

Russian-Ottoman Wars and Modern Russian Identity

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Russia's 18th and 19th century wars with the Ottoman Empire gave rise to numerous accounts, which constructed the image of the "Turk" as the "Other" of a westernizing monarchy and imperial elite. This paper examines how the absolutization of cultural difference and creation of the symbolic boundary in the course of imperial encounter served as a powerful mechanism asserting common identity of an otherwise heterogeneous body of imperial officers and administrators. Based upon this opposition, the discourse of Russia's civilizing mission served to sustain the claim of Russian monarchy for the membership in the European "family" of states. The main part of the paper seeks to contribute to recent debates on the character of Russian "orientalism" by investigating the contradictions in the identity of Russian privileged class as they transpired in the 19th century war discourse.

The "Orient" and "Eastern Europe"

Eighteenth century European accounts of the Ottoman Empire were grounded in the assumption that the Ottomans were essentially hostile to enlightenment and civilization, which itself was rooted on the long tradition of representing the "Turk" as the "Other" of Europe. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople the "otherness" of the "Turk" was asserted mainly in religious terms. Relunched by the Pope Pius II in the mid 15th century, the theme of the crusades was later transformed into the discourse of the "Eastern mission" of the Habsburg emperors consisting in saving the Christendom from Islamic conquest. After the defeat of the Ottoman army at Vienna in 1683, predominantly religious connotations of the Ottoman "otherness" gave way to political and cultural ones. The Ottoman Empire was not part of the European state system, which emerged after the peace of Westphalia of 1648, while the government of the Sultan provided a ready example of despotism, which in the age of enlightenment constituted the antithesis of the civilized and rational government.¹ The Ottomans' stubborn support of their traditional institutions, during the long period of the imperial decline only confirmed the impression of cultural "foreignness" of the power, which otherwise for centuries controlled a substantial part of European territory and was an important factor of the European "balance of power." The realm of the Sultans associated with political instability, despotism, luxury and sensuality became the most concrete illustration of an "Oriental" society that in all important respects constituted the logical opposite of the enlightened, industrious and prospering Europe. In other words, the Ottoman Empire became the principle *topos* of the symbolic geography implied by intellectual phenomenon of "orientalism" defined by Edward Said as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over Orient."² Building upon Michel Foucault's notion of "discourse" and Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Said defined "orientalism" as a "structure of cultural domination" meaning not only a totality of the ideas about Europe's superiority to the East, but the unchallenged hegemony of these very ideas producing "positional superiority" of a Westerner in all possible relationships with the "Orient."³

The switch from religious to secularized terms also occurred in the perception of the Orthodox peoples of South-Eastern and Eastern Europe. If earlier they were viewed primarily as the Greek Orthodox with all the feelings that this religious denomination was capable of producing in a Catholic or Protestant hearts, with time they became treated in terms of their position on the scale of enlightenment, in which the Oriental despotism of the sultans and the civilized countries of Europe constituted the logical opposites. The problematique of symbolic geographies implied in Said's book, was creatively approached by Larry Wolff and Maria

¹ Iver Neuman, *Ispol'zovanie "Drugogo."* Moscow: Novoie izdatel'stvo, 2004, 72-98.

² Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

Todorova, who studied Western European perceptions of Eastern Europe and the Balkans respectively, demonstrating the importance of “semi-orientalizing” discourses alongside classical “orientalism” in the formation of the European identity.⁴ Cast against the fundamental oppositions of “European-ness,” and “non-European-ness,” barbarity and civilization, stressing ambiguity and “in-betweenness”, the representations of Eastern Europe and the Balkans treated these territories as regions of Europe’s potential extension and the space of its natural “civilizing mission.” In the context of the present study, the works by Said, Wolff and Todorova allow understanding how with the emergence of orientalizing and semi-orientalizing discourses the old religious frontiers between Christendom and Islam, Catholicism and Orthodoxy turned into a frontier separating “civilization” from “barbarity”, while the rhetoric of crusades turned into mission to civilize the lands that had the misfortune of falling under an unenlightened yoke.

