

# Deconstructions of the Russian Empire in Western Travel Literature



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By

Dimitrios Kassis

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## ABSTRACT

Situated between Europe and Asia, Russia systematically challenged the European theories attached to nationhood due to its geopolitical and cultural peculiarities: since the rise of European nationalist movements, imperial Russia posed a threat to the very existence of the Germanic empires of Britain, Germany and Austria, and was frequently evoked to epitomise European barbarism, paganism, despotism and the Orient. In its struggle to acquire a new identity, which would bridge the gap with Western empires, Russia could not conform to the rising Anglo-Saxon movements that sought to glorify Nordic supremacy at the expense of the Oriental Other. Drawing upon this binary opposition between the Orient and the Occident, the Russian Empire concentrated on the development of its own nation-building theories, which managed to incorporate the ascending Pan-Slavic wave into its nationalist agenda. The anti-Western rhetoric that often characterised Russian politics contributed to the subversion of the conventional Western perspective of the Orient and the emergence of Eurasianism as a political theory that exalted the different traits of its imperial system.

This book sets the focus on the representations of the Russian Empire from 1792 until 1912 in the field of travel literature. To this end, British and American travel narratives of the aforementioned period have been selected to explore all the issues pertaining to Russian identity and culture. For this reason, the book addresses major issues attached to Russian history and culture that were explored by Western travellers in their attempt to approach the Russian Empire.



## INTRODUCTION

The present book is concerned with the representations of the Russian Empire in the travel discourse of American and British travel writers. The purpose of the book is to throw light on the various instances in which Russian culture is brought to the foreground by these travel writers in order to address the different aspects of Russian civilisation.

Before the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars, Russia held the position of a terra incognita in Western imagination. It was after the active involvement of the Russian Empire in the alliance against King Napoleon that Russia acquired a new place in the mapping of the North and gradually became a travel destination worth visiting apart from the popular Grand Tourist lands.

Owing to its peculiar state as an Empire divided into two vast parts, the European and the Asiatic, Russia was persistently viewed as a nation that posed a threat to British expansion towards the East and that largely undermined the British geopolitical interests overseas. Unlike Germany and the Scandinavian nations, which fared better in Victorian imagination due to their connection to the Old Norse culture and the common ties with ancient Britain, Russia was remotely connected to the Anglo-Saxon myth and, therefore, it did not accord with the pristine Protestant aspect attached to British and American culture. Undoubtedly, the affiliation of the Russian Empire to the Greek Orthodox Church was inconsistent with the Protestant values of the British Empire and the American culture, harbouring a hostile attitude towards Catholicism, represented by the French Empire, and Eastern Christendom, epitomised by the Russian East (Robert Young 21).

Apart from its seminal strategic position as a crossroads between Europe and Asia, the depiction of the Russian nation coincided with the geographical situation of the Empire, triggering debates such as the climate theory, the concept of the Far North and the Orientalism of the Russians both culturally and racially.

With respect to the climate theory, which remained in vigour well until the mid-nineteenth century, at a time when biological racism came to occupy a prominent position in the study of races, in his *Spirit of Laws*, Montesquieu formulated the correlation between a country's legal system and its climatological conditions. In particular, Montesquieu contended

that “if it is true that the character of the spirit and the passions of the heart are extremely different in the various climates, laws should be relative to the differences in these passions and to the differences in these characters” (231). In the light of this theory, which affected the mapping of Europe throughout the eighteenth century and at the turn of the nineteenth century, climate was perceived as a decisive factor in the formation of national characters. In absence of scientific criteria, which could contribute to a more accurate delineation of races in terms of aptitudes and spiritual qualities, Montesquieu endeavoured to justify the distinct features of Northern and Southern European nations. Eighteenth-century theorists extensively used this model in order to reinforce the idea of the enlightened European South as opposed to the cold and barren North (Lisa J. Piergallini 2017). In that respect, Russia could not be treated as an enlightened nation from Montesquieu’s perspective, given that it was distant from the main centres of European culture and was geographically ideal to serve as a nation that epitomised the Far North, that is, the barbaric zone that clashed with the cultural refinement of Grecian culture.

As regards the concept of the Far North, which influenced travel literature on the Northern European territories, representations of Russia attuned to the popular myth of Ultima Thule as a utopian locus far removed from the European political centres. This new trend in travel literature of the late eighteenth century awakened the interest of “polymath travelers and expeditions pursuing antiquarian interests alongside scientific interests” (Percy G. Adams 19), thus contributing to the Romantic North and adding to the savage grandeur of the Northern peripheries of Europe such as Scandinavia and Russia. Unlike Grand Tourists, who flocked to regions of the beaten track to gain easier access to the sublime and the picturesque, travellers who ventured to Russia were, in their greatest part, driven by scientific or political motives (Edward Chaney 52).

