**Historical Analysis of Leo Tolstoy, *Hadji Murat* and Alexander Pushkin, *Journey to Arzrum***

***“What it Means to be Russian, A Look Through the Eyes of Imperial Nobility”***

From its scenery to the culture and people, Russia has had an indisputably colorful background. Through the use of writings by Tolstoy and Pushkin, we will look to the times of Imperial Russia and pull apart what it means to be Russian. These writings, both composed by nobility, paint a colorful picture of ideals, morals, and many other aspects of Russia’s social, military, and political ideals. Although the resources were written by those of a specific social class, the viewpoints of the main character and others often depict people of varying backgrounds and classes. This will allow a more complete picture of Russian nobility and the lifestyle they live, and how they expect others to live. How do the nobles act as members of society? How do they see other members of this society act? Most of all, what does it mean to be Russian, based off of these viewpoints? These and several other questions will be answered through an analysis of the materials presented over the course of this semester.

When the question “What does it mean to be Russian?” is posed, the first topic that typically comes to mind revolves around the social aspect of society. After reading *Hadji Murat*, one theme stands out that can be seen regularly through the entire piece, community. As we learned at the beginning of the semester, Russia covers a massive geographic area and includes nearly every climate type on the planet. One would expect that given this space, a sense of community would be difficult to sustain. This would be true for the Country as a whole, but there are many close knit communities who heavily rely on each other to survive the varying climates and infertility over much of the landscape. Readers of *Hadji Murat* will be greeted with many instances of heavy drinking and gambling, for example, as Tolstoy writes “The officers had drunk vodka, eaten a bit, and were drinking porter. A drummer was uncorking the eighth bottle.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Given the frequency that large amounts of alcohol are regularly consumed throughout the book, it may seem alarming and point to alcoholism, but this perfectly depicts the strong social relationship that defines many Russians, not a crutch. This can also be attributed to both the peasant and nobility desire to seek adventure. In addition Tolstoy shows a level of trust and a sense of how close these groups can be when he writes the example that follows:

“They say the commander has had his fingers in the cashbox again,” remarked one of them in a lazy voice. “He lost at cards, you see.” “He’ll pay it back again,” said Panov. “Of course he will! He’s a good officer,” assented Avdeev.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This can be interpreted in many ways, though the best relates back to this sense of closeness. They watch out for everyone’s well being within their social group, and are able to help those in need. This only shows a viewpoint from the wealthy and those with power, but this can trickle down to the peasantry. As seen in the following example by Pushkin, the main character was upset by the lack of equality when dining. He is used to everyone being served equally and showing this sense of community. In the German household he was visiting, they serve based on rank, and seeing that there were higher ranking people present, he was extremely unhappy to be passed by repeatedly. “General Strekalov, a famous epicure, once invited me to dinner; unfortunately they served the dished according to rank at his house, and there were English officers wearing the General’s epaulettes at the table. The servants passed by me with so much zeal that I got up from the table hungry.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This shows how much Russians rely on this sense of closeness and equality within their groups. At the same time, the gambling which initially created the debts of the general previously is a sign of how adventure-loving the Russian people are**.** From a social perspective, it is clear that being Russian means having a strong sense of community, closeness, and a highly adventurous side.

As we progressed through the semester, one defining theme was ever present no matter the period of time. Russian military and political influence could be seen in every corner of society. In both writings, Pushkin and Tolstoy very clearly depict numerous military scenes, which raise the question, “Does being Russian signify strength and bravery?” As seen in Tolstoy’s novel, the entire back story involves a man by the name of Hadji Murat trying to choose a side to fight for while preserving the well being of his family. During the journey he is faced with the sight of villages being destroyed and death of those around him. This would cause most people to back down from fear, but he kept moving forward in hopes of securing a better future. This attempt to improve life can be seen throughout society from the Tzar taking over additional lands to teach people Russian ways, to people beginning to look toward education to move forward economically. Due to the fact that the Tzar has this goal of military strength and expansion, several complications arise, the most interesting of which caused cases of falsifying information in Tolstoy’s book. There are many scenes of death in battle discussed, but in one particular instance the information was skewed dramatically when relayed to superiors.

… In the middle of the day, a considerable body of mountaineers suddenly attacked the woodcutters. The picket line began to drop back, and at that moment the second company fell upon the mountaineers with bayonets and overcame them. Two privates were wounded in the action and one was killed. The mountaineers lost around a hundred men killed and wounded.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In this battle a small group of villagers were pursued by the Russians and they shot back injuring two and killing one Russian. I believe that the variance in account comes from not only the instinct of self preservation by appeasing your superiors, but an infatuation with strength and bravery in Russian society. By relaying the truth of this event to a superior, it would paint a picture of weakness and cowardice by pursuing for no reason and then losing a man. Given Russia’s propensity to display strength, this would be punished.

Nicholas I was not portrayed in a positive light, showing his willingness to cheat and lie, even pointing to him being an antagonist of sorts. This may seem biased on the part of Tolstoy, but in another reading by Riasanovsky this can be seen again several times, for example “Another prominent investigator reached the conclusion that the impression left by Nicholas I was a result of historical role, not his personal attributes.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This backs up the picture painted by Tolstoy showing that he may have been a man to fear and lie too based on his personal ways of ruling with an iron fist and willingness to act against the face of adversity. This iron fist tendency can be attributed to Russia’s love of strength and bravery. As noted by Riasanovsky “Nicholas I’s insistence on firmness and stern action was based on fear, not on confidence; his determination concealed a state approaching panic, and his courage fed on something akin to despair.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This would make sense and can describe Nicholas’s tendency to overcompensate. The people of Russia look to the Tzar for strength and guidance and he must uphold this view. Finally, it isn’t just a view that nobility must uphold, but also the common people. As seen in *Going to the People*, the author writes

To my mind, Myschkin’s speech was a historical event. For the first time a living word of truth was heard in Russia, spoken fearlessly and forcefully by a helpless prisoner face to face with an autocratic government. Those who heard it were enraptured. The lawyers, who were men of advanced views, unanimously declared that they had never heard anything more admirable.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This says, in plain text, how admirable Russians saw it when a prisoner, the lowest of society, spoke out against the aristocracy. By showing strength and bravery he sparked the interest of those in charge. This can definitively show that being Russian means strength and bravery.

All in all there are many aspects of Russian society that can be shown to be vital to its image. Through military power, politics, and social structure, a complex and fascinating array of ideals can be called “Russian”. From adventure, drinking, and gambling to war and deceit we can finally say that these seemingly negative aspects of society stem from a strong sense of community through socialization and respect to a remarkably strong push for a stronger, braver society. When the question “What does it mean to be Russian?” is posed, it is safe to say that being Russian requires community driven, strong, brave individuals, and this is just the beginning.

# Works Cited

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1. Leo Tolstoy, *Hadji Murat*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Leo Tolstoy, *Hadji Murat*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alexander Pushkin, A Journey to Arzrum, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leo Tolstoy, *Hajdi Murat*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Cracraft – The supreme Commander: Nicholas I*, 269 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Cracraft – The supreme Commander: Nicholas I*, 269 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Katerina Breshkovskaia, *Going to the People*, 355 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)