

Russian Literary Nationalism—Nicholai Gogol’s Literary Observations

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Abstract

The idea of Russia has emerged through discussions amongst religious and cultural leaders in the late fifteenth century. But with the collapse of monarchic regimes, colonial powers and emergence of European nationalism in the nineteenth century, Russia imagined its own brand of nationalism. In this endeavour they were aided by writers, painters and musicians. Most literary, musical and art texts aspire to universalize and are therefore chosen by cultural leaders and intellectuals to represent the nationalistic aspirations of their groups or communities. Russian literary nationalism in the nineteenth century was no exception. It became a unique combination of Cossack brotherhood and love for the cultural and geographical entity called Russia generating strong emotions of patriotism and sacrifice. The works of Nicholai Gogol (1809-1852), Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Vasily Surikov (1848-1916) and Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) created literary, musical and art nationalisms aiding the formation and growth of Russian patriotism and sacrifice. The early appreciation of French thought and culture by the Russian aristocracy, and later

disillusionment with it after the invasion of Russia by Napoleon in 1812, led to the creation of a distinct literary nationalism in Russia somewhat separate from Europe. The Slavophile Movement endorsing rural Russian values and institutions further eroded any residual love for Europe in Russia. In his writings Gogol represented the idea of a decadent and pretentious landed aristocracy within a robust and fun-loving society undergoing transformation. The iconic realism and didactic persuasion of Gogol's short stories and novels brought about a new representation of Russia. He expanded the concept of Cossack brotherhood and regional Russian identity and gave them a national color. Nineteenth century literary nationalism concretized the exuberance of a nation ready to embark on a journey of unification and self-discovery.

In the last five hundred years Russia has evolved as a cultural and geographical entity, distinct from Western Europe, through debates amongst religious scholars and Russo-centric writers, musicians and painters. Though the idea of Russia may have been shaped in the late fifteenth century by Kyivan monks, it was only in the late nineteenth century that the notion of a Russian nationalism as an ethnic, psychological and geographical entity began to take shape through debates by Russian scholars, artists and writers (Plokhly, 2017 ix). The merciless oppression by dictatorial regimes and foreign powers in Europe gave rise to a Hegelian romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century which campaigned for self-determination and group interest. Newly created nation states like Germany unifying surrounding regions and revolting states like Greece and Bulgaria pioneered the zeitgeist of the age by opting for democratic governments based on new concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity. Hegel believed that in an age where monarchies were in retreat, a strong feeling of nationality was the only glue that could keep modern societies together. And he was right to some extent.

Ploky mentions in *Lost kingdom: The Quest for Empire* that the idea of Russia as a “Slavo-Russian” nation emerges around 1472 through discussions by Kievan monks—a “Kyiv-centric vision of Rus’ and its history” (Ploky, 2017 40). These discussions continue well into the nineteenth century expanding themselves into ethnic, geographical and psychological debates of the identity of the nation (Ploky, 2017 40). The Slavophiles such as Aleksey Khomyakov (1894-1860), Ivan Kireyevsky, (1806-1856) and Konstantin Aksakov 1817-1860) emphasized ancient values and institutions; and began to create a distinct cultural identity away from Western Europe through the Slavophile Movement which campaigned for the superiority of village culture. Russian literary nationalism was created by Gogol who imagined the exuberant energy of Russia as a speeding carriage and created a lovable Cossack hero Tarus Bulba in a typical impressionistic manner. Today both the Russians and the Ukrainians claim his literary nationalism as intrinsically theirs.

In recent times critics of Gogol like Edyta Bojanowsha believe that the Russocentric stories that Gogol imagined ironically played against his belief in Ukrainian nationalism with a cultural completeness and a heroic past. Undoubtedly Gogol’s attempt to create the idea of a Russian nation had to reckon with his imperialist beliefs and Ukrainian nationalism. Most scholars have skirted the issue of “exclusionist,” “essentialist,” and imperialist biases in Gogol’s writing (Bojanowsha, 2007 7). Some scholars point out that Gogol was exorcised with the problem of *dvoedushie* or double soul where he battled with the notion of a “divided Russian-Ukrainian loyalty” (Bojanowsha, 2007 9). The ideological imperatives in his literary imaginings makes the evaluation of his literary works not so easy.