Aside from the eighteenth-century trends that permeated travel literature of Northern latitudes, due to its unique status as an Empire placed in the middle of two continents, Russia had been associated with the East. Because of the various Asiatic populations that inhabited its soil, and the ecclesiastical customs of the Greek Orthodox Church that reflected a strong Byzantine influence, the image of the Russian Empire coalesced with the Saidian concept of Orientalism. Drawing upon Said’s emphasis on the mechanism of the Anglo-French Orientalism “through which European intellectuals made an essential contribution to the extension of western hegemonic power over the East” (Cronin 647) in their writings, travel discourse on Russia accorded with the Saidian dichotomy of the Occident and the Orient: otherwise put, the binary opposition of the

colonial centre and the periphery. This view is further reinforced by the fact that the contemplation of Russia as Oriental dates back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, “provoked by a negative reaction to the reforms of Peter the Great, reaching a crescendo in the Slavophil/Westernizer debates of the mid-nineteenth century” (Cronin 648).

Moreover, unlike the imperial expansionist project of the Britons and the French in Asia that sought to colonise territories far from the national borders of their Empires, “for Russia the Orient consisted in the first instance of Asian territories physically incorporated into the state” (Achcar 99). In that way, the imperial experience of Russian citizens significantly differed from the colonial system of Western Empires.

Furthermore, if Western thinkers and nationalists resorted to Orientalism in order to address the dichotomy between the civilised Occident and the barbarian Orient, Eurasianism<sup>1</sup> evolved into the Russian equivalent version, developed at the threshold of the twentieth century based on the assumption that Russia was endowed with a unique national identity that transcended Europe and Asia (Zbigniew Brzezinski 31). In that sense, Eurasianism fulfilled the function of the dominant imperialist doctrine in Russia since the late nineteenth century. It was adopted to designate the expansion of imperial Russia and the geopolitical interests of the country in the two continents (Brzezinski 32).

As has already been argued in my previous books, both American and British travel writers treated the countries visited as an indispensable part of their attempt to corroborate their Anglo-Saxon hypotheses, focusing on all the necessary components of British and American nationhood, that is, race, language, religion, history and the folklore. This was partly due to the popular Herderian definition of a nation’s *Volksgeist* as “the true differential character of our species as reason is from within” (Johann Gottfried Herder 127).

If the early nation-building discourses of Germanic nations revolved around the Herderian components of nationhood, based on the premise that a *Volksgeist* could only be forged through the existence of a distinct language, literature and peasantry (Hildor A. Barton 3), shedding light on all the aspects that could help promote a national culture, Russian nationhood could not conform to this Herderian model. On the one hand, Russian language held the status of the official language of the Empire but many other languages of European and Asian origin were spoken within the Russian Empire. Consequently, Russian nationhood could not be determined in the light of the Herderian outlook on national language

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<sup>1</sup> Yevraziystvo in Russian

(Volkssprache). On the other hand, Russian historiography was intimately related to the Byzantine tradition, a fact that clashed with the Muslim and pagan populations inside its borders. What is more, Russian peasantry, despite its picturesque aspect, did not adhere to the Herderian model of enlightened peasants in Western eyes, given the existence of serfdom in the Russian countryside.

With regard to the issue of serfdom in Russia, whose abolition occurred in 1861, it was the prevalent form of professional relation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, it was not until the early nineteenth century that the Emancipation gradually became the subject of ardent discussions amongst British and American travellers, treating the institution of the *muzhik*<sup>2</sup> as evidence of Russian despotism, which was conducive to unfree labour, as it subverted the liberal institutions of the West (Roger Munting 121). The issue of Emancipation also concerned American theorists and travellers, considering the parallel developments in American society, when the abolition of slavery took place in 1865 and resulted in the Civil War (Munting 121).

In pursuit of a new identity, which would distinguish them from neighbouring nations and colonised lands, Britons and Americans sought to explore all the potential parameters that could enable them to consolidate their expansionist schemes towards the East. To this end, the creation of national myths such as Anglo-Saxonism and Nordicism was pivotal to the justification of their imperialist pursuits.

