MEMORY AND MYTHMAKING: POST-EMANCIPATION LITERARY PORTRAYALS OF PEASANTS IN RUSSIA AND FREEDMEN IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

Amanda Brickell Bellows

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History.

Chapel Hill
2011

Approved by:

W. Fitzhugh Brundage
Louise McReynolds
Heather Williams
ABSTRACT

AMANDA BRICKELL BELLOWS: Memory and Myth-Making: Post-Emancipation Literary Portrayals of Peasants in Russia and Freedmen in the American South
(Under the direction of W. Fitzhugh Brundage and Louise McReynolds)

This paper examines the different relationships that emerged from ostensibly parallel shifts in relative power after the abolition of serfdom in Russia and slavery in the United States. As Russian and Southern elites grappled with the political, economic, and social changes catalyzed by the elimination of these entrenched institutions, they presented and promoted divergent portrayals of the former serfs and slaves in fictional literature; these depictions are encompassed within the South’s Lost Cause myth and Russia’s Peasant myth. The emergence of disparate myths indicates that the post-emancipation power relations that developed between the masters and their former bondsmen in each region differed radically. More broadly, this comparison explores the causal processes that lead to the creation of myths, the function of myths in societies, and the ways in which changing political and economic factors shape the power relationships between individuals.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.  INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LITERARY MANIFESTATIONS OF THE MYTH OF THE LOST CAUSE</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. DEPICTIONS OF A NOBLE CONFEDERACY IN THE LITERATURE OF JOHN ESTEN COOKE</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. WILLING SERVANTS: DEPICTIONS OF DOCILE SLAVES IN THE LITERATURE OF THOMAS NELSON PAGE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.  FEARSOME FREEDMEN: DARK DEPICTIONS IN DIXON’S THE CLANSMAN</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. RUSSIA’S PEASANT MYTH: A CONTRAST TO THE MYTH OF THE LOST CAUSE</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. TURGENEV AND THE RATIONAL SERF</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. NARODNICHESTVO AND THE SECOND ITERATION OF THE PEASANT MYTH</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX.  LEO TOLSTOY AND THE IDEALIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN PEASANT</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X.  ANTON CHEKHOV AND THE DECLINE OF THE PEASANT MYTH</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII. REFERENCES</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Vastly different human relationships arose from ostensibly parallel shifts in relative power during the nineteenth century, when two nations experienced extreme social upheaval. Between 1860 and 1863, Tsar Alexander II and President Abraham Lincoln ordered the abolition of Russian serfdom and American slavery through the Emancipation Manifesto and Emancipation Proclamation, respectively. As Russian and Southern elites grappled with the changes catalyzed by the elimination of these entrenched institutions, they created divergent mythical portrayals of the former serfs and slaves in each culture’s fictional literature. Their depictions are encompassed within the South’s myth of the Lost Cause and Russia’s Peasant myth. Although the two myths passed through a similar, transformative change at virtually the same moment in time, they are diametrically opposed: one elevates, and the other subordinates.¹ Why is it that two groups of white, Christian, planter elites presented and promoted starkly different portrayals of their former bondsmen? Why did Southern writers depict the former slaves in ways that ranged from docile to dangerous during the second of half of the nineteenth century? By contrast, why did Russian authors portray the former serfs in ways that stretched from sub-human to god-like during the same period of time? Finally,

¹ The seeds of Russia’s Peasant myth first appeared in 1850 and the South’s Lost Cause myth emerged in 1865. The second and third versions of each myth developed approximately twenty years after the iterations that preceded them (1870’s, 1890’s in Russia; 1880’s, 1900’s in the South).
what purposes did these myths serve in each society, and why did the South’s myth of the Lost Cause ultimately outlast Russia’s Peasant myth?

A myth, according to French sociologist Roland Barthes, is a system of communication that conveys a message through oral or written speech, images, and symbols. ⁡ Southern historian George Tindall argues that myths are “mental pictures that portray the pattern of what a people think they are (or ought to be);” myths can impart particular meaning to real-life occurrences so they become “charged with values, aspirations, [and] ideals.” ⁢ In post-emancipation Russia and the American South, former serf- and slave-owners created distinct myths in response to similar phenomena: the abolition of serfdom and slavery, modernization, social changes, and challenges to their national or regional identities. In the United States, Southern elites sought to revise the nation’s collective memory by depicting the antebellum South as a place of racial harmony and the Civil War as a just battle waged in defense of a righteous way of life. Historian Fitz Brundage argues that such an act of collective remembering “forges identity, justifies privilege, and sustains cultural norms.” ⁴ Indeed, this romantic image of a blissful and pastoral pre-war South appealed to white Northern and Southern readers alike during the late nineteenth century, a time of rapid industrialization, modernization, and racial strife. Promoted by Southern elites and embraced by many Americans, the myth of the Lost Cause “idealiz[ed] an exclusionary past” in order to justify white supremacy and black subjugation. ⁵ By the end of the nineteenth century, forty

---


⁵ Brundage, The Southern Past, 343.
years after its creation, the Lost Cause myth even justified white violence against black freedmen.

In Russia, elites also responded to economic and social changes by creating a mythology of their own in the decades following the abolition of serfdom. The purpose and trajectory of this myth, however, differed significantly from that of the Lost Cause. Historian Orlando Figes observes that the Peasant myth arose during a time of convergence in Russia, when “old arguments between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles…died down as each side came to recognize the need for Russia to find a proper balance between Western learning and native principles.” According to Russian historian Cathy Frierson, it was during this period that Russian elites identified the problems of “national definition and rejuvenation” and viewed the freed serfs as their solution. The Russian peasants represented to elites “an antidote to the encroachment of values associated with the secular, individualistic, and competitive West” and a source of moral strength. In their literature, Russian elites began to portray the freed serfs as noble, pure, and hard-working people who embodied Russia’s national essence. While their Southern counterparts simultaneously sought to subjugate their former bondsmen, some Russian elites tried to learn from or even imitate the former serfs. Yet, Russia’s Peasant myth was short-lived in comparison to the Lost Cause myth; it had all but disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century.

---


8 Frierson, Peasant Icons, 184.
What prompted the Russian and Southern elites’ production of divergent myths in reaction to comparable phenomena? Despite pre-emancipation similarities in relative power between Russian nobles and serfs, and Southern planters and slaves, I argue that the emergence of disparate myths indicates that the post-emancipation power relations between the masters and their former bondsmen in each region radically differed. After the abolition of slavery and the subsequent passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, white Southerners viewed the freedmen as politically and economically threatening to their individual interests. By contrast, the Russian nobles did not feel as directly threatened by the freed serfs. Many nobles, partly recompensed for their loss by the Tsar, maintained their political, economic, and societal authority in an autocracy where neither nobles nor peasants possessed the right to vote. Thus, factors including competition for land or jobs, political power, and perceived racial differences contributed to the development of disparate power relations between nobles and peasants, and planters and freedmen. These dissimilar power dynamics primarily account for the elites’ production of divergent post-emancipation myths.

Examples of the Lost Cause and Peasant mythologies abound in nineteenth-century literature, which shaped American and Russian culture by influencing popular perceptions and beliefs. In the United States, literature’s widespread influence was facilitated by the Industrial Revolution, which brought technological advances in the printing and publishing industries during the nineteenth century. In addition, as transportation improvements enabled the extensive distribution of books as cargo and as reading material on trains, the act

---


of reading became a national pastime. Fictional literature, the nation’s reading material of choice, appealed most to readers because it enabled them to experience vicariously places outside of their communities and to participate in a shared cultural experience. In Russia, industrialization, the spread of railroads, and urbanization also made reading materials more widely available to citizens of the vast nation during the late nineteenth century.