The problem of the double soul may not be just representation of divided ethnic

loyalty but an ideological imperative. There was always a choice to be made between ideas originating from Europe and those originating from Russia about nation and national identity. Most Russian writers had to reckon with the idea of nationalism as it was being imagined in Europe and at home. Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Russia in 1812 and the subsequent disillusionment of the Russian aristocracy with French culture spurred the creativity of Russian writers, painters and musicians to create their own idea of Russian nationalism. Gogol was no exception. The emergence of nationalist ideas in European culture during the nineteenth century had to reckon with imperialist beliefs in every area of life—political, social and cultural. A new possibility of imagining world societies and humanity began to take shape through self-reflection and self-analysis. Russia was also embroiled in this ideological debate and Gogol found himself at the center. The ideological debates about the concept of nationalism in the Continent and its literary imaginings at home also played an important role in shaping the identity of Russian nationhood.

In the nineteenth century European nationalism gave rise to a selective narrative of history which formed a “collective imagination.” Religious and cultural leaders used the assimilationist narrative to create “national communities” in Russia (Strickland, 2013 4). John Strickland writes,

An effective way of spreading such narratives, was to organize public commemorations of symbolic events that featured the idealized collective experience. Such commemorations enabled cultural leaders to select the content of the past and, by doing so, to inscribe meaning upon it (Strickland, 2013 4).

Using “public commemorations of symbolic events” helped leaders to eulogize

an “idealized collective experience” and selectively use the past to build the present. It worked well.

Ideological Underpinnings and Intentions

Literary nationalism is a function of intention and intentions are often suspect. The “function and value of writing” can be located in the intention of the literary critic not the partial perception of the writer (Johnson, 1981 xxiv). When literary perception is interpreted within an intention, it acquires meaning for society or a nation. Literature as history, literature as politics, literature as identity, literature as self-revelation or literature as collective aspiration, are all functions of intentions, not of the author but of the ‘other,’ unless the text is propaganda. Literary texts are targeted to give a strong sense of identity in a group and generate strong emotions in their conglomeration.

Derrida argues in *Dissemination* (1981) that literary texts are free-floating artifacts, hiding their craft, but revealing their singular interpretation of the world as if representing the entire world. “A unilateral interpretation would conclude that Nature (the world in its entirety) and the Book (the voluminous binding of all writing) were one. If this oneness were not a given, it would simply have to be reconstituted” (Derrida, 1981 56). Literature often does not tell us of its method of composition, the rules of its game. Derrida argues,

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first corner, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible (Derrida, 1981 63).

Literature advertises its own cheapness and revels in a mimesis of language. Literary criticism pretends to unravel the hidden meanings of a literary text and

the dalliance of language and fails to tell the truth. Derrida is quite critical of the facade of literary wholeness and the complete representativeness of literary texts. And yet nationalists and intellectuals select literary texts to represent nation and nationhood.

Craig Calhoun reduces the concept of nationalism into three broad categories namely discourse through language, project through movements and policies, and evaluation through privileging certain political and cultural beliefs. He misses the role that global ideas and local imaginings play in creating unique conceptions of nationhood. He writes,

First, there is nationalism as discourse: the production of a cultural understanding and rhetoric which leads people throughout the world to think and frame their aspirations in terms of the idea of nation and national identity, and the production of particular versions of nationalist thought and language in particular settings and traditions. Second, there is nationalism as project: social movements and state policies by which people attempt to advance the interests of collectivities they understand as nations, usually pursuing in some combination (or in historical progression) increased participation in an existing state, national autonomy ... or the amalgamation of territories. Third, there is nationalism as evaluation: political and cultural ideologies that claim superiority for a particular nation ... In this sense, nationalism is often given the status of an ethical imperative; national boundaries ought to coincide with state boundaries, for example, members of a nation ought to conform to its moral values (Calhoun, 1998 6).

