wasn’t good enough, so I was sent to Turkey. To improve my Russian, I was reading Pushkin on night buses, feeling excited every time I saw Erzurum (Pushkin’s Arzrum) on the schedule board at intercity stations.

Turkey hadn’t been Pushkin’s first-choice destination, either—he had wanted to go to Paris. Denied official permission, he resolved to leave the country the only way he could think of—by accompanying the military in the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29. The tone of the resulting travelogue fluctuates unsettlingly between chatty verbiage and dispassionate horror. “The Circassians hate us,” Pushkin writes at one point. “We have forced them out of their open grazing lands; their auls”—villages—“have been devastated, whole tribes have been wiped out.” Nine years after his first visit to the Caucasus, Pushkin seems to have gained some clarity on the Circassians’ plight. (In 2011, the Georgian parliament voted to characterize Russia’s actions there as a genocide.) Still, in the next sentence, he goes on to observe, implausibly, that Circassian babies wield sabres before they can talk. Later in his account, Pushkin describes a lunch with troops during which they see, on a facing mountainside, the Ottoman Army retreating from Russian Cossack reinforcements—leaving behind a “decapitated and truncated” Cossack corpse. Pushkin quickly segues to the congeniality of camp life: “At dinner we washed down Asiatic shashlik with English beer and champagne chilled in the snows of Taurida.”

What can we afford to see, as writers and as readers? Could Pushkin afford to see that he benefitted from the “resettlement” of the Circassians? How clearly could he see it? For how long at a time?

After lunch, Kats and I took a funicular to the top of Mt. Mtatsminda, where she maintained that Tbilisi's best custard-filled doughnuts were to be found. Rising above the treetops, thinking back on my own national and global privileges, the extent of which have grown clearer to me with the passing years, I did not, I decided, find it difficult to understand Pushkin's simultaneous ability and inability to perceive the truth.

The relationship between literary merit and military power is not a delightful subject for contemplation. I prefer to think that I would have loved Pushkin even if Peter and Catherine the Great *hadn't* waged extensive foreign and internal wars, dragging Russia into the European balance of power. But would Pushkin's work still have been translated into English and stocked in the Barnes & Noble on Route 22 in northern New Jersey—in the world superpower to which my parents came in the seventies, in pursuit of the best scientific equipment? Even if it had been translated, and I had read it, I might not have recognized it as good. Would it have *been* good?

In Tbilisi, I remembered a line from Oksana Zabuzhko's classic 1996 novel, "Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex," which I read on my 2019 trip to Kyiv. "Even if you did, by some miracle, produce something in this language 'knocking out Goethe's *Faust*,'" Zabuzhko writes, of Ukrainian, "it would only lie around the libraries unread." Her narrator, an unnamed Ukrainian-language poet visiting Harvard, suffers countless indignities. She's broke, and her work is rarely translated. But she refuses to write in English or in Russian. A self-identified "nationalist-masochist," she remains faithful to her forebears: poets who "hurled themselves like firelogs into the dying embers of the Ukrainian with nothing to fucking show for it but mangled destinies and unread books."

Were those books unread because they weren't as good as Pushkin's—or was it perhaps the other way round? If a book isn't read, and doesn't influence other books, will it hold less meaning and resonance for future readers? Conversely, can a "good" book be written without robust literary institutions? "Eugene Onegin" is clearly a product of Pushkin's constant dialogue with the editors, friends, rivals, critics, and readers whose words surrounded him, even in exile. Nikolai Gogol,

born in 1809 in Ukraine with Pushkin-scale talents, became a famous writer only after moving to St. Petersburg.

Gogol, now a central figure in the post-2022 discourse about Russian literature, first found critical success in the capital by writing, in Russian, on Ukrainian themes. But the same critics who praised him also urged him to write about more universal—i.e., more Russian—subjects. Gogol duly produced the Petersburg Tales and Part 1 of “Dead Souls.” A celebrated literary hostess once asked Gogol whether, in his soul, he was truly Russian or Ukrainian. In response, he demanded, “Tell me, am I a saint; can I really see all my loathsome faults?” and launched into a tirade about his faults, and also other people’s faults. He eventually suffered a spiritual breakdown, came to believe that his literary works were sinful, burned part of his manuscripts (possibly including Part 2 of “Dead Souls”), stopped eating, and died in great pain at forty-two.