These technological advances led to increased literacy rates in Russia and the United States. Russian literacy rates grew modestly over the course of the late nineteenth century. Between 1860 and 1880, the number of male secondary school students increased from 18,000 to 100,000 and the number of university students from four thousand to eight thousand. By 1897, the national literacy rate reached 21%, although rates were highest among elites and citizens in urban areas. For example, literacy rates in the urban Moscow Province approached 70%, while rates among rural residents hovered at just 25% in 1910. American literacy rates exceeded Russian literacy rates during the same period of time. In the United States, only one adult out of 156 was unable to read. In the South, however, one out of sixteen white Southerners was illiterate in 1850. The South’s dispersed population and extended growing season were two factors that contributed to the region’s illiteracy rates,

11 Zboray, 74, 75, 80, 82.
12 One of the most popular genres of literature in the mid-nineteenth century, novels outsold instructional and informative texts. Ibid.
15 Brooks, When Russia Learned to Read, 4.
16 Zboray, A Fictive People, 196.
the highest in the nation.\textsuperscript{17} As in Russia, however, American literacy rates rose over the course of the nineteenth century as a result of urbanization, modernization, and other technological advances.

Statistics about rising literacy rates suggest that nineteenth-century readers increasingly used literature for information and for entertainment in the United States and Russia. By analyzing evidence of the Lost Cause and Peasant myths in popular works of literature from this time period, one can gain insight into the post-emancipation psyches of the elite authors who promoted these myths in their novels and the growing number of literate citizens who eagerly consumed them.

\textsuperscript{17} Zboray, \textit{A Fictive People}, 198.
CHAPTER 2

LITERARY MANIFESTATIONS OF THE MYTH OF THE LOST CAUSE

The myth of the Lost Cause was the U.S. South’s collective response to its military defeat in the Civil War and to the societal changes that proceeded from the nationwide abolition of slavery in 1865. After the formal defeat of the Confederacy at Appomattox in April of 1865, battle-worn Southerners and former slaves pondered their uncertain futures. Some white Southerners’ sentiments of hesitation and doubt transformed into hostility and resistance toward many of the changes that occurred during the subsequent period of Reconstruction.\(^\text{18}\) In order to cope with the social developments that accompanied the integration of freedmen into Southern society, the shifting political dynamics that proceeded from black male citizens’ newfound ability to vote, the economic vicissitudes of a rapidly urbanizing South, and a new sense of moral fallibility, former Confederates created this myth.\(^\text{19}\)

To justify their actions, proponents of the Lost Cause myth removed slavery as a central cause of the war and claimed instead that Confederates fought to uphold states’ rights in the face of Northern aggression. During the decades that followed Reconstruction, supporters of the myth further revised history first by asserting that African-Americans


preferred slavery to freedom in their depiction of the antebellum South as a place of racial harmony, and then by depicting freedmen as dangerous to white members of society in the late nineteenth century. Evidence of the changing myth is apparent in novels written by three members of the Southern elite: John Esten Cooke, Thomas Nelson Page, and Thomas Dixon, Jr. An examination of their works reveals how changing societal power dynamics directly influenced their fictional portrayals and perceptions of the former slaves. Each work of literature is representative of a distinct iteration of the Lost Cause myth, seen more broadly in poetry, art, ceremonies, emblems, monuments, politics, and business from 1865 until the present.  

---

CHAPTER 3

DEPICTIONS OF A NOBLE CONFEDERACY IN THE LITERATURE OF JOHN ESTEN COOKE

Evidence of the Lost Cause myth in its earliest stage appears in the literature of John Esten Cooke, a Virginian planter who strove to expurgate African-Americans and slavery from the historical record in his promotion of the Confederate cause. A member of the Southern elite, Cooke was born in 1830 to a slave-owning family. When the war arrived, Cooke fought as a Confederate soldier and served as an aide to General J.E.B Stuart, witnessing many important battles. Afterward, Cooke transformed his experiences as a soldier into fodder for a series of sentimental stories about the Civil War, becoming the first important novelist to write about its events. One of Cooke’s most popular novels was The Wearing of the Gray (1867), a hybrid of fiction and history, romance and realism. In it, Cooke recounted his memories of the Civil War but neglected to mention the institution of slavery, the war’s central cause. Instead, he focused on great battles and brave men throughout his five hundred and sixty-page narrative. Although Cooke purported to present to readers a semi-historical account of the war, he purposefully re-imagined his past by changing historical details and embellishing his descriptions of particular events. In doing so...

---


23 Bratton, “John Esten Cooke and His "Confederate Lies,"” 77.
so, Cooke created a picture of a glorious South that justified the Confederacy’s actions and distracted readers from the problems of post-war race relations between whites and the newly freed slaves.

Despite Cooke’s introductory claim in *The Wearing of the Gray* that “every trait and incident set down was either observed by [the writer] or obtained from good authority,” Cooke embellishes his descriptions and apotheosizes his generals.\(^{24}\) In his depictions of Civil War generals like J.E.B. Stuart, Robert E. Lee, and Wade Hampton, Cooke transforms men into heroes. For example, Cooke describes Stuart as having about him “a flavour of chivalry and adventure which made him more like a knight of the middle age than a soldier of the prosaic nineteenth century.”\(^{25}\) Here, Cooke glorifies Stuart’s personality and demeanor to the extent that his words seem satirical. Yet, for the mid-nineteenth century reader, Cooke’s descriptions may have been a consolation during the gloomiest of times. The Southern elites who mourned the South’s defeat likely found comfort in believing that their fallen relatives had fought under heroic men like Stuart.

Cooke’s embellishments are not limited to his depictions of Civil War generals; he glorifies the life of Confederate soldiers as well. In his chapter “In the Cavalry,” Cooke writes: “to the cavalry-men belongs the fresh life of the forest—the wandering existence which brings back the days of old romance.”\(^{26}\) Cooke’s description is quixotic; it is unlikely that soldiers who “summon[ed] their recollections… [saw] the fun and frolic of the


bivouac…romantic scenes and gay adventures…smiles, sighs, laughter, and tears." These descriptions show the extent to which Cooke’s depiction of a soldier’s life is idealistic. He intentionally romanticizes the horrific events that he experienced in the hope of inspiring his readers.

Indeed, in Cooke’s wartime diary and private correspondence, he expresses opinions that contradict those contained in The Wearing of the Gray. In an 1864 journal entry, Cooke describes the war as “tedious, but necessary…grow[ing] in bitterness, but loomi[ng] darker and larger.” And in a telling letter to a friend, he writes despairingly: “In modern war, where men are organized in masses and converted into insensate machines there is nothing really heroic or romantic or in any way calculated to appeal to the imagination.” If this statement reflects Cooke’s genuine feelings, why did he promote a romanticized image of the Civil War in his literature?

Economic factors largely motivated Cooke’s actions. In 1879, in another letter to a close friend, Cooke reflects on his lengthy career: “[I write] for money…and my own satisfaction. I have made some money, about $20,000 since the war, and I have poisoned the rising Southern generation with "Confederate lies" about the war--which is enough to retire on.” Here, Cooke frankly acknowledges that his literary depictions of the war are distorted. Aware of the discrepancy between his romantic portrayal and his actual

30 Bratton, 74.
31 Bratton, 75.
experience, Cooke admits that his literature has shaped the perceptions of a new generation of Southern men and women. Indeed, Southern elites responded to Cooke’s depiction of the Civil War and his omission of slavery with great enthusiasm for several reasons. First, the myth of the Lost Cause may have distracted Southern readers from the most obvious element of war, death, a pressing concern in a region where approximately one out of five men of military age did not survive the war. In addition, the memory of the horrors of war likely motivated Southern readers to seek an emotional escape during the post-war years, which they found in this mythology. Ultimately, Cooke’s book both comforted Southern readers and distracted them from the problems of their time, like the plight of the freed slaves and the overwhelming task of rebuilding the South’s economy. By glorifying and idealizing the South’s role in the Civil War in *The Wearing of the Gray*, Cooke set a solid foundation upon which the myth of the Lost Cause would stand and evolve.