If Calhoun believes that the linguistic rhetoric includes literary representation to

produce nationalist identity there is no quarrel with him. But if not, it is impossible to understand the emergence of Russian nationalism without the strong nationalistic emotion that literature created.

Gogol's Literary Perceptions

Gogol reimagines the Cossack identity of Russia as proto-imperialist and tribal nationalist, something that early nineteenth century Russian writers like Tolstoy and painters like Surikov and musicians like Tchaikovsky imagined. Tolstoy while chronicling the French conquest of Russia imagined the aggrandizing power of nation states and the benefits of war. In *War and Peace* (1869) he wrote,

All historians agree that the external activity of states and nations, in their conflicts among themselves, is expressed in wars; that the political power of states and nations increases or decreases owing directly to their greater or lesser military successes (Tolstoy, 2008 1031).

The idea of “military successes” linked to the growing “political power” of a nation was a cruel reality that Tolstoy acknowledged even while he campaigned for peace. The supremacy of the people and the importance of their will were valued by Tolstoy above everything. In chapter 16 of *Anna Karenina* Sergei Ivanovich, well-versed in rhetoric, changes the direction of the conversation to the will of the people and claims it can be understood not by logic but intuition—“It is felt in the air, it is felt by the heart. Not to mention those undercurrents that have stirred up the stagnant sea of the people and are clear to any unprejudiced person” (Tolstoy, 2000 807). An intuitive understanding of Russian nation based on the culture and tradition of the past adds new dimensions to the imagining of Russian nationalism.

Not only literature but painting too imagined the nation through events, landscape and portraits. Painters like Surikov were more direct and realistic in their representation of nation and nationhood. Surikov used intense images of Cossack landscape, history, customs and people to create the identity of a new nation; paintings such as “Yermak’s Subjugation of Serbia” (1895) and “Crossing the Alps” (1899) reveal the strength of battle-hardened spirit while “The Taking of a Snow Town” (1891) and “Portrait of a Young Woman” (1911) endurance and exuberance. There is both tenacity of purpose and intensity in his works. Surikov’s paintings gave “shape and Persistence and transformation of nations” (Smith, 2009 89). The local and national merge in images created by Gogol, Tolstoy and Surikov.

The immediacy of emotion stirring quality of music was employed widely in both Europe and Russia to generate emotions of love and patriotism for the nation. Frolova-Walker explains that Russian musicians of the nineteenth century introduced folk music uplifting the gloomy temperament of the Russians which was later used to whip up emotions of patriotism for the nation. Both literary nationalism and musical nationalism gave impetus to Russian nationalism (Frolova-Walker, 2007 ix-x). Russian composers called Mighty Kuchka and others like Tchaikovsky gave shape to an emerging nation through their unique musical styles.

The process where the local turns national is essential to imagining national identity. After giving an emotional legitimacy to a community it is possible to raise it to the level of a nation which involves bringing together multiple ethnicities and communities. The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) explains that local communities function within the political model of “self-government” while national societies use the political model of an

“autocratic state.” The divergent perspectives are summed up by him thus,

The self-governing Cossack community (*volnitsa*) demonstrates above all the dualism, the contradictory nature of the Russian national character: on the one hand they humbly helped the Russian people build the despotic, autocratic state, but on the other hand they retreated into their self-governing communities, turning their backs on the state and stirring up rebellion against it (Berdyayev, 2000 15).

Failing to fix the contradiction Russia imagined its civilization as singularly unique and spiritual though often the reality belied this vision.

The struggle between Russia and Europe, the East and the West, was represented as that between the spirit and religious culture, on the one hand, and a soulless aesthetic civilization, on the other. It was believed that Russia would not enter upon the path of European civilization, that it would follow a path and destiny of its own and that it was capable only of a religious and authentically spiritual culture. This theme was very dominant in the Russian consciousness (Berdyayev, 2006 208).

