

“THE RUSSIAN COLD” AS PERCEIVED BY EUROPEANS IN THE 15TH THROUGH 19TH CENTURIES AS A CONSTITUENT ELEMENT OF THE RUSSIAN NATIONAL MYTH

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This article brings together some preliminary observations on the given subject, which is part of the wider realm of questions related to mutual perceptions between Russians and Europeans, as well as the even broader problem the perceptions of a foreign culture. One of the mechanisms of this kind of perception are a priori judgments founded on the metonymic contiguity between a person and the realm of their inhabitation. Judging ‘by the context’ is one of the methods for summarizing the factors that influence human behavior into tractable lists which, when worse comes to worse, appear endless.

In the 18th century, Charles Montesquieu developed a theory of how climate influences peoples and states. His ideas were popular and illustrated, for instance, in Germaine de Staël’s novel *Corinne, Or Italy*, where the entire conflict revolves around the opposition between the “Northern” nature of the male protagonist and the “Southern” nature of the female. Jules Michelet thought within the same paradigm when, in the middle of the 19th century, he constructed his noteworthy conception of the Russian people as a “Southern” people who live in the “North.” This perception was based not only on historical and geographical data, but also on the rich European tradition of seeing Rus’/Russia as a Northern country.

As a rule, in the framework of a priori ideas about ‘the exotic’, there isn’t much room for complex spectra of nuances; the scales are regulated by binary oppositions (*black – white, hot – cold, North – South, etc.*). This is expressed in certain rhetorical modes in the narratives about the locus of exoticism, including hyperbole and oxymoron. Although much has been written about the relationship of Europeans to the Russian cold in both of the local materials,

as far as we are aware, this subject has not previously been considered in the context they are presented in this article.

1. Degree of Expression of Cold

Most rhetorically acute are paradoxical forms that give rise to violent conjunctions between that which, in normal circumstances, seems to be uncombinable.

a. **Oxymoron** ('fire and ice'¹)

Guillebert de Lannoy, the first traveler since Bruno de Querfurt to write about his journey to Rus', lists an entire series of "miracles" brought about by the frost in Novgorod and its vicinity in 1413. He was most impressed with a pot of meat in which the water was boiling on one side and freezing on the other: "Je veis l'eau bouillir a l'un des lez du pot et engeler a glace a l'autre lez" <sic!> [Лан-ныа 2003: 79]. It's impossible to know what he really saw.

One hundred and fifty years later, in 1553, Englishmen exploring a Northern sea route to Russia witnessed something similar. Clement Adams, writing of the achievement of the English seamen, reported that "You may see the same faggot burning at the one end and freezing at the other" [Адамс 1838: 50]. Adams himself had never left England.

In 1867, another similar incident befell Théophile Gautier. This time, the wood transformed into a cigar, and there is no good reason to doubt the story quoted below:

I went outside and lit an excellent Cuban cigar. Standing in the doorway, I recalled how in St. Petersburg it is forbidden to smoke in the street — there's a heavy fine <...> Because I only had to walk several steps, I concealed my cigar with my bent arm. <...> When I tried to relight it in the foyer <...> its chewed up and moist end had turned into a chunk of ice, while, on the other end, the generous and noble "puro" was still burning [Готье 1990: 74–75].

b. **Hyperbole** ('liquid freezing instantaneously')

While it was rare that descriptions of the Russian cold would reach the level of oxymoron, hyperbole was a common occurrence. According to this rhetorical model, saliva could freeze before hitting the ground in Russia, and the same was true of water. The first to write of this may have been Austrian diplomat Sigis-

¹ A typical example comes from *Eugene Onegin*, where Pushkin uses this duality to describe the "mutual difference" between Onegin and Lensky.

mund von Herberstein, first in Latin (1556), and later in German [Герберштейн 1988: 131]; between these two publications, there was even an edition in Italian. The book became an intellectual bestseller of the 16th century.