By the 1880’s, the Southern elites’ early focus on the military aspects of the war had developed into something more complicated and insidious. During the twenty years that followed the South’s surrender in Appomattox, Southern elites promoted a second iteration of the Lost Cause myth that included an increased sense of nostalgia for an imagined past. Authors like Thomas Nelson Page, Joel Chandler Harris, and LaSalle Corbell Pickett wrote novels, poems, and short stories that appeared in popular national magazines such as

---


34 Faust, xi.
These writers portrayed life in the antebellum South as a time when genteel ladies and chivalrous gentlemen reigned over uncouth slaves in an idyllic pastoral society. A world in which race relations were harmonious, they depicted a peaceful, paternalistic system of slavery where whites and blacks were content in their respective positions of power. This literature appealed to Southerners and to readers beyond the borders of the former Confederacy as white Americans across the country embraced the second phase of the Lost Cause myth.


37 Paul Herman Buck, The Road to Reunion, 1865-1900 (New York: Vintage Books, 1959). Blight, 139, 251. Buck and Blight offer complementary explanations for the myth’s widespread popularity and appeal. Buck argues that Northern readers used the sentimental literature of the 1880’s as a guide to understanding the South and that the Lost Cause myth became real to both Northerners and Southerners, inspiring Southern youths to cling to an imagined past and providing Northerners with a lens through which to view the antebellum South. Blight asserts that Southern authors created a Lost Cause mythology that enabled Northerners and Southerners to reconcile their differences at the expense of solving the problem of race relations between whites and blacks. He posits that the myth diverted their attention from racial problems and facilitated the reunion of the two alienated sides.
CHAPTER 4

WILLING SERVANTS: DEPICTIONS OF DOCILE SLAVES IN THE LITERATURE OF THOMAS NELSON PAGE

The work of Virginian Thomas Nelson Page best represents the group of Southern writers who described this idealized system of slavery. Born in 1853, Page grew up on his family’s small plantation, where sixty slaves worked and lived. As an adult, he wrote numerous short fictional poems and stories describing an imagined “Old South” that were widely published in several national journals. A compendium of short stories, *In Ole Virginia* (1887) serves as a representative example of Page’s many works that depict the antebellum South as a place of peace and prosperity.

In one story, “Marse Chan,” Page writes a fictional account of the antebellum South told in 1872 by a freedman named Sam. Nineteenth-century readers likely found this imaginary survivor of the old system to be a realistic character whose self-described history was moving and convincing. Page depicts Sam as a forlorn man who maintains an unwavering loyalty to his former master, Marse Chan, throughout many trials and

---


40 Others include *Lippincott’s Magazine* and *Century*. Blight, 225.

41 Thomas Nelson Page, *In Ole Virginia or Marse Chan and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895).

tribulations. By depicting the former slave as proud of his dedicated servitude, Page promotes the notion that freedmen preferred life before the abolition of slavery. In one scene, Sam describes his impressions of life prior to his emancipation: “Dem wuz good ole times…— de bes' Sam ever see…Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do—jes' hed to 'ten' to de feedin' an' cleanin' de hosses, an' doin' what de marster tell 'em to do... Dyar warn' no trouble nor nothin’.”

Using the character of Sam as his mouthpiece, Page portrays slave labor as having been as pleasant, something that freedmen were glad to complete. This illustrative passage is just one of Page’s numerous attempts to re-imagine the South’s past by depicting it in sentimental and idealistic terms.

Page’s personal views, evident in short stories like “Marse Chan,” are also apparent in a collection of essays entitled The Old South (1892). These stories are meant to serve as Page’s firsthand account of life in antebellum Virginia, but like Cooke’s The Wearing of the Gray, they waver between fact and fiction. In one essay entitled “Social Life in Old Virginia before the War,” Page again claims that slaves enjoyed forced labor. Of harvest time, the most grueling of season of all, Page writes that “the severest toil of the year was a frolic. Every ‘hand’ was eager for it…the young men looked forward to it…How gay they appeared…sweeping down the yellow grain.”

Here, Page portrays arduous work as an activity that the slaves took pleasure in completing, possibly to absolve former slave owners of the guilt they may have felt or to portray the South in a better light to Northern readers. In the chapter’s conclusion, Page attempts to further whitewash history by asserting that although “the social life of the Old South had its faults…what civilization has not? But its

43 Page, In Ole Virginia or Marse Chan and Other Stories, 10; referenced in Gross, 24.
44 Page, The Old South, 151.
virtues far outweighed them...[Slavery] Christianized the negro race...and gave it the only civilization it [ever] possessed.”

Instead of ignoring the problem of slavery like his literary predecessors, Page argues that negative conceptions of slavery were wrong. His description of slavery’s benefits is paternalistic and his portrayal of slave labor is inaccurate. Yet, Page’s depiction of slavery as a benevolent institution was not inadvertent; using the mythology of the Lost Cause as his inspiration, Page reworked the tactics employed by authors like Cooke. While Cooke avoided any discussion of the issue of slavery, Page forthrightly addressed it in order to alter the nation’s perception of the institution. By portraying the Old South as a place where slaves and their masters lived in harmony, he hoped to change the historical memory of his peers.

Readers responded with enthusiasm to Page’s depictions of the antebellum South. One literary critic described “Marse Chan” as a “truthful [and] dramatic... representation” and praised Page for producing “such beautiful and faithful pictures of a society...of the irrevocable past.” Audiences also eagerly consumed the myth. In Columbia, South Carolina, Page read “Marse Chan” to the crowd at the Opera House. A local newspaper described the “sympathetic” audiences as oscillating between “hearty laughter” and “surreptitious weeping” for the poor freedman who wished he could return to his pre-war

---

45 Page, The Old South, 184.

life. Yet, despite the inaccuracy of Page’s portrayal, the author’s rosy descriptions ultimately supplanted the nation’s darker memories of the antebellum South.

What provoked the tactical transition from Southern elites’ avoidance of the topic of slavery to a distortion of its characteristics? The shift in the language and content of the myth of the Lost Cause coincided with a period of rapid industrialization and modernization in the United States. First, images of a bucolic antebellum South with its peaceful plantations served as a pleasing counterpoint to the views from factory windows where urban workers spent long hours; these idyllic scenes certainly appealed to the nation’s growing number of urban residents. In addition, such nostalgic depictions acted as a bulwark against these challenges to the South’s regional identity. As railroad tracks and telegraph lines sprouted and spread faster than a hearty kudzu vine, Northern and Southern states became more connected to one another. Communication improved, corporations expanded, and the transportation of people and goods grew increasingly efficient. As regional distinctions within the United States began to fade, readers may have viewed the image of a distinctive Old South with a mixture of pride and longing.