The Kremlin now uses Gogol’s work as evidence that Ukraine and Russia share a single culture. (An essay about Gogol’s Russianness appears on the Web site of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which Putin started in 2007.) According to a 2021 article by Putin, Gogol’s books “are written in Russian, bristling with Malorussian”—Little Russian—“folk sayings and motifs. How can this heritage be divided between Russia and Ukraine?”

In Tbilisi, the Gogol story I kept coming back to was “The Nose”: the one where Major Kovalyov, a mid-level civil servant, wakes up one morning with no nose. Fearing for his job and his marriage prospects, he hits the streets of St. Petersburg, searching for his missing proboscis. A carriage pulls up nearby. A personage emerges, wearing a uniform and plumed hat that denote a higher rank than Kovalyov’s. It is Kovalyov’s nose. “Don’t you know where you belong?” Kovalyov demands. “Don’t you realize you are *my own nose!*”

The nose coldly replies, “My dear fellow, you are mistaken. I am a person in my own right.”

Read enough Putin speeches and Kovalyov’s attitude toward his nose starts to sound familiar. How dare a mere appendage masquerade as an independent

entity? What cruelty, to separate the Little Russian nose from the Great Russian face! In “The Nose,” as in so much of the Russian literature that I had been revisiting, the interests of empire prevail. The police apprehend Kovalyov’s runaway organ “just as it was boarding the stagecoach bound for Riga.” Tellingly, the nose had been headed west.

The morning of my lecture, I went for a walk on Rustaveli Avenue. The broad tree-lined sidewalks were flanked with used booksellers purveying, alongside Georgian books I couldn’t read, lone volumes of Tolstoy and Turgenev. At one stall, a series of Soviet-era classroom maps—one of them showing the changing eighteenth-century borders of the Russian and Ottoman Empires—were held in place by a Latvian cookbook and a Dostoyevsky omnibus.

Dostoyevsky: we meet at last. I opened it to “Crime and Punishment,” the story of Raskolnikov, a poor student, who decides to murder an old pawnbroker to fund his education. Turning the yellowed pages, I noticed multiple mentions of Napoleon. I thought back on Raskolnikov’s theory about how “extraordinary” individuals have the right to kill others for “the fulfillment of an idea.” If Napoleon, who murdered thousands of Egyptian people and stole their archeological treasures, is lauded as the founder of Egyptology, why *shouldn’t* a student be able to kill one person to advance his studies? The logic of Raskolnikov’s crime, I realized, was the logic of imperialism.

“Putin’s offensive on February 24 owed much to Dostoevskyism,” Oksana Zabuzhko wrote in an [essay](#) last April, after the [massacre in Bucha](#). She called the invasion “an explosion of pure, distilled evil and long-suppressed hatred and envy,” adding, “‘Why should you live better than us?’ Russian soldiers have been saying to Ukrainians.” It was easy to see that message in “Crime and Punishment.” Why should “some ridiculous old hag” have money, when Raskolnikov is poor?

Dostoyevsky didn’t, of course, endorse Raskolnikov’s views. (The clue is in the title: the story ends in a Siberian prison.) Still, he found his ideas interesting enough to be the subject of a book. Should we still read that book? In “Culture

and Imperialism,” Edward Said raises a similar question about Jane Austen. He concludes that to “jettison” “Mansfield Park” is to miss an opportunity to see literature as a dynamic network, rather than as the isolated experiences of victims and perpetrators—but that the solution isn’t to keep consuming Austen’s novels in a geopolitical vacuum. Instead, we need to find new, “contrapuntal” ways of reading. That means seeing “Mansfield Park” as a book with two geographies: one, England, richly elaborated; the other, Antigua, strenuously resisted—yet revealed, all the same.

Contrapuntal, or stereoscopic, reading felt like an exciting approach to the Russian canon, in which categories like victim and perpetrator—or center and periphery—are particularly fluid. Madina Tlostanova, the decolonial critic, has described Imperial Russia, along with the Ottoman sultanate, as a special kind of “secondary” empire, one that formed on the margins of Europe, and that compensated for its resulting inferiority complex by “modernizing” its own subject peoples. Peter the Great’s Westernization of Russia can be seen as an unacknowledged trauma. In the words of the scholar Boris Groys, this “cruel inoculation” protected Russia against “real colonization by a West that surpassed it both technically and militarily.”