Writers were expressing the new culture of authenticity, of values of humility and humanity. But what they saw was an age of muflisme, mediocrity and duplicity. Therefore, they wanted to create a nation that fitted their ideal, their consciousness, their perception. Berdyayev writes,

Culture is not the realization of a new life or state of being, but of new values. All its achievements are symbolic. It does not realize the truth, goodness, beauty, power or divinity of life. It realizes truth only in philosophical and scientific treatises; goodness in ethics and social

commandments; beauty in poems, pictures, statues, plays, music or architectural monuments' divinity only in cult and religious symbolism. Its centre of gravity lies below and weighs down the creative act. Similes, images and symbols are all the means it has of communicating the new life or the higher state of being. The creative act of knowledge gives birth to the scientific work; the creative ethical act brings about the establishment of customs and institutions; the creative religious act establishes the cult, dogma and symbolic structure of the Church which is but the similitude of the heavenly hierarchy. Where, then, is the 'life' itself? For culture does not seem to be able to achieve a real transfiguration. And dynamic energy within the crystallized forms of culture leads irreparably away from culture, to the experience and power of 'life.' And this constitutes the transition from culture to civilization (Berdyayev, 2006 208).

The creative acts of culture hide deep within and are ethical and symbolic. This ethical inner being of a nation creates a new political, cultural, scientific and psychological edifice represented in the nation. However Russian progress towards enlightenment was slow as people enjoyed vast amounts of freedom and yet they were plagued by authoritarianism and injustice.

This dichotomy in society which simultaneously contained oppression and freedom was felt by writers and philosophers too. In *The Origins of Russian Communism* (1960) Berdyayev explained,

Russia in the nineteenth century was self-contradictory and unhealthy; in it there was oppression and injustice, but psychologically and morally it was not a bourgeois country and it set itself against the bourgeoisie

countries of the West. In this unique country political despotism was united with great freedom and breath of life, with freedom in manner of life, with absence of barriers, imposed conventions and legalism (Berdyayev, 1960 18).

The “self-contradictory and unhealthy” aspects of nineteenth century Russian society was felt in the fact that it had “political despotism” and yet enjoyed “great freedom.” It tried to challenge the bourgeoisie societies of Europe and yet remained quite feudal and retrograde.

Tarus Bulba–Curing Ailing Souls and Cossack Brotherhood

The didactic quality of Gogol’s writing is inescapable. He wants to present the superior quality of Russian virtues of patriotism and sacrifice. He is keen to create public awareness and bring about reformed thinking. Vladimir Nabokov in his persuasive book on the life of Gogol is of this view. He believes that Gogol wanted his readers to eschew their “national defects” and improve upon their “national virtues” (Nabokov, 1961 133). Nabokov writes,

Gogol decided that the purpose of literary art was to cure ailing souls by producing in them a sense of harmony and peace. The treatment was also to include a strong dose of didactic medicine. He proposed to portray national defects and national virtues in such a manner as to help readers to persevere in the latter and rid themselves of the former (Nabokov, 1961 133).

Gogol represented the obvious contradictions of Russian society of the nineteenth century, limited by despotic institutions and possessing the energy to

unite against the Poles. The dislike between the Russians and Poles was palpable. The Russians looked down on the Poles and found them spiritually debased while the Poles saw the Russians as gutless. In *The Enemy with a Thousand Faces* (2000) Harle Vihlo writes,

Russian attitudes toward Poland were rather negative. In Russian national mythology the Western invader, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was held to be a Western variant of the Tartar Yoke, a godless mass of people spiritually inferior to the Russians. A widespread Russian stereotype pictured a Pole as a proud, imprudent, and fraudulent person. During and after the 1830-31 insurrection many Russian writers voluntarily participated in anti-Polish propaganda. Gogol wrote *Taras Bulba*, an anti-Polish novel of high literary merit, to say nothing about lesser writers (Harle, 2000 130-31).