Lastly, the second iteration of the myth of the Lost Cause appealed to readers who harbored anxieties about changing racial dynamics. In the 1880’s, freedmen were increasing in number, running for office, and demanding better pay from their white employers. Race relations were bitter; many white elites fought desperately to preserve their societal power

---


49 Burbank and Cooper, *Empires of World History*, 270.

50 Burbank and Cooper, *Empires of World History*, 270.
and deeply resented the former slaves. Southern elites’ portrayals of freedmen as weak, discontented, and nostalgic for their lives as slaves in the antebellum South appealed to readers’ sensibilities by justifying their belief in white racial superiority. However, as whites increasingly adhered to the second iteration of the Lost Cause myth, blacks continued their inexorable push to secure their civil rights. The rhetoric of the myth became more extreme as Southern elites began to advocate outright violence against the freedmen, using literature as a potent weapon in the national fight to convince readers that prior racial relations should be restored.
CHAPTER 5

FEARSOME FREEDMEN: DARK DEPICTIONS IN DIXON’S THE CLANSMAN

At the end of the nineteenth century, Southern elites began to promote a sinister version of the myth of the Lost Cause that depicted the freedmen as threatening to whites. In their literature, Ku Klux Klan apologists like Thomas Dixon, Jr. and Myrta Lockett Avary described acts of terror and lynching as the justifiable tools of white citizens against dangerous and unruly African-Americans.51 Their portrayals were a reinterpretation and extension of the earlier paternalistic assertion that the freedmen were happy as slaves. Loosed from bondage, Southern elites reasoned, the “maladjusted” freedmen posed a threat to the whites who had fought to preserve the stable system of slavery. Thus, by the early twentieth century, the Lost Cause myth had rapidly transformed from a losing side’s justification for the war to its outright insistence upon white supremacy and black subjugation.

In his novel, The Clansman (1905), Thomas Dixon, Jr., promotes this third, most violent phase of the Lost Cause myth. A white Southern elite, Dixon was born in 1864 in Shelby, North Carolina.52 Described by historians as a fervent Negrophobe, Dixon embraced

51 Blight, Race and Reunion, 112.
a form of radical racism that drove him to write this popular work of fiction. Indeed, he claimed that, as an author, that he “made no effort to write literature,” but that his “sole purpose in writing was to reach and influence with [his] argument the minds of millions.”

In The Clansman, Dixon describes the fictional reconciliation of two families, one Northern and one Southern, who join to avenge a freedman’s rape of a young girl. The victim is Marion Lenoir, a white Southerner who is raped by Gus, a freed slave. During the rape scene, Dixon depicts Gus as a ferocious and animal-like “black brute…[with] yellow teeth grinning through his thick lips.” He writes that Gus “stepped closer [to Marion] with an ugly leer…his sinister bead eyes wide apart, gleaming apelike,” just before his “black claws…sank into [her] soft white throat.” Dixon’s description, filled with racist stereotypes, is meant to strike fear in the hearts of white Northern and Southern readers. By portraying Gus as an animal, Dixon insinuates that all African-Americans are dangerous and should be restrained by law. Moreover, Dixon sets up a scene that will ultimately justify the immoral and unlawful actions of the Klansmen who eventually murder Gus.

To avenge Marion’s rape, a group of Klansmen “gathered in the woods” and put on the Klansman’s “white robe…[with] a scarlet circle and cross.” Clad in their disguises, the men “made a picture such as the world had not seen since the Knights of the Middle Ages.

---


55 Thomas Dixon, Jr., The Clansman (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1905), 303.

56 Dixon, 304.

57 Dixon, 315.
rode on their Holy Crusades.” Like the Confederate soldiers depicted by Cooke, Dixon’s Klansmen also appear as courageous medieval knights. In addition, Dixon’s imagery suggests that the KKK’s mission to kill Gus was a sacred one. When Dixon describes Gus’s ritualized killing, he continues to use religious imagery to appease the reader’s moral sensibilities. By interweaving Christianity with the Klansmen’s ceremony, Dixon attempts to blur the lines of morality. He strove to alter the opinion of readers who possessed a negative perception of the KKK by presenting the group of men as rational and moral, concluding his story with the assertion that the Klan had both “saved…Civilization…[and] redeemed [the South] from shame.”

With its bold, racist message and dramatic plot, The Clansman was an instant hit in both the North and the South. Although initial reviews of the book questioned its historical accuracy, the public was fascinated by Dixon’s controversial novel. Within six months of its publication, The Clansman was a bestseller and would later be dramatized in film with the production of D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, the highest grossing film of the silent film era. As C. Vann Woodward observes, it was during this period that “the extremists of Southern racism…reached a wider audience, both within their own region and in the nation, than ever before.”

58 Dixon, 316.
59 Dixon, 374.
61 Okuda, 5.
Why did white readers so enthusiastically embrace this twisted depiction of the KKK in the third phase of the Lost Cause myth? Dixon’s novel both exacerbated and reflected existent racial tensions between early twentieth century blacks and whites as African-Americans made great strides in politics and in the workforce.64 The presence of a rising black middle class worried whites, as did the number of African-Americans who ran for political office, voted, and became sharecroppers and farmers.65 White Southerners saw black progress as threatening to their livelihoods and power; their negative impressions of black progress were aggravated by the numerous stories printed by American magazines and newspapers that exaggerated instances of black violence against whites.66 During the late nineteenth century, some of these whites even resorted to violence in an effort to maintain their political and economic supremacy.

In his seminal book, The Mind of the South, Southern journalist Wilbur Cash argues that from the 1880’s until the early twentieth century, white Southerners increasingly employed sadistic methods of violence against blacks that included lynching, burning, and mutilation.67 Cash analyzes the psyche of such Southerners, observing that many believed that “to smash a sassy Negro, to kill him…was…an act of patriotism and chivalry.”68 Statistics suggest that instances of lynching in the South peaked between 1880 and 1930,

64 Okuda, 219.
66 Okuda, 220.
68 Cash, 119.
when a total of 4,697 cases were recorded.\textsuperscript{69} Together, brutal tactics of racial control, the implementation of laws restricting black voting rights, and the enforcement of segregation created an oppressive environment for freedmen in the Jim Crow South.\textsuperscript{70} These actions and attitudes were both shaped by and reflected in the third phase of the Lost Cause myth, apparent in popular novels like Dixon’s \textit{The Clansman}. Ultimately, the success of Dixon’s controversial book reveals that, fifty years after the Civil War concluded, the Lost Cause mythology still exerted considerable influence on Americans.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{69} Dora Apel and Shawn Michelle Smith, \textit{Lynching Photographs}, (Berkley: University of California Press, 2007), 15. Actual occurrences of lynching almost certainly exceeded the number of reported instances.

\end{thebibliography}
RUSSIA’S PEASANT MYTH: A CONTRAST TO THE MYTH OF THE LOST CAUSE

Like their Southern counterparts, Russian elites created and promoted a myth of their own during the decades that followed the emancipation of the serfs. In Russia, the 1861 abolition of serfdom heralded political, economic, and social changes that caused the elites to reflect upon Russia’s condition and to wonder about their nation’s future. After Tsar Alexander II issued the Emancipation Manifesto in 1861, no civil war broke out and there was little if any violence. The abolition of serfdom was dramatic, but Russia’s nobles had little ability to prevent or reverse the tsar’s decree. Although the nobility lamented their economic misfortune, many believed that serfdom was an outdated, immoral institution and begrudgingly accepted their new situation.

Still, nobles and peasants alike struggled to adjust to the social changes wrought by serfdom’s demise. Describing post-emancipation Russia in terms reminiscent of the post-emancipation South, one contemporary described it as “a time of universal reconstruction … a time of extreme confusion of ideas, mutual misunderstandings, intensified expectations, and exaggerated fears.” During this period of upheaval, post-emancipation Russian elites

---

71 Frierson, Peasant Icons, 6.
73 Skaldin [F.P. Elenev], “V Zakholust’i i stolitse. V.” Otechestvennye zapiski 185 (November 1869): 1:151; quoted in Frierson, 7.
became increasingly focused on the nation’s villages and the former serfs. They subsequently turned to literature, a central forum where they could debate the meaning of recent events and contemplate courses of action. The Russian novel served as the cultural venue where authors defined Russia’s national identity; there, elites asked important questions about what it meant to be Russian and ultimately created the Peasant myth, Russia’s counterpart to the South’s Lost Cause mythology. However, while the Lost Cause myth subordinated the freedmen, the Peasant myth glorified the Russian peasants.