With the advent of the pseudo-sciences, which accelerated the introduction of race as the sole means of drawing a distinction between different nations based on the alleged biological supremacy of the Anglo-Saxons over the Other, Russia came to epitomise the proper hotbed for the validation of the new racial theories of Aryanism, Anglo-Saxonism and Nordicism. Discussing the different definitions of the Germanic race, Geoffrey G. Field observes that

the term 'Nordic' came into vogue rather late. The Russian born French anthropologist, Joseph Deniker (1852-1918) referred to a race *nordique* as early as 1900, but most nineteenth-century theorists like Count Gobineau (1816-82), Otto Ammon (1842-1915), Vacher de Lapouge (1854-1936), and H. S. Chamberlain (1855-1927) preferred to speak of 'Aryans,' 'Teutons,' and 'Indo-Europeans'. (523)

A nationalist theory originally developed to mould the different ethnic groups of Britain and America into a single political and cultural identity,

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<sup>2</sup> Russian rural dweller

Anglo-Saxonism gradually transformed into an umbrella term to incorporate all European nations that shared similar racial characteristics. Given that the previous nation-building components of nationhood (language, history, literature and religion) were not deemed sufficiently scientific, in the light of the Darwinist conception of racial definition physical qualities were treated as the main tools of racial delineation. As alleged by two ardent late nineteenth-century Nordicism scholars, Madison Grant and Henry F. Osborn, descendants of the ancient Nordic tribes could still be traced in all the Northern territories of the European Continent, Russia included:

North of the Alpines and occupying the shores of the Baltic and Scandinavia, together with eastern Germany, Poland, and Russia, were located the Nordics. At the very base of the Neolithic, and perhaps still earlier, this race occupied Scandinavia, and Sweden became the nursery of the Teutonic subdivision of the Nordic race. (57)

Interestingly enough, Russia was purposefully depicted as one of the cradles of Nordic racial aristocracy, despite its frequent view by Western theorists as a rival empire, which epitomised all the negative qualities that clashed with the positive properties of the Teutonic nations. By introducing anthropological characteristics to the study of the racial origins of nations, inevitably British and American anthropologists needed to incorporate part of the Russian population to the Nordic agenda, partly due to the racial blondness of the latter:

This ancient Nordic element, however, still forms a very considerable portion of the population of northern Russia and contributes to the blondness and the red-headedness so characteristic of the Russian of today. As we leave the Baltic coasts, the Nordic characters fade out both toward the south and east. The blond element in the nobility of Russia is of later Scandinavian and Teutonic origin. (Grant and Osborn 77)

Notwithstanding the endeavour of certain British and American scholars to incorporate Russia into the Anglo-Saxonist discourse that sought to unite all members of the alleged Nordic aristocracy, during the nineteenth century the rise of the Russian Empire clearly defied Britain's predominant role within the European context and overseas, a fact that gradually transformed travel discourse on Russia into an anti-Russian rhetoric. One of the main reasons for the demonisation of the Russian Empire was precisely its leading role in a parallel movement to that of pan-Germanism, that is, pan-Slavism.

Manifesting itself during the mid-nineteenth century, pan-Slavism evolved into a political movement that promoted the idea of unity amongst different Slavic-speaking communities across Europe (Paul Vyšný 67). While the pan-Germanic spirit developed with the aim of safeguarding the imperialist interests of Britain, Prussia and Austria-Hungary, the pan-Slavic movement was crystallised as a reaction of Slavic nations, which were part of the aforementioned empires, against their rulers, thus attacking both spiritually and politically these European superpowers, including the Ottoman Empire (Nicholas V. Riasanovsky 10).

Resulting from the Napoleonic Wars, and inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, the pan-Slavic movement rested on the strenuous efforts of Slavic scholars to revive Slavic history, philology and folk music in order to emphasise the common ancestry of Slavic-speaking communities that lived under the yoke of the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire (Riasanovsky 11).

Considering the fact that Russia was the only territory in mid-nineteenth century Europe that was not occupied by a foreign power, the Russian Empire was persistently venerated as the liberating force, which would help other Slavic brethren recuperate their sovereignty (Vyšný 68). Consequently, pan-Slavism became synonymous with the Russian expansionist agenda westwards, mainly in the Balkan Peninsula, which culminated in the outbreak of the Crimean War, resulting in an open clash between the West and the Russian Empire for the appropriation of the Balkan and Mediterranean geopolitical sphere.

Given the above Anglo-Russian clash that scathed Anglo-Russian relations to a significant extent, pan-Slavism was immediately treated by British and American theorists as an ideological construct which did not only reinforce the cultural preponderance of Russia but also “sought to legitimise Russian intrusion into the political affairs of the weak states of a Slavic zone” (Anna Grigorieva 14). In other words, the ideas that British and American travellers expressed against the Russian Empire in their writings reflected the incumbent rivalry between different empires in their attempt to expand towards the East, giving rise to one of the thorniest issues of nineteenth-century Europe, that is, the Eastern Question.