Russia’s “Internal Colonization” Project

In opposition to the Ottoman rulers of the 18th century seeking to resuscitate their might through “traditionalistic reforms”, Russian monarchs of the 18th century spared no effort in order to become part of the European states system and get recognition as enlightened rulers. Their ambitious military, political and cultural agenda offers the first instance of “westernization” understood as conscious adaptation of Western technology and cultural forms by a society that originally did not participate in their creation. Started by Peter the Great, this westernization had as its most important result the internalization of the maxims of the rational and orderly government as well as forms of polite sociability by the elite elements of the society⁵. Neither Peter the Great nor his successors fully managed to imitate a “well-ordered police state” of German territorial rulers, but, paradoxically, their apparent failure did not contradict the character of their undertaking. Moreover, the principal incompleteness of Russian variation of the “enlightenment project” became the major organizing factor of Russian history, which after Peter can be viewed as a succession of various modernization impulses. These different variants of the “enlightenment project” might have been formulated in explicit opposition to each other, but all of them tended to view Russia as a more or less empty space, whereupon a new society can be built. Russia’s “enlightenment project” was rooted in the 18th century symbolic geography that perceived Russia as part of Eastern Europe, geographically and symbolically located between “Europe” and the “Orient” and constituting the space of Europe’s potential expansion through the realization of its civilizing mission. If the western superiority over the “Orient” resulted from essentialization of its “otherness”, cultural hegemony of Europe over Eastern projection had to do with perpetuation ad infinitum of the teacher – pupil relationship lying at the basis of any discourse of civilizing mission. What mattered was not the final result of the educative process, but constantly changing content of “enlightenment” that conditioned the perpetuation of the quasi-pedagogical authority structure.

By virtue of early started westernization Russia escaped a colonial domination by foreign power(s), yet the policies of the 18th and 19th century Russian monarchs towards their subjects allow speaking of an “internal colonization project.”⁶ In fact, there was no fundamental difference between the approach of the Habsburg rulers towards the peoples populating the Danubian frontier and the treatment of the Russian peasants by the successors of Peter the

⁴ Larry Wolff, *The Invention of Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of Enlightenment*. Stanford.: Stanford University Press, 1994, 517-518, 539. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁵ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, 369-370. Raeff, “Transfiguration and Modernization: The Paradoxes of Social Disciplining, Pedagogical Leadership, and the Enlightenment in the 18th century Russia.” in Idem, *Political Ideas and Institutions of Imperial Russia*, 1994, 341. For the social practices of courtly etiquette and ceremony and their political effect see Norbert Elias, *Court Society*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, 78-116.

⁶ Alexander Etkind, “Fuko i imperaskaia Rossia: distsiplinarnyie praktiki v usloviakh vnutrennei kolonizatsii,” 166-191.

Great. Before the age of nationalism producing various ethnic ontologies idealizing the peasant as the supreme embodiment of nation, the absolutist rulers and political elites of Central and Eastern Europe tended to view their peasants as “barbarians” or “children” and therefore as the object of a never ending civilizing process. Operating within this conceptual universe, Russia’s ruling class portrayed itself as the champion of European enlightenment thereby seeking to acquire and maintain cultural hegemony over all the peoples that were within the horizon of Russian expansion. For Russian monarchs and imperial elite the acceptance of semi-orientalizing discourse of Eastern Europe was, at the same time, a means of escaping it and a condition of both their independence vis-à-vis the western European powers and of their political dominance over all segments of Eastern European population that still remained “uncivilized” no matter their formal social status. Other Eastern European nobilities either had to merge into the imperial elite or else be relegated to the status of the “uncivilized” together with the masses of Eastern European peasantry.

Russian-Ottoman Wars and the Conquest of the Symbolic Frontier

A series of wars with the Sultans undertaken by Russian rulers constituted an important aspect of Russia’s own cultural westernization. On the one hand, the declining Ottoman Empire represented a relatively weak enemy, the victory over which, nevertheless, added to the prestige of a rising power. On the other hand, Russian propaganda could use the common perception of the Ottoman government as despotic and inimical to enlightenment in order to legitimize conquests, whose geopolitical implications might otherwise appear worrisome for the advocates of the European balance of power. Thus, in her first war with the Ottoman Empire Catherine the Great enjoyed an enthusiastic support of Voltaire, who perceived this war as the struggle between civilization and barbarity. Russian writers of the early 19th century developed this theme asserting that the despotic Ottoman government had no moral right to rule over the Christian provinces. Thus, Russian periodical *The Telegraph* provided a justification for the war that Russia conducted against the Ottoman empire in 1828-1829 arguing that “the enlightenment, which sheds its benevolent rays onto the better part of Europe, is in stark contrast with the barbarian spirit of the Ottoman government.”⁷ However, most importantly, Russian-Ottoman wars offered Russian monarchy and the imperial elite a concrete opportunity to *feel European* by acting in ways, which they believed suitable for a civilized nation, in contrast to the “barbarian” characteristics displayed by their enemy.