European travelers scrambled to outshine each other in their descriptions of this happening to them [Гейденштейн 1889: 244; Флетчер 1991: 20; Оlearий 1906: 328]. Reingold Heidenstein wrote that this happened to him while he was freezing beneath the walls of Pskov among the other troops led by Stephen Báthory. This is echoed by his contemporary Giles Fletcher and, in the 17th century, by Adam Olearius. Even the contemporary of Peter the Great Johann Korb (1698) ‘observed’ how “drops of water thrown up into the air freeze before they hit the ground” [Корб 1997: 231]. Unlike his predecessors, Korb gave the drops some extra time to freeze.

During the Enlightenment, these stories began to be considered laughable, and Gottfried Bürger included a parody of them in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1786):

A furious bear attacked me with a terrifying roar. The only thing I could do was climb up a tree to escape <...> Forlorn, I looked down at my knife <...> sticking out of the snow <...> I dispatched a stream of liquid that, in times of great fear, always abounds in a man, directly at the handle of my knife. <...> the cruel cold instantly froze the stream <...> Grabbing onto the handle thus elongated I <...> pulled up the knife <...> and greeted the furry guest with such hospitality that he’s never going to climb another tree again [Бюпреп-Паче 1985: 26–27].

Any exaggeration has a grain of truth, and the Patriotic War of 1812 proved this, in the words of Napoleon’s sergeant Adrien Bourgogne, who figured out he could eat the horse blood frozen in the snow (the carcasses of the animals were frozen too solid to be cut). Once, his comrade in arms broke a bottle of vodka during a brawl and Bourgogne, interested in where this occurred, was rewarded for his curiosity: “Le morceau de biscuit <...> ainsi que quelques pinces de neige a l’eau-de-vie me firent beaucoup de bien” [Бургонь 2005: 94].

2. The effect of the cold on living nature

A majority of the Europeans who write about the cold agree that such severe cold cannot help but have an effect on man and living nature. The way it is said to affect each of these, however, is always cardinally different.

a. **Northern nature** ('susceptibility to the cold')

In 1526, unafraid of reproaches for inconsistency, Johann Fabri wrote that:

Muscovy has incredibly vast forests where one can capture black foxes and white bears <...> the cause for this may be the severe Northern cold, which always gives rise to whiteness, as philosophy attests to [Фабри 1998: 21].

In the 17th century, this was repeated by Olearius, in his discussion of white rabbits: "white coloration arises from cold <...> and black from heat" [Олеарий 1906: 333]. At the same time, the cold was observed to do the opposite. For instance, in 1678, the Polish envoy Bernard Tanner heard that the pelt of a sable is "blacker, thicker, and has longer fur" depending on the severity of the winter [Таннер 1891: 108].

Other consequences of the cold were described in contradictory ways. Thus, in 1517, dean of Krakow's Jagiellonian University Matvei Mekhovsky wrote that in Russia "... the livestock is smaller and without horns, likely, also due to the cold; the people are tall and strong" [Меховский 1936: 115].

Inquisitive foreigners even conducted experiments, like Olearius's father-in-law in Estlandia, who turned gray rabbits white with the help of the cold, or Peter Bruce, who wanted to observe hibernating animals and thus acquired a bear cub for this purpose, writing "When snow fell, the bear climbed into his box and lay there for a month without leaving once or eating anything, just sucking on his paw" [Брюс 1991: 179].

b. **Northern Peoples** ('cold-resistance')

According to foreign observers, the cold had a rather different effect on Russians than it did on Europeans; early accounts claim that Russians didn't feel the cold at all. Daniel Printz, an envoy of the Holy Roman Empire, witnessed infants being baptized in cold water in 1576: "They believe that infants are in no way harmed by the cold, but are instead made extra warm" [Даниил 1877: 39]. Soon afterwards, Giles Fletcher watched a celebration of the Feast of the Christening when "many men and women <...> threw themselves into a hole in the ice, some naked, others dressed, in weather where you could <...> freeze your finger just by dipping it into the water" [Флетчер 1991: 149-150].