As regards the significance of the Eastern Question in European politics of the mid-nineteenth century, Grigorieva asserts that

the growth of the influence of Russia in the system of international relations in the first half of the 19th century took place in the conditions of the foreign Slavic movement for the national liberation. During that time, a stereotyped perception of so-called ‘Russian colossus’ took shape as an evil force that strove for the annihilation (destruction) of German-Romanic



civilization with the support of Western and Southern Slav fellow tribesmen. (Grigorieva 13)

In that respect, the Russian Empire came to represent all the qualities that were antithetical to the seminal view of the British Empire as a liberal, freedom-loving political system. Influenced by the above-mentioned racial and political theories on the rival empire, British travellers felt intrigued to pay a visit to the Russian Other. In pursuit of elements, which would contribute to their deeper understanding of the Russian Colossus, and yearning to serve the need of the British Empire to acquire factual data on the political and sociocultural affairs of the Russian superpower, British travellers ventured to European Russia, and in fewer cases, they embarked on journeys to the Russian East.

Nevertheless, an additional dystopian trait of the Russian Empire was the sectarianism that characterised Russian society, a condition that was staunchly opposed to Victorian and American notions of Protestantism as a notion yoked to their alleged Anglo-Saxon national identity. The emergence of Raskol, that is, the official schism of the Russian Orthodox Church “into an official church and the Old Believers Movement in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century” (Robert O. Crummey 34) was a major political development which aimed at unifying the Greek and Russian Church practices through the promotion of radical reforms. The Raskol movement<sup>3</sup>, which alienated Old Believers from the Official Church, led to severe persecutions in the seventeenth century, coming to a halt during the reign of Peter the Great.

Concerning the issue of religion in Russia, a prominent position in Russian and Western discourses occupied Peter the Great whose instrumental role in modernising Russian culture and religion was met with the dissatisfaction of Russian believers and the enthusiasm of Westerners. As mentioned by Ludmila V. Mininkova and Tayjana J. Ajdunova, even though Peter the Great laid the foundations for the creation of modern Russia, he was poorly received by conservative Russians of his epoch, who tended to associate him with the image of the Antichrist and the contamination of the Russian traditions with Western elements (974). Despite the contradictory views on the role of Peter the Great, Michael Kort affirms that

The reign of Peter the Great marks the beginning of Russia's imperial era. It lasted from the 1690s until March 1917, when the Romanov dynasty was overthrown and the monarchy itself abolished. (xviii)

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<sup>3</sup> Raskolnik means dissenter in Russian

In that sense, the Russian emperor was often regarded as a politician who succeeded in consolidating the Russian Empire, placing Russia in the map of European superpowers. According to Olga Maiorova, Peter the Great was an emblematic figure, who successfully epitomised the contradictory self-image of the Russians and their loose connection to the conventional Western view of the Orient (13). As Maiorova purports, through Peter the Great's reforms "Russian educated society [...] learned to look at the East through European eyes" (13). Nevertheless, notwithstanding their sufficient exposure to Western philosophy, Russians "could not feel completely comfortable with the Western discourse of superiority over Asia, knowing that for Europe Russia itself belonged to the Orient" (Maiorova 14). By undermining the Orient, at a cultural level, Russian thinkers would also reject Russian contribution to European civilisation.

In his *Expansion of England*, John R. Seeley, a fervent advocate of the Anglo-Saxon movement, expressed the common belief that Russia should be regarded as the main enemy of the British expansionist agenda, which could pose a menace to the British imperial plans to appropriate Asia, stating that

There followed a pause in our foreign affairs. Our Empire had no important foreign relations for about twenty years. Then began a new phase. Another European Power takes the place of France as our rival in Asia. This power is Russia. (333)

In this sense, the Eastern Question appears to be inextricably connected to the ascending power of the Russian Empire, which posed a menace to the expansionist agenda of the British Empire in the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, the British Empire also adopted a negative stance towards the Russian presence in Asia, which was reminiscent of the precariousness of the Asian colonies under an imminent Russification. Discussing Russian expansion in Asia, Seeley bestows significant attention on the Russian accumulation of territorial power, which renders the Russian Empire a significant threat to the British geopolitical interests:

Russia already presses somewhat heavily on Central Europe; what will she do when with her vast territory and population she equals Germany in intelligence and organisation, when all her railways are made, her people educated, and her government settled on a solid basis and let us remember that if we allow her half a century to make so much progress her population will at the end of that time be not eighty but nearly a hundred and sixty millions. At that time which many here present may live to see, Russia and the United States will surpass in power the states now called

great as much as the great country-states of the sixteenth century surpassed Florence. (349-50)

Drawing upon the previous dimensions of the Eastern Question, one could also affirm that an additional dimension of this issue, that made Russian expansion an important obstacle to the British plans in Asia, was the Greek Orthodox faith. Given that the majority of the Slavic peoples who lived under foreign rule were Christian Orthodox, the Eastern Question was further intensified by the supreme role of the Russian Empire as the protector of Orthodoxy amongst Slavic-speaking communities during the pan-Slavic movement. According to Grigorieva,

The recognition of Russia as predominant force of the Slavic union was quite harmoniously supplemented with judgments about Russian language as common Slavic language, and also about a Slavic communal life and Greek-Orthodox church. (18)

The defiance of the Germanic rule in Europe through the revival of the Slavic literature and culture gave a new impetus to the Russian presence in the East and, at the same time, underscored its potential expansion in Central Europe, where a significant number of Slavic ethnic groups yearned to liberate themselves from their German and Austrian rulers.