A contrapuntal approach would mean thinking about Russian classics alongside works by Zabuzhko and Tlostanova—and Dato Turashvili, Nana Ekvimishvili, Nino Haratischvili, Taras Shevchenko, Andrey Kurkov, Yevgenia Belorusetz, and Serhiy Zhadan, to name a handful of the important Georgian and Ukrainian writers whose works exist in English. It would mean not bracketing off novelists’ political views, as I initially tried to do with Dostoyevsky. One editorial in *The Spectator*, responding to the proposed suspension of a Dostoyevsky lecture series in Milan, called it ironic to “censure” a writer who had himself been “sent to a Siberian labour camp for reading banned books that attacked the Tsarist regime.” As it turns out, being a victim of imperial repression doesn’t make you incapable of perpetuating repressive ideas. One of Dostoyevsky’s fellow-prisoners in Siberia, a Polish nationalist, wrote in his memoirs about Dostoyevsky’s insistence that Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland “had forever been the property of Russia,” and would, without Russia, be mired in “dark illiteracy, barbarism, and abject

poverty.”

In 1880, near the end of his life, Dostoyevsky gave a famous speech at the unveiling of the Pushkin monument in what is now Moscow’s Pushkin Square, extolling Pushkin as the most Russian *and* the most universal of writers. He linked Pushkin’s achievements to Peter’s reforms, through which Russia didn’t just adopt “European clothes, customs, inventions and science” but actually incorporated into its soul “the genius of foreign nations.” Russia, like Pushkin, knew how to transcend national limitations, and was on a course to “reconcile the contradictions of Europe,” thereby fulfilling the word of Christ. The speech was received with hysteria, weeping, screaming, and shouts of “You have solved it!” referring to the eternal mystery of Pushkin. Dostoyevsky’s “Pushkin speech” is quoted on the Russkiy Mir Foundation’s Web site.

The point of drawing a connection between Dostoyevsky and Putin isn’t to “censure” Dostoyevsky but to understand the mechanics of trauma and repression. Among the writer’s formative memories was an incident he observed at age fifteen, at a post station on the road to St. Petersburg. Before his eyes, a uniformed courier rushed out of the station, jumped into a fresh troika, and immediately started punching the neck of the driver—who, in turn, frantically whipped the horses. The troika took off at breakneck speed. Dostoyevsky imagined the driver going back to his village that night and beating his wife.

Dostoyevsky eventually adapted this memory into Raskolnikov’s nightmare in “Crime and Punishment.” In it, Raskolnikov dreams that he is a child and has to watch a peasant beat a horse to death. On waking, he clearly connects the dream to his own impending plan to kill someone with an axe. He then gets out of bed and kills someone with an axe. In other words, being a middle link in a long chain of violence—even *knowing* you’re a middle link in a long chain of violence—doesn’t magically rapture you out of the chain. In his own life, Dostoyevsky didn’t always apply this insight—but, like all good novelists, he enabled his future readers to see further than he could at the time.

My talk about how we don’t need to stop reading Russian literature was received warmly by the audience of assembled Russian majors and

educators. One student, bringing up Pushkinopad, asked whether my ideal vision of the world was one in which the Pushkin monuments were toppled. I wondered aloud whether, in an ideal world, we might recognize literary achievement in some way other than by building giant bronze men who tower above us.

Later that evening, I heard that one live-stream viewer of the lecture had written in, protesting the decision to broadcast a talk about Russian literature. As I walked back to the Writers' House, past a bar with a chalkboard that said "FREE WINE on the occasion of PUTIN'S DEATH," I contemplated the vast difference between an ideal vision of the world and the world we live in. Feeling a wave of pessimism, I thought back to the essay in which Zabuzhko, quoting Tolstoy's line "There are no guilty people in the world," characterizes Russian literature as a two-hundred-year festival of misplaced sympathy for criminals, rather than for their victims, enabling crimes—including war crimes—to continue.

Something in her argument resonated with me. Wasn't there a way of celebrating the ability to feel sorry, the ability to "see all sides," to "objectively" take in the whole situation, that ended with seeing painful outcomes as complicated, interesting, and unchangeable? It was as if "good" novels had to make human affairs seem insoluble and ambiguous. If a problem in a novel looked too clear-cut—if the culprit was too obvious—we called it bad art. It was a subject I'd been thinking over for a while, questioning my own decision to write novels. There are signs that Tolstoy had similar worries. After publishing "Anna Karenina," he underwent a "spiritual crisis" or "conversion," decided his own novels were immoral, and turned to religious writing. But, eventually, he went back to novels—including "Hadji Murat."