It's true that Fletcher did mention that not all Russians could tolerate the cold so well. According to him, holy fools were the best at tolerating it "they're like Gymnosophists" (i. e. the yogis that Alexander the Great had encountered in India), but "there are not many people like this because it's very cold <...> walking around naked in Russia, especially in the winter" [Ibid.: 131]. Russians

were not much different in this amongst their closest neighbors. Olearius recalled that “In Narva, I was amazed to see Russian and Finnish boys <...> bare-foot as geese, walking and standing around in the snow for half an hour” [Олеарий 1906: 346].

If overall, Russian ways did not impress Europeans, their ability to withstand the cold did. Clement Adams even used this characteristic as a moral parable:

When the earth is covered in deep snow and has ossified from cold, the Russian will hang his cloak up over some picket posts <...> start a little fire, and lie down with his back to the wind; <...> This snow dweller gathers water from frozen rivers, pours oatmeal into it, and there’s dinner. <...> The frozen ground is his blanket, and a tree stump or a rock is his pillow. <...> What a strong reproach this is to the effeminate delicateness of our Princes who wear their warm boots and fur coats in incomparably better climates! [Адамс 1838: 55].

The simplicity of Russian coachman would continue to fire the imaginations of foreigners for another three centuries. Nicolaes Witsen wrote in his diary (1664–1665): “Our Russian and Latvian drivers lit fires, lay down next to them, threw their clothes over their bodies and slept like that, despite the cold” [Витсен 1996: 47]. Madame de Staël (1812) wrote that “...in winter, the coachmen can wait by the gates ten hours at a time without complaining; they lay down on the snow under the wagons like the homeless of Naples, but at sixty degrees latitude” [Сталь 1991: 40].

The Russian’s resistance to cold is not only ‘hyperbolic’ in descriptions, but even ‘oxymoronic’ when complemented with stories of their supposed resistance to heat — as demonstrated, most often, in the bathhouse: “When they get completely red <...> the men and women run outside naked and douse themselves in cold water, or, in the winter, roll around in the snow” [Олеарий 1906: 346]. The Danish diplomat Just Juel wrote that (1709–1711):

That day, there was a harsh frost, but they ran out anyway <...> red as boiled lobsters <...> and <...> played for a long time, running around naked in the snow [Юль 2001: 78].

Francisco de Miranda (1786–1787) provided more quotidian examples:

The children sleep in cubbies between the stove and the wall that are hot enough to bake bread in. I don’t understand how these people don’t get sick, alternating between heat and cold like that [Миранда 2001: 112].

3. Ideological Myths. "The Russian Cold" as a metaphor

In the 19th century, while the old reports about the strength of the Russian cold began to lose their credibility, the frosts did not fall out of the discourse about Russia, migrating to the level of metaphor.

After the Cossacks took Paris, Russian hardiness ceased to seem impressive to foreigners and even began to seem false. In 1827, François Anselot is shocked by the endurance of a Russian man who "falls asleep on stone or in snow", always prepared to take orders. What if he never finds out that there are better conditions for life? "Will he seek out warmer lands? <...> why do today's politicians stubbornly close off Asia from them?" Anselot was afraid that Russians in search of warmth would "drown" Europe in a great flood [Анселот 2001: 119–120].

In "Dziady", Adam Mickiewicz wrote that Russians walk around St. Petersburg dressed lightly not because they don't feel the cold, but because they are trying to oblige the emperor, who wants St. Petersburg to seem like a Southern city. The result of this despotism is the death of a valet who didn't dare put on the fur coat of the officer he served despite the freezing cold. The theme of the cold culminates in "Dziady" with the image of Russian as the ice block of a frozen waterfall. This is an image from P. A. Viazemsky, put into the words of a character recognizable as A. S. Pushkin, is too well-studied to need elaboration. We only note that there is a rhetorical similarity with Anselot's image: in Mickiewicz's poem, the ice block will melt if the sun of freedom comes out.