However, through the exploitation of the pan-Slavic movement, which allowed Russians to picture themselves liberators of their Slavic and Orthodox brethren, the expansionist agenda of the Russian Empire was not perceived as a threat only by Victorian theorists and politicians. The mid-nineteenth century American political agenda was also profoundly affected by the political developments within the European and the Asian contexts. Notwithstanding the sectarian diversity and the multiethnic character of the American society, American nationalist discourse embraced the Anglo-Saxon paradigm, given that the Americans sought to project themselves as a purely Nordic race as well as direct descendants of the original English settlers that inhabited the American Continent. Thus, the concept of the *Homo Americanus* came to the fore, based on the allegation of the American nationalists that

the national ethnic group was Anglo-American Protestant ('American'). This was the first European group to 'imagine' the territory of the United States as its homeland and trace its genealogy back to New World colonists who rebelled against their mother country. In its mind, the American nation-state, its land, its history, its mission and its Anglo-American people were woven into one great tapestry of the imagination. (Eric Kaufmann 3-4)

Considering the meticulous efforts of American nationalists to present the United States as a racially pure stock of Anglo-Saxon descent, which promoted the Protestant values across the globe, Russia was opposed to that self-aggrandising image of the Americans both ideologically and geopolitically. Furthermore, the Russian Empire bordered Northern America until 1867, the year when Emperor Alexander II of Russia transferred Alaska to the United States in the aftermath of the Crimean War (Claus M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick 330).

Given all the above, one could affirm that Russia challenged Western discourse to its core, since “the Russian Empire appeared as a European imperium with a civilizing mission in Asia, and at other times it was imagined as an anti-Western force” (Mark Bassin, Sergey Glebov and Marlene Laruelle 1). As a result, the Eurocentric conceptualisation of the Other as pertaining to the peripheral world could not correspond to Russian geopolitical reality, given that British and American travellers often used Russia as an anti-modernist dystopia (Bassin, Glebov and Laruelle 2).

With regard to the first chapter of the book, it focuses on William Coxe’s *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark*. This chapter presents the image of Russianness in accordance with the eighteenth-century concept of the Far North that often characterised Russian nationhood in British travel literature.

Concerning the second chapter, it is concerned with Marie Guthrie’s *A Tour, Performed in the Years 1795-6, through the Taurida, or Crimea* which inaugurated the rise of Gothicism and the emergence of South Russia as the appropriate hotbed for the study of the Anglo-Saxon theory.

As regards the third chapter of this volume, Josiah Conder’s *The Modern Traveller: A Popular Description, Geographical, Historical, and Topographical of the Various Countries of the Globe: Russia* revolves around the issue of the abolition of serfdom in early nineteenth-century Russia.

Regarding the fourth chapter, it analyses Charles Boileau-Elliott’s account *Letters from the North of Europe*, addressing the Orientalist perspective from which the British writer contemplates Russia by drawing a comparison with the Indian colonial space, challenging the Anglo-Russian racial connection.

As per the fifth chapter, Laurence Oliphant’s narrative *The Russian Shores of the Black Sea* pertains to the Eastern Question, emphasising the different aspects of Russian despotism in the light of the Crimean War.

With reference to the sixth chapter, the focal point of John Overton Choules’ travel account *The Cruise of the Steam Yacht North Star* is the

Anglo-American alliance that permeates the writer's portrayal of the Russian cultural context, highlighting the binary opposition of the Russian Empire and the two Anglo-Saxon nations' racial and political prowess.

The seventh chapter comprises Donald Mackenzie Wallace's analysis of the Slavophil movement and the emergence of pan-Slavism through the study of his travel text *Russia, its History and Condition*. In this chapter, Wallace elaborates on the definition of the movement and the causes behind its manifestation.

With respect to the eighth chapter, Maturin M. Ballou's *Due North; or, Glimpses of Scandinavia and Russia* explores the Nihilist movement that challenged the Czarist hegemony, describing the most important developments relevant to the Russian political scene of his era.

As to the ninth chapter, George Frederick Wright's *Asiatic Russia* touches upon the Russian Orient as the ideal locus to investigate the theories of Aryanism and Nordicism that prevailed in American nationalist discourse towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The final chapter of the volume centres on Stephen Graham's *Undiscovered Russia*, which is produced as an anti-conquest narrative. Graham's text revisits the eighteenth-century travel aesthetics of the Noble Savage and the *Volksgeist*, fostering an Arcadian image of the Russian peasantry, religion and the folklore.