"Hadji Murat," which was published posthumously, is considered unique in Tolstoy's work, and in the nineteenth-century Russian canon, for how thoroughly it enters the perspective of the imperial subject. In consecutive chapters, Tolstoy portrays the destruction of a Chechen village, first from the point of view of a young Russian officer—he can't believe his luck at being, not in a smoke-filled room in St. Petersburg, but "in this glorious region among these brave Caucasians"—and then from the perspective of the villagers, whose lives have

been “so lightly and senselessly destroyed.” The juxtaposition recalls Pushkin’s “Journey to Arzrum”: the gutted village, the iced champagne. But Tolstoy, whose life was many decades longer than Pushkin’s, exposes the terrible calculus facing the villagers, who must abandon their own values and join either the Russian Empire or Imam Shamil’s resistance. The imam’s brutality mirrors Tsar Nicholas’s. As in the image of Dostoyevsky’s troika, it’s easy to see the chain of violence—and maybe to envision its disruption.

Multiplicity is built into the text: ten versions exist, none conclusive. Tolstoy kept the draft at hand until his death, in 1910. In an 1898 diary entry, Tolstoy mentions a certain “English toy”—it sounds stereoscopic—that “shows under a glass now one thing, now another.” Hadji Murat, he writes, must be represented in this fashion: as “a husband, a fanatic, etc.” It occurred to me to think of that “English toy” as the novel itself—a technology inherited by Tolstoy from Austen and Defoe, one that could reveal different truths from different points in space and time, perhaps even destabilizing the structures it once bolstered.

Most of “Hadji Murat” takes place outside of Russia, in the North Caucasus and Georgia, places where Russia isn’t unilaterally right. It’s where Tolstoy, having escaped the smoke-filled rooms of St. Petersburg, first became a writer. Looking at “Hadji Murat” from Tbilisi, I found its stereoscopic quality extending to “Anna Karenina,” which also became less fixed, more provisional, in my mind—almost as if Anna’s fate, like the meaning of the novel itself, could, and would, keep changing.

One evening in Tbilisi, at a restaurant around the corner from where Tolstoy had lived, I met the filmmaker Salomé Jashi. I had been captivated by her 2021 film, “Taming the Garden,” about a project orchestrated by Georgia’s former Prime Minister, the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, to uproot hundreds of trees from across the country, for relocation at a privately funded “dendrological park” on the Black Sea.

Jashi doesn’t appear in the film, which has no narration. Instead, the camera silently follows the workers who carry out the extraction with giant machines.

Locals, having exchanged their rights to the trees for unheard-of sums, contemplate the ravaged earth, the stumps and severed limbs of other trees that had to be cut down to make way for the trucks. They weep, cross themselves, laugh, shoot cell-phone videos. Some seem to be auditioning different emotions, to see which one fits.

Jashi told me that, as a child, during the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia—a partially recognized Russian-backed state, which Georgia views as a historic part of its territory—she used to write patriotic poems, and dreamed of devoting her life to her country. She speaks Russian, but as a teen-ager she stopped reading Russian books. To this day, she has never read a novel by Dostoyevsky; not, she told me, on principle, but because she didn't want to read books in Russian, and why read Dostoyevsky in translation?

As I topped off our wine—we were splitting a bottle—I found myself recalling the unforgettable shots in Jashi's film of massive trees in transit. One bounces sedately down a country road on the back of a flatbed truck; another glides along the Black Sea on a barge. The image of the sailing tree, its leaves ruffled by the breeze, was almost too outlandish to process, more like a metaphor than like anything actually existing in the world. In it, I seemed to see the spectral presence of Ivanishvili, whom many suspect of steering the country behind the scenes. I saw Robinson Crusoe's island, unmoored and floating toward the horizon. I saw the thistle Tolstoy yanked out of the earth, now bigger than he was. And I saw the great Russian novels themselves, their roots newly visible, their branches stretching to the sky. ♦

Published in the print edition of the January 30, 2023, issue, with the headline "Novels of Empire."