The military operations themselves provided the most immediate elan for this counterposition. Russian accounts were based on the assumption that the way of conducting wars is the consequence of mores, way of life and character of a people. Thus, in Europe “the softening of mores leads to the respect natural rights of human beings in war, as the result of which the war is based more on the art than on the force.”⁸ Whereas Russia put up a disciplined army employing the latest strategy and tactics of the European military science, the Ottoman army consisted of the most diverse elements motivated by religious fanaticism and marauding, putting all their energy in the first violent onslaught, but rarely capable of organized maneuvering. As a result Russian military-minded writers defined the ability to withstand the first attack of the Ottomans as the key to eventual victory over them. Late 18th – early 19th century victories of the Russian armies served as the proof to the general point that the “ignorance and fury of the Asians” can be vanquished “by the art and cold blood of the Europeans.”⁹ At the same time, Russian authors emphasized the exclusively military character of the Ottoman dominance comparing their presence in Europe to a military camp. The general popularity of war among the “Turks” was seen as the surrogate of political freedom absent in conditions of despotic government. The hidden irony of such rhetoric consisted in the fact that European writers like Bonald used the metaphor of the “military camp” in respect of Russia

⁷ “Vzgliad na sostoianie Turetskogo gosudarstva.” *Telegraf*, 1829, no. 17, 87.

⁸ An. Pushkin, “Vzgliad na voennoie sostoianie Turetskoi imperii,” *Vestnik Evropy*, 1826 № 10, 187.

⁹ *Ibid.*

itself reflecting the fact that for a century after the death of Peter the Great Western-like army and the victories that it achieved over European armies constituted the most significant proof of Russia's westernization.

The personality of the emperor played a very important role in the discourse of war. The emperor symbolized the political identity of the imperial elite and the glorification of the ruler was in fact a means of the nobility's self-glorification.¹⁰ Personal participation of the emperors in the war drew great attention of the Russian writers and brought the main themes of the Russian imperial discourse in still sharper focus. Like in almost any other domain, it was Peter the Great who set the example with his Azov campaigns in the end of the 17th century. The fact that the founder of the empire suffered a shattering defeat in the Pruth campaign of 1711 against the joint Ottoman-Tatar forces did not prevent the incorporation of this episode in the "Petrine myth."¹¹ Under the pen of Russian early 19th century writer Pavel Svinin, the story of Peter's defeat turned into a moral victory over his enemy Charles XII, in pursuit of whom Russian troops found themselves encircled by the overwhelming Ottoman and Tatar forces. Telling the story of Peter's ukaz to the Senate, in which he prohibited to take into consideration his pleas in case he is captured by the Ottomans, Svinin opposed it to the extravagancy of Karl XII, who after the Poltava defeat became de-facto Ottoman prisoner in the Bender fortress and sent his boot to rule Sweden. Contrasting with the extravagancy of Charles XII, the behavior of Peter the Great offered example of self-abnegation and care for the common good, which was an essential characteristic of an enlightened ruler.¹²

Peter's successors sought to emulate his exploits. Thus, the conquest of the Pontic steppe and the Crimea were part of the personal competition that Catherine the Great held with her predecessor until the end of her life. Against the background of Peter's failure the Pruth campaign, her success, firmly establishing Russia's presence on the Black sea, was particularly obvious. At the same time, the empress demonstrated magnanimity granting liberal access to all who wished to settle on the new lands, which placed her in favorable light in comparison with harsh approach of the tsar-reformer. Peter and Catherine offered two contrasting and at the same time mutually complimentary examples for the 19th century Russian monarchs, who sought to imitate both the heroic stature of the former and the liberality of the latter. Thus, highlighting the participation of Nicholas I in the 1828 campaign on the Danube, the author of "semi-official" account of this war, F. V. Bulgarin compared Nicholas I to the founder of modern Russia stressing the readiness of both to risk their lives for the benefit of the country and at the same time, emphasized Nicholas' magnanimity in the treatment of the vanquished Ottomans. Reflecting on the Adrianople peace treaty that concluded the war, Bulgarin enthusiastically proclaimed that "the moral power of the Ottoman Empire fell in the struggle with the European enlightenment, and their physical might was shattered by the blow of the impregnable Russia. The will of the Russian emperor shook this colossus, his magnanimity prevented its collapse."¹³