## CHAPTER ONE

### WILLIAM COXE: *TRAVELS INTO POLAND, RUSSIA, SWEDEN AND DENMARK*

The first chapter of this volume commences with William Coxe, a British historian and physician, who was born in 1747. Coxe graduated from Eton College, becoming a Fellow of King's College in the year 1768 (Kassis 44). A late-eighteenth century scholar and historian, Coxe travelled extensively throughout Europe "as tutor and fellow traveller of several noblemen such as Lord Herbet and Samuel Whitbread" (Kassis 44). Being a keen traveller, he produced several travel accounts which touched upon major historical and political issues of his time: *Sketches of the Natural, Political and Civil State of Switzerland* (1779), *Account of the Russian Discoveries between Asia and America* (1780), *Account of Prisons and Hospitals in Russia, Sweden and Denmark* (1781), *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark* (1784), *Travels in Switzerland* (1789) and *Historical Tour in Monmouthshire* (1801).

An acclaimed author of his time, Coxe also penned several memoirs of historical personalities: *Memoirs of Sir Robert Walpole* (1798), *Memoirs of Horatio, Lord Walpole* (1802), *Memoirs of John, Duke of Marlborough* (1818-9), *Private and Original Correspondence of Charles Talbot, Duke of Shrewsbury* (1821), *History of the House of Austria* (1807) and *Memoirs of the Bourbon Kings of Spain* (1813). Coxe died in 1828.

The present chapter pertains to Coxe's travel text *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark*, published in 1784, a few years prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution. The reason why I selected Coxe's travelogue as an introductory text is precisely that he was one of the first travellers who ventured to the Russian soil, despite his equally important contribution to travel literature on Scandinavia.

Even though Coxe has been criticised for producing work that "abounds in factual information but contains relatively few personal anecdotes or reflections" (Barton 8), there are several instances in his travel narrative which suggest that he is an author who attempts to

impregnate his narration with detailed information and personal opinions on the subject into which he delves.

One of the main issues explored in his text on the Russian Empire is the condition of the Russian peasantry. When dwelling upon the morals of the Russian peasants, the writer stresses their propensity to theft and deception, a statement that introduces the reader to the idea of the perilous Russian Other:

The peasants seemed greedy of money, and almost wholly demanded previous payment for every trifle have bought or bargained for. They seemed also in general much inclined to thieving. In Poland it was not necessary to be always upon the watch; and we frequently left the equipage during the whole night without any guard: but in this country, without the precaution of regularly stationing a servant in the carriage, every article would soon have disappeared; and even with this expedient, the watchfulness of our Argus was continually baffled by the superior vigilance of the natives; and the morning generally announced some petty loss, to which the night had given birth. (256)

Considering the above comment, the reader is struck by Coxe's attempt to depict the Russian peasants as a backward nation, who does not conform to Herder's conventional image of enlightened peasantry as a major component of a country's nation-building agenda. From Coxe's perspective, Russian peasantry is inclined to thieving and greed, a fact that posits Russian peasants as an indicative sample of Russian nationhood. He also juxtaposes the Russians with Catholic Poles, treating the former as a barbaric nation. Given that religion played a paramount role in the categorisation of nations, and nurtured the tendency of Britons to fashion themselves as beacons of Protestantism, it is worth noticing that Coxe chooses to compare Russians to a neighbouring nation of different religious doctrine.

The writer's persistent portrayal of the Russians as a backward, subordinate Other is further explored, when Coxe focuses on the uncivilised aspect of the Russian peasants and the poor technological advances attached to their everyday life. In particular, Coxe remarks that

the backwardness of the Russian peasants in all the mechanical arts, when compared with those of the other nations of Europe, is visible to the most superficial observer. As we approached, indeed, towards Petersburg, and nearer the civilized parts of Europe, we could not fail to remark, that the villagers were somewhat more furnished with the conveniences of life, and somewhat further advanced in the knowledge of the necessary arts, than those who fell under our notice between Tolitzin and Moscow. (438)



If one throws a closer look at Coxe's detailed description of the Russian peasantry throughout his Russian tour, it becomes apparent that the writer introduces the reader to the idea of Russia as a Northern periphery, which embodies the dark, backward Other that is antithetical to the enlightened European cultural centres. What is more, it is worth noticing that Coxe adopts a discourse of Otherness, when referring to the two major cities of the Russian Empire: while St. Petersburg is praised for its cultural and geographical proximity to Western Europe, the Muscovite capital is assessed as backward, since its peasants are culturally distant from Western Europe. In that sense, Coxe's constant reminder of Russian Otherness corroborates Jopi Nyman's argument that