The Poles too shared a “rather negative view of the Russians. Vihlo continues,

The dominant Polish stereotype saw Russians as cowardly Barbarians with a slave’s mind. Another key element in the stereotype was the antithesis between moral, Christian Poles and immoral, godless Russians (Harle 2000 130)

Gogol was trying to manage both the Russian and Polish stereotype when he wrote *Taras Bulba* (1835). Gogol’s “anti-Polish” novel creates the indomitable spirit of Taras Bulba who loves Russia and Cossack brotherhood intensely and is willing to sacrifice his family and life for both. Bulba’s idea of the Cossack brotherhood and the Russian national soul can be gauged from his speech:

‘No, comrades! to love as the Russian heart can love—to love not with the mind or anything else, but with all that God has given you, all that is in you—Ah ...’ said Taras , and he waved his hand while his gray head trembled and his mustache twitched. ‘No!’ he said “No one can love like that!’ (Gogol, 1985 99).

When Balaban is about to die he cries, “‘May Holy Russia live forever, and may her glory be eternal!’” (Gogol, 1985 103)! Before Kukubenko dies he ends his passionate speech with the words,

‘I thank god that it is my lot to die before your eyes, comrades! May men better than we live after us, and may Russia, beloved of Christ, flourish forever ...! And his young soul fled. The angels received it in their arms and bore it to heaven’ (Gogol, 1985 106).

Both Balaban’s and Kukubenko’s statements make us understand that the love for the Fatherland and Cossack brotherhood is synonymous. Without this mission of love there can be no ready sacrifice. Gogol creates the indomitable character of Bulba to endorse his message of a hero who can fight for the Cossacks against non-Christian Tartar hordes and the Poles, even at the cost of his life and his family. He sees his eldest son, Ostrap, captured and executed by the Poles and himself slays his younger son, Andrei, for betrayal. His revenge on the Poles is merciless. He is wounded many times and ultimately sacrifices his life joyfully for the Great Brotherhood of the Cossacks in a cruel death by fire. For Bulba both the Zoporozhian Stech—living with the Cossacks—and going to war with them create a real Cossack.

And all of the camp prayed in one church and was ready to defend it to the

last drop of their blood, though they would not hear of fasting and abstinence (Gogol, 1985 44).

Though Bulba believes more in actual combat he yet sends his sons to the Kiev Seminary to study. Perhaps it is his uneducated simplicity coupled with a passionate understanding of the world that makes him a great leader. Ostrap calls him a practical but knowledgeable leader:

‘What a fellow Father is! The elder son Ostrap thought to himself. ‘The old man knows it all, the dog, and feigns ignorance, too’ (Gogol, 1985 26).

Bulba is not perfect. He has his own whims and fancies; he is often not cautious. But he enjoys the reputation of being a merciless and a cunning warrior, one who hides his power and ability only to reveal it on the field of battle. He “feigns ignorance” of the world, though he is the one who knows the world the best. Gogol works against the Polish stereotype of the Russians as “cowardly” and “godless”.

Bulba is beyond reason. He wants the whole of life, not just a part of it. A few decades later Fyodor Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground* (1864) voiced similar concerns. In his rambling existential style Dostoevsky’s character states,

You see: reason, gentlemen, is a fine thing, that is unquestionable, but reason is only reason and satisfies only man’s reasoning capacity, while wanting is a manifestation of the whole of life—that is, the whole of human life, including reason and various little itches (Dostoevsky, 1994 28).

Bulba, like the protagonist in *Notes from Underground* wants “the whole of human life, including reason and various little itches.” Bulba has the energy to create a new Russia.