The discourse of Russia's "civilizing mission" in the Northern Black sea region and the Balkans provided an important corollary of the war rhetoric. The Pontic and Danubian steppe that provided the battlegrounds for the Russian armies also were conceptualized as the space of colonization. In a book titled "A Voyage to Southern Russia and Crimea through Hungary, Wallachia and Moldavia undertaken in 1837" Anatolii Demidov confessed an "irresistible desire to study the countries that had remained uncultivated for so long, but recently have been conquered and civilized (obrazovannykh) with all the diligence, which they merit." Demidov referred specifically to Southern Russia and Crimea, nevertheless, both the title and the content

¹⁰ Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*. Vol I. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

¹¹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

¹² Svinin, "Iz vospominanii v stepiakh bessarabskikh," *Otechestvennyie zapiski*, Part 11, No. 27, iul' 1822, 11-23.

¹³ F. V. Bulgarin, *Kartina voiny Rossii s Turtsieuv tsarstvovanie imperatora Nikolaia I*. SPb: Grech, 1830, 15.

of the book testified that the author placed Hungary, Moldavia and Wallachia in the same category as the two Russian provinces. The symbolic geography underling Demidov's work referred to the Danubian and Pontic steppe as parts of the same space, whose past was defined by nomadic devastations and the Ottoman dominance, but whose present and future were conditioned by the benevolent action of European powers and first of all Russia. Finally, Demidov's representation of the countries that he visited provides a good illustration of fundamental ambiguity of the region's mental mapping that was characteristic of semi-orientalizing discourses of Eastern Europe and Balkanism. Characteristically, the author took interest in seeing these lands precisely at the moment, "when there is still a possibility to capture the last traces of this effacing historical way of life and, at the same time, understand the way, in which this barbarity turned into civilization and how a hope for the future developed out of this terrible past."¹⁴

It is important to understand that the conquest and colonization of the Pontic and the Danubian steppe were conceived within the same a conceptual universe predicated on the symbolic geography of the 18th century enlightenment. In this respect the imperial frontier represented an outward projection of Russia's "internal colonization project" for both were seen as parts of the symbolic frontier between civilization, represented by a westernized monarchy and imperial elite, and the forces of barbarity. At the same time, the discourse whereby the Russian monarchy and imperial elite asserted their western identity in the imperial encounter with the Ottomans and their subject peoples could not cover the growing tensions. The victories over the Ottoman Empire and territorial annexations that they entailed, contributed to the perception of Russian Empire as a threat to European balance of power and stimulate reconceptualization of Russia from a space most suitable for the experiments in enlightened government into a variation of oriental despotism.¹⁵ On their part, 19th century successors of Catherine the Great apprehended the revolutionary implications of the enlightenment political philosophy, while imperial elite grew increasingly tired of their position of simple imitators of European fashions and developed various forms of "national consciousness" eventually producing the ethnic ontology of Slavophilism that conceptualized Russia as an original civilization in opposition to "Europe." Meanwhile, a direct confrontation with the "West" in the course of the Crimean war precipitated a reappraisal of traditional struggle with the Ottoman Empire. Alongside the official ideology of the wars, there emerged liberal, Pan-Slavic and Pan-Orthodox interpretations of their objectives testifying progressive disintegration of former imperial elite and the "parting of ways" between the government and educated public. Finally, by the end of the 19th century the central position of the Ottoman Empire in the symbolic geography of Russian imperialism was overtaken by new territories in Asia and the far East, that for a period of time were portrayed as spaces of Russia's civilizing mission.

¹⁴ Anatolii Demidov, *Puteshestvie v Iuzhnuuu Rossiiu i Krym cherez Vengriuu, Valakhiuu i Moldaviuu sovershennoie v 1837 godu*. Moscow: Tipografiia Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1853, Preface.

¹⁵ On these changes see Martin Malia, *Russia Under the Western Eyes. From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin's Mausoleum*. Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1999, Chapter 2.