British nationalism, that strange composite which was established at the end of the seventeenth century, has also had a role to play in defining the nation's relationship with its other Others, its European neighbours, in addition to its views of its internal ethnic minorities and formerly colonized peoples. (5)

Based on Nyman's definition, Coxe seeks to define British nationhood in relation to the Othering of the Russian Empire. This becomes evident in his contemplation of the Russian peasantry whom he projects as corrupt and uncivilised. In another episode from his travel narrative, the writer impregnates his narration with images of incestuous family relations and sexual promiscuity in Russian peasant life, revealing the supposed barbaric propensities of the Russian nation. In particular, Coxe remarks: "their progress towards civilisation is very inconsiderable; and many instances of the grossest barbarism fell under our observation, during the daily intercourse we necessarily maintained with the peasants" (439). Later on, he affirms that he wishes to show "what a wretched state of ignorance the common people are still plunged, when even the smallest trace of such immoral practices still subsists amongst them" (439).

In the above depiction of the Russian peasantry, one can discern the imperialist nuances with which Coxe tinges his discourse. Apart from their corrupt and uncivilised aspect, Russian peasants are also described as sexually promiscuous, a fact which is opposed to the British definition of cultural refinement. Moreover, his assumption of the role of the imperial beholder, who reproduces scenes of cultural inferiority with the aim of Othering the country visited, accords with Carl Thompson's definition of Otherness as "the processes and strategies by which one culture depicts another culture as not only different but also inferior to itself" (132).

Aside from his effort to foreground the backwardness of the Russian Other, Coxe is also interested in the detrimental effect of the Russian clergy on the decadent condition of the peasantry:

These incestuous marriages, rectified by inveterate custom, and permitted by the parish-priests, were formerly more common than they are at present; but as the nation becomes more refined, and the priests somewhat more enlightened, and as they have lately been discouraged by government, they are daily falling into disuse. (439)

Clearly, Coxe's firm belief in the backward aspect of the Russians is not only confined to their overall projection as the Oriental Other. It is also related to his negative view of the religious affairs within the Russian Empire, harbouring a hostile attitude towards the Greek Orthodox Church and its expansion in Europe, as most British intellectuals of his time (Young 21). His demonisation of the Russian Church is again encountered in another fragment, when the writer seeks to explain the Russo-Byzantine connection:

Because the Russians, being converted to Christianity by the Greeks, were accustomed, after their example, to decorate their temples with various figures, and must have received from them many portraits of saints, which form in their religion a necessary part of divine worship. We may conclude, therefore, that the cathedral of St. Sophia, [...] was necessarily ornamented with the figures of saints by some Greek artists, which the great dukes of Novogorod drew from Constantinople. The drawings in question, indeed, are so indifferent, as not to have deserved a particular inquiry, if they had not assisted in illustrating the progress of the liberal arts, and in ascertaining the early introduction of painting into this country, at a period when it was unknown even in Italy. (454)

Drawing upon the above excerpt, what becomes apparent is Coxe's Anglo-centric contemplation of Russia, attaching attention to the supreme role of the British Empire and treating as backward all the vestiges of European civilisations that are not akin to the Teutonic cultural continuum. In the above case, however, his anti-Orthodox feelings are explicitly expressed, when he comments on the primitive aspect of Eastern iconography in juxtaposition with other Christian doctrines.

If Protestantism constituted one of the major nation-building elements that forged British nationhood, the writer adopts a conventional anti-Oriental rhetoric. In that respect, Coxe's endeavour to Other Russia is in perfect compatibility with the Saidian argument on Western interventionism in the East, which led to the systematic study of Christian sects "by

European Powers improvising as well as constructing their Oriental policy” (191) in order to consolidate their political and cultural superiority over the potential colonised nations.

In search of vestiges, which corroborate his dystopian outlook on Russian culture, Coxe also focuses his gaze upon the issue of womanhood in Russia. When witnessing Russian washerwomen’s hard labour in the frozen canals, Coxe intersperses his narration with comments that point to the role of Russian women as domestic slaves within Russian society, without departing from an exotic reading of his travel destination:

I was greatly surprised with observing, that even at this time several women, whose dress differs but little from that of the men, were engaged in washing upon the Neva or on the canals. They cut holes in the ice with an hatchet, dipped their linen into the water with their bare hands, and then beat it with flat flicks. During this operation, the ice continually formed again, and they were constantly employed in clearing it away. Many of them passed two hours without intermission at this work, when the thermometer was at 60 below freezing point; a circumstance, which proves how the human body may be brought to endure all extremes. (483)

Given the above episode, Coxe concentrates on the masculine and unnatural aspect of Russian women, who engage in activities that require “male strength” and are not consistent with the prescribed patterns of British womanhood that overwhelmingly described women as angels in the house (Ann Colley 83). Accustomed to witnessing the domesticity of British women, Coxe clearly associates women’s hard labour and outdoor activities with the overall primitiveness of Russian peasant life. However, according to Svetlana Filatova, “unlike Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where women struggled to participate in economic activities, women’s entrepreneurship flourished in Russia” (120). In that respect, if British women’s professionalisation constituted a delicate issue until the 1850s, Russian society never prevented women from engaging in business activities.