Within the pages of the Russian novel, the Peasant myth underwent three distinct phases as it budded, bloomed, and withered over the span of approximately forty years. Evidence of this myth is apparent in the literature of Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, and Anton Chekhov. By placing their works in historical context, one finds that their promotion or denial of the Peasant myth both shaped Russian elites’ perceptions of the former serfs and mirrored fluctuating power dynamics between the two groups.

---

74 Frierson, 8.

CHAPTER 7

TURGENEV AND THE RATIONAL SERF

During the 1850’s, Russian noble Ivan Turgenev sowed the seeds of Russia’s nascent Peasant myth through his sympathetic portrayal of the serfs. Born in 1818 to a family with ancient aristocratic lineage, Ivan Turgenev knew well the institution of serfdom.\(^76\) He grew up in the Orel province on the Spasskoye Estate, where his family owned approximately two thousand serfs.\(^77\) As an adult, Turgenev completed his education at Petersburg University and traveled abroad in Italy and Germany. In his first major work, *A Sportsman’s Notebook* (1852), Turgenev depicted the serf as a rational and thoughtful person instead of as a weak slave, a view that contradicted that of most Russian elites who believed that serfdom was a natural part of life.\(^78\) Turgenev’s revolutionary book both laid the foundation of the Peasant myth by portraying these enslaved Russians as both sentient and human, and presaged a general shift in the attitudes of the landowners toward their serfs.

Writing from the perspective of a propertied huntsman who shares with the reader his nostalgic recollections of life in the countryside, Turgenev transmits his own abolitionist

---


views. Through the voice of the huntsman, Turgenev introduces the reader to intelligent and relatable characters. For example, the narrator describes one serf, Khor, as possessing a “cast of face recalled of Socrates...he seemed a man conscious of his own worth.” Turgenev’s Greek metaphor shows that he held the peasants in high esteem. By using such a description, Turgenev sought to show the readers of his time that serfs were intelligent, apperceptive men, not mere property. Indeed, the narrator encourages Khor to “buy [his] own freedom” outright, arguing that the serf would “be better off if [he] were free.”

The story of the narrator’s encounter with a larcenous peasant also reveals Turgenev’s abolitionist convictions. When the huntsman encounters a destitute man who has stolen wood from a nearby forest, he does not condemn him for his actions. Instead, the narrator immediately empathizes with him; the serf has attempted to steal wood because he lacks the resources necessary for survival. Indeed, the serf declares that “it was hunger” that drove him to steal, and that “with children to feed...it’s hard, and that’s the truth.” Once again, Turgenev presents to the reader an image that contradicts the stereotype that dominated nineteenth-century literature. While other nobles depicted serfs as men whose actions were driven by emotion rather than rational thought, Turgenev portrays the thief as a man who has weighed his options and who makes the decision to risk his life for the well-being of his family. Deeply moved, the huntsman declares that he “promised [himself] that, whatever

---

79 Hanne, 45.


82 Turgenev, *A Sportsman’s Notebook*, 179.

83 Figes, 223 and Hanne, 51.
happened, [he] would set the poor wretch free” from the prison of the forester’s house. 84 Short of manumitting him from his bonded status as a serf, it was all that the narrator could do.

Turgenev’s novel, rife with anti-serfdom sentiments, dramatically affected the viewpoints of the Russian elites and may have altered the course of Russian history. Although Tsar Nicholas I fired the censor who allowed A Sportsman’s Notebook to be published, Nicholas’s son and heir to the throne, Alexander II, was deeply moved by Turgenev’s humanistic portrayal of the serfs. 85 Indeed, Turgenev, Turgenev’s biographers, and Alexander II’s biographers all assert that the future tsar’s decision to emancipate the serfs a decade later was due in part to Turgenev’s revolutionary depiction of the serfs in the novel.86 The Russian elites who read A Sportsman’s Notebook also experienced similar transformations in their attitudes toward the serfs. P.V. Annenkov, a literary critic and contemporary of Turgenev, claimed that even though the most liberal of Russian elites possessed disparaging attitudes toward serfs, these elites began to have a positive impression of the peasants after reading A Sportsman’s Notebook. Throughout Turgenev’s life, landowners approached him to express their gratitude for his role in awakening their consciences and helping instigate the emancipation of the serfs. Although some elites undoubtedly disagreed with Turgenev’s depiction, the author’s international fame, election to the Imperial Academy of Sciences in 1859, and widely attended funeral all serve as evidence of his national and international popularity and of the widespread influence of his literature in

84 Turgenev, 178.
85 Hanne, 43, 65 and Seeley, 105.
86 Hanne, 41-43.
Thus, the ideas that Turgenev expressed in *A Sportsman’s Notebook* represent the first stage of the Peasant myth that would further transform Russian elites’ perception of the former serfs from that of a primitive being to a mysterious and wise man.

---

CHAPTER 8

NARODNICHESTVO AND THE SECOND ITERATION OF THE PEASANT MYTH

After Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom by decree in 1861, the opinions of elites continued to change. Like their Southern counterparts, some Russian elites realized the moral fallibility of their former desire to preserve an oppressive institution. Instead of creating a myth that justified or denied this, however, Russians sought to understand the character of their former bondsmen. In the second version of the Peasant myth, an extension of the first, some Russian elites became enamored with the idea of the Russian peasant and elevated the former serfs by attributing to them admirable qualities that they believed represented the true Russian character.

The Russian elites who propelled the Peasant myth into its second phase were strongly influenced by a political movement called narodnichestvo, or Populism, which gained popularity among student intellectuals during the 1870’s. A socialist agrarian movement comprising narodniki, or Populists, its proponents believed that they were “one with the people,” referring to Russia’s most populous group, the peasants.

Influenced by the philosophies of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Russian Slavophiles of the 1840’s and 1850’s, and elements of the Russian Orthodox religion, the narodniki

89 Figes, 224.
believed that peasant institutions were Russia’s key to achieving socialism. According to one contemporary, the *narodniki* “graft[ed] onto [the peasants] higher ideals.”\(^\text{91}\) As the movement gained strength, it became politically oriented in nature. By the late 1870’s, the *narodniki* articulated specific policy goals like a desire to create a collectivist society with an economy that would be based on two peasant institutions, the *mir*, an arrangement of communal land structure, and the *artel*, a village productive cooperative.\(^\text{92}\)

Between 1872 and 1878, a growing number of *narodniki* became interested in learning from and instructing the peasants. During the summer of 1874, a mass social movement called *khozhdenie v narod*, or the “Going to the People,” occurred when approximately 3,000 student intellectuals traveled to nearly every province in European Russia. They hoped to integrate themselves within peasant communities where they could learn from and instruct the peasants. Although the peasants were unreceptive and unwelcoming toward these intellectual intruders, the *narodniki* maintained their enthusiasm and returned to the villages between 1876 and 1878 in a second wave.\(^\text{93}\) Ultimately, government authorities labeled these students as civil agitators, arrested them, and forced them into exile.

The Populist movement subsequently changed its tactics, founding in 1876 the first official political party to directly advocate social revolution, *Zemlya i Volya*, or “Land and Freedom.” In 1879, the movement would splinter once again into *Narodnaya Volya*, “The People’s Will,” and *Chorny Peredel*, “The Black Repartition.” The latter group hoped to

---

\(^{91}\) Vospominanya Lev Tikomerova (Moscow and Leningrad, 1927), page 86; quoted in Pipes, “Narodnichestvo,” 444.