The Coach and the Making of a Nation

The exuberance of a nation can best be imagined through a short story. Gogol wrote called *Calash* or “The Coach,” a four-wheel horse driven carriage, in 1836 which began to symbolize pretentious elegance, decaying power and new energy of the town. Gogol chose a sleepy town which soon found a new energy with the coming of a cavalry regiment and the “headquarters of the general of the brigade” (Gogol, 1985 241). The cavalry itself could be a symbol of the imperialistic rule of Alexander I (1801-1825) who conducted educational reforms early in his reign but turned dictatorial towards the end. Perhaps the mare *Agrafiona Ivanovna* could represent the graceful feline beauty of the South. The pretentious landlord *Pythagoras Pythagoravitch Chertokutsky* could symbolize a decadent aristocracy with no moral principles, only self-interest. The shared carriage at the regimental quarters, could stand for the closely-knit social structure and energy.

Seeing the story in detail it can be said that Gogol presents a nondescript town with fun-loving but pretentious people. The dilapidated, “terribly sour” and “dull” district town of B in South Russia becomes lively with the arrival of a regiment (Gogol, 1985 241). There are hardly any trees in this dusty town as the city mayor has cut them down to get a better view, and when it rains pigs grunt and roll in the slush on the streets. Travelers want to leave the place quickly as the marketplace too has a somewhat “melancholy air” (Gogol, 1985 241). Occasionally a carriage passes by laden with “sacks of flour” to brighten up the

dullness of the town (Gogol, 1985 240). The judge and the mayor are not quite dutiful members of society. The carriage of the regiment officers going through the market place to make purchases causes “great animation.” The “neighboring landowners” now visit the town to play cards called “banks” and forget “thoughts of crops and hares and their wives’ commissions” (Gogol, 1985 241-42). The general of the brigade gives a lavish dinner to important persons in the town including landowner Chertokutsky, a “leading aristocrat of the town” with a dubious past. He had to “resign his commission” in the cavalry regiment having caused some “unpleasantness” to which we are not privy to (Gogol, 1985 242). He dresses well, has a “rather pretty wife” and “fine-rate horses, gilt locks on the doors, a tame monkey, and a French butler for the household” and was a ladies’ man (Gogol, 1985 242-43). However, he advertises himself as a cocky retired military officer, driving a phaeton. He is a failed businessman, having “mortgaged to the bank” his serfs “for the sake of some commercial operations” (Gogol, 1985 243). Gogol presents an image of decadence.

The fat general was usually seen drinking, eating and playing whisk. It was not clear why he gave a “big dinner” at a “vast scale” emptying out the provisions of the town, forcing the judge and his deaconess to live on “buckwheat cakes” (Gogol 1985 242). The dinner had choice fish, poultry, vegetables, wines, champagnes, ice-cream and lots of tobacco. Chertokutsky had already sold an excellent mare to the general and now wanted to sell a calash which he had won at a game of cards; it was a fine piece and its original cost was 4000 rubles, though nobody believed him. Chertokutsky played whisk, drank a lot and listened to a colonel describing an 1812 battle that had “never taken place” (Gogol, 1985 247). He went home drunk at 3 am and immediately went to sleep without informing his wife of his dinner invitation to the general and his entourage. The next day the general and his entourage came. Discovering that he

had forgotten the dinner invitation he panicked and hid himself in the coach. The general wanting to see the coach firsthand flipped the cover of the coach and discovered Chertokutsky hiding in it “clad in his dressing gown” (Gogol, 1985 251). Surprised he only said “Hullo, there you are” and went back.

The didactic nature of Gogol’s works and his belief in enhancing human values proved to be more amenable for creating Russian literary nationalism. His literary nationalism expanded the metaphors of the Cossack brotherhood and love of rural Russia and combined the two into a national whole. He presented a new Russia, distinct from the debasing values of Europe, as a receptacle of true Christian faith and strong moral values. The shift away from Europe had its historical antecedents but Gogol’s didactic persuasions gave a new spin to popular attitudes and stereotypes prevalent in Russia during the nineteenth century. In his stories Gogol presented the “heart of Russia” with its “nurses and children, stout landowners and their daughters” who visited fairs and “flock[ed] to enjoy themselves, driving in chaises with hoods, gigs, wagonettes, and carriages such as have never been seen in the wildest dreams (Gogol, 1985 242). He introduced different social classes in his stories who were coming together to create a new life and a new nation.

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