Notwithstanding the writer’s persistent dystopian reading of Russian culture, he also intersperses his discourse with instances that seek to shed light on the Westernisation of the Russian Empire under the reign of Peter the Great. With regard to the Czar’s reforms in the fields of religion and politics, Coxe praises Peter the Great for laying the foundations for the country’s transformation into a Western Empire:

Peter the Great has incurred considerable censure for transferring the seat of empire from Moscow to Petersburg: it has been urged, with some degree of plausibility, that he was in effect more an Asiatic than an

European sovereign; that Moscow, lying nearer to the center of his dominions, was better calculated for the imperial residence; and that, by removing his capital, he neglected the interior provinces, and sacrificed every other consideration to his predilection for the settlements upon the Baltic. (459-60)

By throwing a positive glance at the reforms of Peter the Great, Coxe might be seen as precursor to the Slavophil/Westernizer debates of the mid-nineteenth century that gave rise to significant sociopolitical convulsions both in the Russian context and within the European geopolitical framework (Cronin 648). Although Coxe assumes a strictly Anglo-centric narrative position when describing the Russian peasantry and the role of the Russian Church in the spiritual life of the country, he rejoices over elements of Russian cultural life that are more familiar with his own notion of cultural refinement.

The exoticisation of Russia as a backward and Oriental Other is made explicit, when the writer touches upon the splendour of the Russian court and the Asiatic aspect of the Russian nobility:

It retains many traces of its antient Asiatic pomp-blended with European refinement. An immense retinue of courtiers always preceded and followed the empress; the costliness and glare of their apparel, and a profusion of precious stones, created a splendour, of which the magnificence of other courts can give us only a faint idea. The court-dress of the men is in the French fashion: that of the ladies is a gown and petticoat, with a small hoop. (493)

Even though the writer overlooks the most significant accomplishments of the Russian nation at the time of his visit to Russia due to his constant proneness to the Othering of the natives and their customs, there are some instances in his travel account, which suggest that he is also interested in documenting the educational advances of contemporary Russia. On one occasion, he marvels at the educational developments in Moscow, where its University and schools provide excellent education to their young students:

Beside the university, there are two gymnasia, or seminaries, for the education of youth, endowed also by Elizabeth, in which are taught divinity, classics, philosophy, the Greek, Latin, Russian, German, French, Italian, and Tartar languages; history, geography, mathematics, architecture, fortification, artillery, algebra, drawing and painting, music, fencing, dancing, reading and writing. There are twenty-three professors; amongst these, the Syllabus informed me, that Mr. Alexief teaches divinity two

hours in the week. Mr. Matthaei, professor and rector of both seminaries, explains some of Cicero's Orations. (340)

Aside from the educational accomplishments in St. Petersburg and Moscow, Coxe wishes to stress the hospitable aspect of the Russian nobility. As the writer notes

nothing can exceed the hospitality of the Russians. We could never pay a morning visit to any nobleman without being detained to dinner; we also constantly received several general invitations; but as we considered them in the light of mere compliments, we were unwilling to intrude ourselves without further notice. We soon found, however, that the principal persons of distinction kept open tables, and were highly obliged at our resorting to them without ceremony. (273)

Despite the Arcadian dimension that Coxe wishes to ascribe to the Russian nobility, one should not fail to mention that a significant number of eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Western travellers perceived hospitality as a sign of backwardness, triggering once again images of Otherness (Peter Fjågesund and Ruth Symes 168).

All in all, Coxe's travel account typifies subsequent travelogues on Russia: eager to set the focus on British superiority over the nation described, Coxe inaugurates an era of exploration, during which Otherness is often called upon to address the relationship of the traveller with the country visited. Consequently, the writer does not depart from his Anglo-Centric view, considering that Russia is introduced as part of the dark and subaltern Orient that is staunchly opposed to the refined aspect of British culture. This is attested in his encounter with all aspects of Russian cultural life (religion, peasantry, education and womanhood) which are purposefully mentioned by Coxe to reinforce the idea of Russia as a Northern peripheral zone, alluding to the concept of the Far North that eighteenth-century travellers entertained in their travels to the European North. Nevertheless, one cannot question Coxe's contribution to the field of travel literature on the Russian Empire at a time when few travellers journeyed in such a distant country from the British metropolis.