\(^{93}\) Frierson, *Peasant Icons*, 39.
redistribute land into peasant communes in order to achieve a socialist community, but disbanded in 1883. By contrast, the members of the People’s Will advocated tactics of terror to achieve their goals and succeeded in murdering Tsar Alexander II in March of 1881. The actions of these Russian elites pose a stark contrast to that of their Southern counterparts; while the narodniki sought to impart political and economic power to the former bondsmen, the Southern elites strove to deny it.

Many members of the Russian elite were both inspired by and supportive of narodnichestvo and the narodniki. They shared the narodniki’s fascination with the idea of the Russian peasant and began to present a highly idealized view of the former serfs in their literature, depicting peasants as deeply spiritual and morally upright possessors of a special wisdom. These romanticized portrayals are at the heart of the Peasant myth; they are visible in the widely popular literature of elite authors like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, as well as in essays written by Russian nobles like Aleksander Engelgardt and Gleb Upsenskii.94 These writers inherited the legacy of Russian elites like Turgenev who, twenty years previously, decried the institution of serfdom. Now, they looked to the peasants with the hope of understanding Russia’s identity and future.

---

94 Frierson, 13-14, 81.
CHAPTER 9

LEO TOLSTOY AND THE IDEALIZATION OF THE RUSSIAN PEASANT

No Russian noble did more to promote and spread the Peasant myth than Leo Tolstoy. A descendant of one of Russia’s oldest families of nobility, Tolstoy was born in the province of Tula in 1828. At the age of nineteen, Tolstoy inherited his family’s sprawling two-thousand-acre estate and became responsible for the wellbeing of two hundred serfs. After the abolition of serfdom in 1861, Tolstoy distributed much of his land to the freed serfs and eventually settled down to live the life of gentleman. Influenced by narodnichestvo, Tolstoy became increasingly convinced that the peasants should be the teachers of Russian society. He acquired an idealized view of Russian peasants and argued that Russian elites should emulate them.

In order to spread his viewpoint, Tolstoy filled his literature with moving depictions of the former serfs as diligent, pure, and admirable people. In Anna Karenina (1877), the novel that best defined and popularized these ideas, Tolstoy expresses his approbation of the peasants through the voice of the character Levin. Levin, a conflicted Russian nobleman

---

96 Figes, Natasha’s Dance, 236.
97 Figes, Natasha’s Dance, 238.
98 Freeborn, Russian Literary Attitudes, 74, and Figes, 243.
99 Figes, Natasha’s Dance, 237, 243.
who struggles to understand how best to live, learns to observe the peasants for inspiration and guidance. As Levin searches for meaning in his own life, he begins to find peace on his estate among the peasants with whom he enjoys working in the fields. When other noblemen tease him about his love of performing peasant labor, he defends his ways: “It is such pleasant work, and at the same time so hard.”

Through Levin’s introspections, the reader can observe Tolstoy’s own attitude towards the peasants. Tolstoy advocated peasant life to his readers because he believed that their simple and pure activities strengthened one’s moral character. Indeed, Levin discovers that physical labor purifies his soul. After spending an afternoon in the fields, Levin finds that he is unusually “light-hearted…[because] his work was undergoing a change which gave him intense pleasure.”

From these “blessed moments,” Levin realizes that “what gave him the most pleasure was the knowledge that he was able to keep up with the peasants.”

Tolstoy also admired the peasants because he thought that they possessed a strong moral fiber, a product of what he perceived to be their Christian faith. He expresses this view during the later chapters of the novel, when Levin undergoes a series of self-realizations that awaken in him a new religious devotion and understanding. After Levin settles down to a quiet life in the country with his new wife, Kitty, he realizes that he is still discontented, still searching for life’s purpose. He wonders: “What am I? Where am I? And why am I


102 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 229.

103 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 228, 230.
Soon after these thoughts pass through his head, Levin meets a peasant who describes to him another peasant, Plato. He says that Plato is a man who does not live for his own needs; rather, he “lives for his soul and remembers God.” As Levin continues to think about the peasant’s advice, he “felt something new in his soul and probed this something with pleasure, not yet knowing what it was.” Ultimately, Levin comes to the conclusion that “we must live for Truth, for God…I and millions of men who lived centuries ago and those who are living now: peasants, the poor in spirit…we all agree on one thing: what we should live for, and what is good.”

Like Levin, whose religious revelation leads him to discover that “every moment [of his life is] no longer meaningless as it was before,” Tolstoy, too found personal salvation through the peasantry. Tolstoy underwent his own spiritual transformation in the late 1870’s shortly after the publication of *Anna Karenina.* Of this metamorphosis, Tolstoy writes that he finally concluded that the peasantry was the most important part of his life: “It has been my monastery, the church where I escaped and found refuge from all the anxieties, the doubts and temptations.” The reader finds that Tolstoy not only expresses his own convictions through Levin’s voice, but that Levin’s fictional experiences foretell those of his creator. The character’s life is certainly intertwined with that of Tolstoy, a fact that provides

---

104 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 718.
scholars with an unusual historical source that better enables them to understand the Russian author.

The powerful image of the moral, wise peasant represents the second phase and height of the Peasant myth, which resonated among many Russian elites.\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Anna Karenina} was widely popular for its controversial message and of course, scandalous plot filled with adultery and intrigue. One elite wrote in 1875 that society’s reaction to the book bordered on delirium and that he had seen old men jumping up and down with joy, while another wrote that the Russian elites were in an uproar as they praised and debated the book’s contents.\textsuperscript{111} The elites’ initial excitement, rather than waning in the years that followed the novel’s publication, grew into a dedicated enthusiasm. Thousands of Russian elites, dubbed Tolstoyans, set up communes across the nation where they tried to live according to his principles. In a representative example of elite mentality and action, one nobleman, Prince Dmitri Khilkov, distributed his grand estates among his peasants and saved one small plot of land for himself where he worked and lived among the former serfs.\textsuperscript{112} What accounts for Tolstoy’s portrayal of the former serfs and for the Peasant myth’s broad popularity among some members of the Russian elite? Their reaction differed greatly from that of the Southern planters who, in the decades following the abolition of slavery, fought vigorously to suppress rather than imitate the freedmen.

\textsuperscript{110} Although literary critics gave the book mixed reviews about its literary merits, members of the Russian elite were widely enthusiastic. The royalties that Tolstoy received from both \textit{Anna Karenina} and \textit{War and Peace} amounted to more than twenty-thousand rubles a year, an indication of the books’ widespread popularity. A. V. Knowles, “Russian Views of Anna Karenina, 1875-1878,” \textit{The Slavic and East European Journal} 22, no. 3 (October 1, 1978), 302.

\textsuperscript{111} Knowles, 302.

Several factors explain the popularity of narodnichestvo and, more specifically, some Russian elites’ admiration and idealization of their former bondsmen. First, after the abolition of serfdom in 1861, Russian nobles generally retained their social and economic power. Although Tsar Alexander II emancipated approximately 40% of Russia’s population, many of these serfs remained legally bound to village communes and were obligated to reimburse the Russian state through redemption payments over the course of 49 years.113 Russia’s nobility maintained ownership of their land, received fiscal compensation for their labor losses, and tried to replicate pre-emancipation relations between planters and serfs.114 Suffering through famines, droughts, and high taxes, many peasants faced insolvency and were dependent upon their former masters. Samuel Baron and Richard Pipes argue that, between 1861 and 1900, the peasants’ quality of life declined due to factors like high taxes, falling grain prices, poor land quality, and rapid population growth.115 Thus, in the decades immediately following the abolition of serfdom, the power dynamics between the peasants and their former masters did not change dramatically.116 As a result, Russian nobles may have been more considerate of the peasants’ plight and receptive to the Peasant myth than they would have been had the former serfs directly threatened their authority.