In both cases, the cold takes on a symbolic signification, and turns out to be unstable in that it allows for the possibility of a 'thaw' with the concomitant negative consequences: a 'flood' dangerous for Europe or a 'thaw' dangerous for Russia. For Mickiewicz, the 'ice' of autocracy lays the truth bare on a symbolic level: Russian people are thus described as 'nature' subject to the cold, not 'Northern peoples' who don't feel it. The truth of Russians' 'frozenness' (which doesn't apply to the poet's 'genius' friends) is in contradiction with their outer and mythologized resistance to cold.

The duality that emerges in Mickiewicz was further developed in Jules Michelet's *Democratic Legends of the North* (1854), where the author identifies Russians with water frozen by the Northern cold: "Russians are Southern people", "only the incursion of the Tatar hordes caused them to leave the South" and establish themselves in the Northern "swamps". They are lively and brisk "they walk, they ride, they travel. That's all Russians can think about". "Fickle lovers of the sea of Northern dirt <...> Russians seem to be made of water. 'As deceptive as water', in the words of Shakespeare" [Мишле 2007: 153–154].

Michelet believed that Russians (which he thought were the same as Scythians) had an elemental nature:

The Greeks called Russians “the men with lizard eyes”; Mickiewicz put it even better, saying that real Russians had “insect eyes” that shone but seemed inhuman <...> Russians aren’t quite human yet [Мишле 2007: 155].

He lifts the image of the cold of autocracy out of Mickiewicz, as well:

The Russian government <...> wishes to bring about a harsh calm, a mighty stagnation, achieved at the cost of the best things in life. <...> The thickness of this ice is very dubious, it should not be depended on [Ibid.: 157].

It’s incredible, although this is often the case with images arising from polemics, but the metaphorical idea of a ‘frozen’ Russia was also taken up by the people it was meant to criticize, the defenders of Russian conservative thought. After Alexander II’s reforms, this metaphor was alluded to by Konstantin Leontiev, author of the famous aphorism “...Russia needs to be at least a bit frozen so as not to ‘rot’ ...” [Леонтьев 1886: 86].

4. Demythologization. “The Russian Cold” in a mocking light

Despite the well-known legend, Denis Davydov proved that in 1812, the Russians chased the French from Russian soil without any help from the winter. Jean Baptiste Marbeau went even further, claiming that in 1812,

Russian soldiers, accustomed to spending their winters <...> in heated dwellings <...> turned out to be much more sensitive to the cold than the European soldiers [Марбо 2005: 612].

Théophile Gautier repeats this notion:

People from countries with more temperate climates <...> believe that <...> like polar bears, Russians delight in snow and ice. <...> On the contrary, they get cold easily and <...> take preventative measures that foreigners <...> will neglect [Готье 1990: 45].

Thus, Mickiewicz’s jesting regarding Russian braggadocio is replaced by the mockery of the myth of Russians’ resistance to cold itself. Gautier goes even further and calls the fatal force of the Russian cold itself into question:

People complain that the climate isn’t severe enough <...> old people tell you of wonderful winters when <...> people were “cheered” by temperatures of twenty-five and thirty degrees below zero [Ibid.: 57].

Gautier, who had always been afraid of the cold, found that the cold could be enjoyable:

the snow sparkles like melted marble, <...> the samovar boils, the champagne is ice cold <...> and for desert, you slide down icy hills lit by men holding lanterns <...> you return to the city tasting the sweetness of the frost in the whirlwind of a brisk ride [Готье 1990: 80–82].

In the end, the author

felt a strange love for the cold. <...> if important work hadn't kept me in St. Petersburg, I would have left to roam with the samoyeds [Ibid.: 84].

It turns out that the cold isn't as great as the Russians stories about it. It is possible that the hyperbolic and oxymoronic storytelling forms discussed above are reflections of analogous stories (at the very least, similarities with Russian folklore are easy to find) or exaggerated accounts of real events, as the case of Gautier's cigar. How the cold really affected Russian life is a question that lies outside of the competency of philology. Here we can say that without a doubt, "the Russian frosts" have influenced myths about Russia and the Russian national character.

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