Russia’s Two Nordic Landscapes

The Source of Liberty

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The very formulation of the problem of "Russia and the North" seems somewhat paradoxical to the Russian consciousness, because since the time of the reforms of Peter I at the beginning of the eighteenth century the Russian empire entered the European cultural process and saw itself as a northern power. The new capital, rising up at the will of the emperor on the shores of the Baltic, was fondly known in government circles as the Northern Palmyra, the empress who ruled there as the Northern Minerva, while the better tragedians and poets were proudly called Northern Racines and Pindars. Regarding national mythology, one fact stood out as extraordinarily significant, namely that the founder of the Russian sciences and arts, Mikhail Lomonosov, came to Moscow with a fish transport from the north, out of the country of Arkhangelsk on the White Sea. He became a symbol of the creative capabilities of the country awakening to enlightenment.

"Soon, all the people will flow into the North to light their lamp," wrote the Young writer Nikolai Karamzin in 1788 in his verses "Poetry". He was to became the first author of a systematic History of the Russian State, which is still a significant work today. The soul of poetic inspiration, which had changed its place of sojourn ever since the creation of the world, already announced, according to Karamzin, its own appearance in the North on the banks of the rivers Neva and Moskva. The stormy growth of the political significance of the empire also increased its cultural consciousness. The historical mission of Russia became the widening of its immense territory, bringing knowledge from the Western world.

"With the successes of humanity, understanding and education, the North is continually developing and... will coalesce with enlightened Europe," wrote Batyushkov, one of Karamzin's students, polemicizing against Montesquieu's view of the North as a region unfavourable for the development of the sciences and the arts. Batyushkov took part in the 1812-14 war, when the North repaid its debt to Europe, liberating it from the Napoleonic tyranny. "We are here, the sons of the snows, beneath the banner of Moscow, with freedom and thunder," he writes in one of his poems, devoted to the campaign in which Russian officers, in whom Europe expected to see ferocious half-savages, subjugated Paris not only by force of arms but also by their refined manners and the impeccability of their French.

In this way, then, Russia, like the North, appeared as the continuation and the end of Europe, guarding the borders of Greco-Roman civilization. The poet Alexander Kushnyer says about this, already in the tragic intonations of the twentieth century: "Here... where
the snow is just like plaster or chalk, its [Europe's] own outpost is pushed forward to the final limit of its influence."

However being the far North in relation to Europe, the same Russia knew another North, a world of stern and natural landscapes, that made Russia itself seem the embodiment of middle-European civilization. If one looks closely at the picture of the North drawn by Russian literature and Russian art, then we can see distinctly two related and yet different patterns, which could be called the worlds of Finland and of Sweden.

During the whole of the eighteenth century the Finnish North consistently experienced the colonizing activities of the Russian emperors. After the Northern War, Karelia and the Baltic estuary of the Neva became part of the empire, and then the whole of Finland after the Russo-Swedish war of 1808-9. Consequently, Finland was regarded in the national geocultural thinking as a distant province, the outskirts, a poor and marshy region waking up to the new life. It was namely in these areas that a new capital arose, and the circumstances of this became one of the keys to the mythology of the Russian state. In the most mythogenic production of Russian literature, A. Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman", the story of the founding of St. Petersburg was expounded in verse which Russian high-school students and schoolchildren have learnt by heart for a hundred and fifty years:

Where once before the Finnish fisherman
One of nature's poor outcasts
Threw his dilapidated net
from the low shore ...
Palaces and towers jostle today
On the animated shores
In well-proportioned piles.

But the beauty of the primordial nature of this poor provincial region, untouched by man, struck Russians left there by fate. The poet Derzhavin, working in the Petrozavodsk district, was shaken by the power of the waterfall in Kivatch. He survived a storm on one of the Karelian lakes and, shaken, saw the fury of God in this tempest. "A diamond pours out of the hill / with four rock faces out of the sky," he wrote in the poem "The Waterfall". Pictures of Finnish and Karelian nature became of particular interest in Russian literature when romanticism introduced to it the fashion for wildness and primitivism: "He lay, as in a coffin in the cradle of the hills of the region with their boulders. He was quite encircled by the stony steppe and a chain of lakes."

Visiting Finland when in exile, the poets F. Glinka and E. Baratynski wrote poems in which they placed their heroines amongst these forests and lakes, clean and "wholesome" girls, dying of love for European civilization, represented here by the inhabitants of Petersburg.

But Finnish nature is not always a victim, uncomplainingly perishing under the pressure of civilization. It also has a strength capable of celebrating over the enemy and making its owner invincible, impossible to absorb.

"I died in terrifying lassitude, I began to breathe in the stink and the blood, I was not able to carry on in this house. But then iron Suomi Said: You will get to know about everything except joy, yet live, have courage," wrote Anna Akhmatova, accustomed to licking the mortal wounds brought by time on Finnish soil. Not for nothing does "The
Bronze Horseman" end with the rebellion of suppressed nature, destroying the works of man. Innumerable mystical prophecies about the fate of Petersburg promised its end at the bottom of the sea. The North stands up for itself.

The image of Sweden, to a considerable extent regarded in the Russian mind as a representation of the whole of Scandinavia, is built on quite different foundations. Here, there is far less intimate suffering on account of its own history, Finland for Russia being what Russia is for Europe, and more in the way of interested attention and jealous rivalry.

Russia waged long, bloody and largely successful wars with Sweden, yet Russian reformers from Peter I to Gorbachev invariably sought models there. Strictly speaking, this story began even earlier, because the foundations of the Russian State were laid by the calling in of the Varangians and it was Scandinavians who were the first princes in Kiev and Novgorod.

If the Finn in Russian culture is a ploughman or fisherman, the Swede, Norwegian, Varangian and Viking are warriors or scalds. The song of the holy scalds - that is the reward for those who fell gloriously in battle. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the fashion for Scandinavian mythology came, on all accounts from France, to Russia, along with sonorous names: Odin, Hel, Valhalla, their ominous and bewitching colourings filling Russian verse. It is possible to see an unusual northern antithesis to the ancient Olympus in the German gods, important to the Slavs who of course had not created a Pantheon of their own.

"The places are charming in their desolation, the Stones of Sweden, the Scandinavian wildernesses, the ancient abode, the valour and temperament," wrote Batyushkov. And the poet depicts a majestic and terrifying kind of nature, though here it does not rear poor souls, struggling in a lonely fashion for their existence, but proud and warlike tribes, providing princes for Russia, enemies on the field of battle, partners in trade and mentors in poetry. Many of the best Russian poets competed with each other to translate "The songs of Harald the Brave". Harald - uniting in himself statesman, conqueror Nero and poet and married to a Russian princess, a union he strove for over the course of several years - is the ideal expression of the spirit of the Scandinavian North in Russian culture.

The dialogue between Russia and the North continues even today. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, moving Russia aside from Western Europe, makes it particularly relevant. The difference between Finland and the Germanic North in the Russian cultural consciousness has today worn very thin. The world of the North is on the one hand the Scandinavian-Baltic North-West, a European cultural zone, outlined by an ancient history of rivalry and cooperation around the Baltic Sea, and on the other hand, the North-East, unassimilated areas of Russian border country. Isolationists like Alexander Solzhenitsyn see the development of the latter regions as the first priority. Russia for them is not Eastern Europe, but a special Eurasian space. In the future fate of the country, understanding and cultural interpretation of the North could still play an important role.

Translated from Russian by Douglas Harrison