116 Kolchin argues that the post-emancipation decades were marked by continuity rather than change for the Russian elites and that unlike the American South, “there was no radical attempt to give sudden equality to the ex-serfs or to break the social and economic hegemony of the [nobles]…noblemen were still noblemen in a highly stratified society.” Kolchin, *Unfree Labor*, 375.
Some Russian nobles may also have embraced the Peasant myth in a reaction to modernization. Beginning in 1880, fresh modes of production emerged and new industries arose from the wreckage of the feudal system of serfdom. Rates of industrialization in Russia reached unprecedented heights between 1880 and 1900 as the state promoted policies that supported infrastructure improvements and heavy industry. Perhaps these changes caused anxiety in Russia’s nobility, a group of historically landed gentry. Like their Southern counterparts who dreamed of an idyllic antebellum South, some Russian nobles idealized the pastoral lifestyle in their glorification of the former serfs.

Finally, a romanticized image of the Russian peasant may also have appealed to Russian elites because of a perceived lack of a racial difference. Unlike their Southern counterparts, the majority of Russian elites did not view their former bondsmen to be members of a different race. Nobles respected the peasants to a degree because they believed that they shared with them a common race, language, religion, and national history. When Russians spoke of “the people,” they referred to the peasants who comprised the majority of Russia’s population. While some might argue that the elites’ belief in a shared racial heritage was inevitable, this is not the case. Scholar Mark Smith argues that race is a social construction and that “race and racism are constructed, peddled, and marketed;” he points to the actions of white-slaveholders in the antebellum South who “cast blackness in

\[\text{117 Baron, Plekhanov, 3.}\]
\[\text{118 Moon, The Abolition of Russian Serfdom, 126.}\]
\[\text{119 Kolchin posits that, while American slavery formed along the color line as whites subjugated blacks, nobles and serfs saw commonalities in their ethnic and religious origins. Kolchin, Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom, 184.}\]
sensory terms both to justify and explain exploitation.”¹²⁰ Indeed, there exists evidence that, in antebellum Russia, a minority of Russian nobleman argued that serfs had black bones and that they were inherently lazy and puerile.¹²¹ Historical examples such as this support Smith’s claim that, as a social construction, conceptions of race can exist in any society and at any time. In the decades that followed the abolition of serfdom and slavery, however, Russian nobles did not emphasize perceived racial differences. But the existence of pre-emancipation racial prejudices suggests that, in post-emancipation Russia, these elites could have perceived peasants to be of a separate race, much like the white Southerners who maliciously argued that the freed blacks were racially inferior to whites in the post-emancipation South. Consequently, the divergent responses of the Russian and Southern elites support the idea that the power dynamics between the masters and their former bondsmen, rather than racial differences, primarily accounted for the elites’ production of disparate cultural myths.

Thus, factors chiefly related to economic and social power made the Russian elites more receptive to romanticized portrayals of Russian peasants like those found in Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina. Yet, nobles who believed all Russians should imitate the peasants were unaware of the sweeping disillusionment they would soon experience. With the failure of “The Going,” Russia’s continued modernization, and the tide of repressive reforms that swept across Russia during the late 1880’s and 1890’s, the Peasant myth would not survive.


¹²¹ David Brion Davis, Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World (Oxford University Press, 2006), 50.
CHAPTER 10

ANTON CHEKHOV AND THE DECLINE OF THE PEASANT MYTH

The Peasant myth continued to evolve as Russian elites reacted to the political and social events of the late nineteenth century. In the wake of khozhdenie v narod and the murder of his father, Alexander II, a new tsar, Alexander III, introduced a series of decrees to combat the efforts of radicals like the Populists whose ideas and actions appeared to destabilize the social order within the country.\(^\text{122}\) The policies, which lasted from 1881-1894, dealt a blow to the political movement of narodnichestvo, which had declined in strength as the movement splintered and its proponents increasingly supported Marxist ideology.\(^\text{123}\) In addition, industrialization and urbanization continued to change Russia’s character; landowners watched as peasants began to migrate to Russia’s burgeoning cities where they espoused a non-rural lifestyle counter to that described by the Peasant myth. Together, these political and economic changes disheartened the elites who had believed strongly in the Peasant myth, making them particularly receptive to Anton Chekhov’s radical short story, “The Peasants” (1897). Chekhov’s tale exposed the grim hardships of peasant life, presenting


\(^{123}\) Billington, 139, 185. The Populists’ ideology had not disappeared forever. Many of their tenets, such as their faith in the peasantry, appeared again in the rhetoric of the Social-Revolutionary Party between 1901 and 1917. The modern, terrorist tactics of Narodnaya Volya also appeared again when the Social-Revolutionaries resorted to violence in the form of political assassinations. Finally, the Populists’ utopian socialist ideals were evident in the words of the later Marxists, who used traditional narodnik terms to inspire an emotional response in their supporters. Thus, while the Populists were defeated in the 1880’s, their legacy was powerful and extensive because it inspired future political parties of different kinds.
the impoverished *narod* in terms that directly contradicted those of Tolstoy and the hopeful Populists.

Born in 1860, Anton Chekhov never knew serfdom firsthand.\textsuperscript{124} His father, a freed serf, worked hard after his emancipation to achieve social mobility.\textsuperscript{125} As a result of his father’s efforts, Chekhov received both a secondary and a university education, providing him with a solid literary foundation and access to social circles of Russian intellectuals in Moscow and St. Petersburg.\textsuperscript{126} While living in Moscow, Chekhov worked as a doctor in nearby villages, treating ill peasants free of charge and observing their wretched poverty. He also collected data for the first Russian census, learning even more about the miserable conditions in the city slums where peasants lived.\textsuperscript{127} Drawing from his experiences in both peasant and elite worlds, Chekhov wrote a variety of plays and short stories that displayed his unique understanding of the culture and practices of these two groups.

In “The Peasants,” Chekhov presents a vivid picture of peasant life during the late nineteenth century. His writing style, filled with the naturalistic observations that are characteristic of a man with a background in science, provide the fictional story with overtones of realism. While Tolstoy filled his literature with didactic language, Chekhov inserted gritty depictions of the peasants that lent to his authorial credibility as a trenchant and honest observer.


\textsuperscript{125} Bruford, 3-4.

\textsuperscript{126} Bruford, 2-5.

\textsuperscript{127} Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, 256, 257.
Chekhov tells the story of a former peasant, Nikolai Chikildyeyev, who returns to the countryside from Moscow after losing his job as a waiter. Instead of finding “the bright, snug, comfortable” home of his youth, Nikolai is “positively frightened” to see his hut which was now “so dark, so crowded, so unclean.” Chekhov describes to the reader what Nikolai observes: “the big, untidy stove…which was black with soot and flies…bottle labels and newspaper cuttings…the poverty, the poverty!” Chekhov places this unsettling scene in the first few paragraphs of the story. By introducing these ideas to the reader at the beginning of the text, Chekhov may have hoped that the nineteenth-century reader would quickly discover that, like the disillusioned Nikolai, his perceptions of peasant life were flawed.

As the story progresses, Chekhov paints a more expansive view of peasant life. First, the reader meets Nikolai’s family, a group of drunken, ignorant peasants who fail to possess a single redeeming characteristic. The children remain “unwashed and apathetic,” while the parents, “gaunt, bent, [and] toothless old people,” serve Nikolai “tea [that] smelled of fish; sugar…[and] bread that looked as though it had been nibbled.” Chekhov depicts these men and women as rebarbative creatures who fit well into their environment. Their food is as disgusting as their “conversation—about nothing but poverty and illnesses.” Nikolai’s brother, Kiryak, embodies all the worst traits that a peasant might possess. Most noticeable is his penchant for vodka, a trait that drives him to terrorize the entire household. When Kiryak drinks, he has a habit of beating his wife, Marya, who submits to her husband’s

---

129 Chekhov, 249.
130 Chekhov, 251.
131 Chekhov, 251.
132 Chekhov, 252.
blows. Like poor Marya, the other members of the family also accept Kiryak’s brutalities with resignation. When Kiryak abuses his wife in front of his kin, Chekhov writes that “the old mother sat silent, bowed, lost in thought...[while the sister-in-law] Fyokla rocked the cradle.”

