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Political Lessons From Pushkin

By Alexei Bayer

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Russia's greatest 19th-century authors such as Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky remain very influential in modern literature. Russian poets have also been widely translated and appreciated the world over. Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam and Joseph Brodsky may not be household names outside of Russia, but they are well-known to the reading public.

Not so with Alexander Pushkin, whom Russians consider their greatest writer. His poetry is remarkably consonant to the Russian character in form, language, spirit and feeling. Perhaps it is because all Russians grow up reading Pushkin's fairy tales from the earliest age.

In any case, there is something to be said for the fact that neither the poetry nor prose of Russia's greatest writer is understood or loved in the West, especially not in the English-speaking world. I wonder if this fact alone doesn't explain — at least in part — why there is so much mistrust between Russia and the West.

On Oct. 19 — or Lyceum Day, the day when Pushkin graduated from the Tsarskoye Selo

lyceum — I attended a literary soiree in New York hosted by Julian Lowenfeld, a translator of Pushkin's works. He strives to render into English the enchantment of Pushkin's verse, as well as its formal structure. Lowenfeld is certainly not the first to try this, and he follows in the footsteps of many a giant, including writer Vladimir Nabokov, who produced a pedantically annotated yet disappointing translation of "Eugene Onegin."

But the paradox surrounding Pushkin is that he was arguably the most Western of Russian writers, Pushkin scholar Olga Muravyeva told me after the reading. She was visiting from St. Petersburg, where she works at the Institute of Russian Literature, popularly known as the Pushkin House. Quoting from memory copious lines from his poems and letters, Muravyeva showed how Pushkin jealously guarded his artistic and ethical independence. He wrote what could be considered opposition poems, hailing friends sent into Siberian exile for taking part in the Decembrist plot against Nicholas I, but also a defiant response to those who criticized Russia's brutal suppression of the 1830 Polish rising. In doing so, he antagonized both the government and liberal opposition, who wanted to make use of his talent and name for their purposes.

Pushkin's insistence on his right not to belong to any cause and his freedom to remain a poet and an individual is very Western, said Muravyeva. But Russian literature ultimately chose a different path. It adopted a line from a poem by Nikolai Nekrasov, written two decades after Pushkin's death in 1837: "You don't have to be a poet, but a citizen you surely must be." Since then, Russian literature always "belonged." It either supported the opposition or sold out to the government. Its quality was often judged based on which side the author supported.

Whether this harmed Russian literature is beside the point. Russia continued to produce — and kill off — brilliant, original writers, but its political system has always been a failure. For more than 170 years after Pushkin, Russian politics have been frozen, featuring an oppressive government on one side and its oppressed population on the other, with literature forever striving to take sides.

Pushkin, Muravyeva said, is particularly relevant today because, after almost two centuries, the thinking people in Russia are ready to declare: "A plague on both your houses." Or, to use Pushkin's words: "It is greater freedom that I seek. To be in thrall to the authorities or to the people is all the same."

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