Chekhov does not offer any hope to the reader with the story’s dark conclusion. By the end of “The Peasants,” the family members’ resigned attitudes have influenced Nikolai himself. No longer an outsider, he, too is literally crushed by the poverty that surrounds him as he falls ill and dies.” Nikolai’s descent into poverty and his eventual death reflect Chekhov’s own belief that the popular image of the happy, wise peasants was just an illusion. With the publication of “The Peasants,” Chekhov intentionally brought an awareness of the crippling poverty and misery of peasant life to Russian elites.

Indeed, Chekhov’s devastating depiction of the directly challenged the Peasant myth and Russian elites’ perceptions of the former serfs. Readers who ranged from intellectuals to government officials were horrified by the short story; Tsar Alexander III’s censors tried to prevent half of the story’s publication and Tolstoy declared it to be “a sin before the people,” arguing that Chekhov had not looked deep enough into the peasants’ souls. Yet, many Russian elites saw the veracity of Chekhov’s portrayal, including one critic who observed that “as [Chekhov] presents the matter, not only learning from the people, but even teaching them appears almost impossible.” With the stroke of his pen, Chekhov brought a new understanding of the peasants to the Russian elites.

133 Chekhov, 252.
134 Chekhov, 278.
135 Williams, 68, and Figes 256.
136 I.N. Ignatov in Russkie Vedomosti, 1897, No. 106, April 19th, quoted in Williams, 68.
Why did audiences accept Chekhov’s portrayal of the former serfs as accurate, despite its contradictions with prior, more idealized depictions of peasant life? Changing economic and social conditions in Russia may have made the Russian elites particularly receptive to this new depiction of the peasants at the moment of the story’s publication. Life in Russia was changing rapidly at the end of the nineteenth century as the nation modernized and industrialized. The peasant population multiplied to 79 million from 50 million between 1861 and 1897, resulting in the overcrowding of villages and a shortage of arable land that left peasants unable to grow a marketable surplus or make a living.\textsuperscript{137} Consequently, thousands of peasants, the majority male, began to migrate to urban centers as they searched for work.\textsuperscript{138} The old way of life, idealized by the Russian elites, rapidly disappeared as peasants sought new opportunities. However, peasants faced the prospect of crushing poverty in cities, too, where they were unable to afford adequate medical care. The child mortality rate was exceedingly high; six out of ten infants died before the age of one, and many peasants perished during the famine of 1891 and the cholera epidemic that permeated the countryside soon after.\textsuperscript{139} Despite these hardships, the peasants remained undeterred in their desire to escape village life. By the turn of the twentieth century, when Chekhov published his play, statistics showed that half of rural school children expressed a strong desire to move to the city rather than to remain within their native villages.\textsuperscript{140} Elites could see that life was changing irreversibly during these tumultuous decades.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Figes, 258.
\item Figes, 258.
\item Figes, \textit{Natasha’s Dance}, 259.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Aware of the aforementioned societal changes, Russian elites realized that Chekhov’s story was an accurate depiction of an unwanted reality. They may have recognized that, in the early twentieth century, their estates would fall into ruin as peasants relocated from villages to more populous urban centers where they could work in factories, a new merchant class developed, and former serf families like that of Chekhov rose to higher social positions.\footnote{Baron, Plekhanov, 3.} By the close of the nineteenth century, many Russian elites began to view the former serfs as an ignorant group of people that was neither morally nor spiritually superior.\footnote{Figes, Natasha’s Dance, 260.} As one contemporary lamented, “the Russian people…have lost faith in the narod: their life and those fundamental principles which not long ago were the beacon of a better future, have become the subject of skepticism.”\footnote{F. Andreev, “A Word About the Muzhik,” quoted in Frierson, 181.} Thus, Chekhov’s short story simultaneously portended and contributed to the decline of the Peasant myth. The Russian elites ultimately rejected the notion of the noble peasant as they watched the waves of modernity sweep across Russia.
CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

By juxtaposing the Peasant and Lost Cause myths, one observes divergent paths and purposes. While the Peasant myth reached its apex during the 1870’s and 1880’s when Russian elites aspired to emulate “the people,” it declined in strength and influence by the close of the nineteenth century. By contrast, the Lost Cause myth, evolving over time, grew increasingly popular during the latter half of the nineteenth century as it gained broad support among Americans outside of the Southern elite group. The myths appear to have served different functions in each society; while Russian elites used the Peasant myth understand and define their national identity during a time of great economic and social change, Southern authors employed the Lost Cause myth to justify white supremacist violence and to garner support for political policies like the Jim Crow laws that strengthened the whites’ dominant position in Southern society. Whereas Southern landowners feared that the newly emancipated slaves would overwhelm them politically, Russian landowners living under an autocracy did not share similar concerns.

Economics also played a role in shaping the attitudes of the members of the elites. In Russia, many peasants remained legally and structurally tied to the land after their emancipation, were too poor to purchase the nobles’ estates, and were subsequently unable to challenge the nobles’ dominant social position through the accumulation of wealthy or property. Unlike the abolition of slavery, accomplished through warfare, the tsar abolished
serfdom with the financial interests of the state in mind, but Russian elites were compensated for their losses and had a degree of legal authority over the peasants.144

Lastly, racial perceptions and cultural similarities also contributed to the production of divergent myths. Russians accepted the freed serfs as members of their society. Russian elites believed that they shared a common race, heritage, religion and history, but in contrast, racism and a lack of shared history acted as a centrifuge that separated white and black Southerners after the abolition of slavery. Thus, Russian and Southern authors produced dissimilar myths because of perceived commonalities, the economic livelihoods of the elites after the abolition of serfdom and slavery, and the different levels of political power that the serfs and the slaves possessed after their respective emancipations. These factors all contributed to the formation of disparate power relations in each region, which in turn explains the elites’ production of and audiences’ belief in the divergent myths.

But while the Peasant myth faded away by the beginning of the twentieth century, the Lost Cause myth remained strong. White Southerners relied upon their myth; its success fortified their societal position. By contrast, the idealization of the Russian peasant did not preserve the nobles’ power. Perhaps this distinction accounts for the longevity of the Lost Cause mythology: its proponents’ livelihoods depended on the myth’s survival in the popular mind.

A final explanation for each myth’s creation may be that these writers created the Peasant and the Lost Cause myths to satisfy their personal needs. Of Americans and Southerners, Southern author Robert Penn Warren writes that they “fear…to find [themselves] nakedly alone with the problems of time and of [themselves], so they search for

their “next alibi and…next assurance of virtue.”145 The Lost Cause mythology did indeed provide Southerners with an alibi and a moral justification for the war itself and for their treatment of the freed slaves. By comparison, the Russians who created the idealistic Peasant mythology may have found a “spiritual tranquility” by placing their hopes in the peasants, as did Tolstoy.146 While it appears that men re-imagine their histories for many reasons, the fact remains that if one cannot accept “the past and its burden,” there will be no “future, for without one there cannot be the other.”147 One must view one’s past and present with clear eyes so that he does not foster or enhance “the old inherited delusions which [his] weakness craves.”148


146 Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 728.


REFERENCES

Primary Sources


Editorial, “The Past and the Present,” December 9th 1865, Richmond Times Dispatch


Print Shop, 1919. Originally published in 1892.


Secondary Sources


Ogden, J. Alexander and Kalb, Judith E, ed. *Russian Novelists in the Age of Tolstoy.*


