

The Good Russian Prisoner: Naturalizing Violence in the Caucasus Mountains

Bruce Grant
Swarthmore College

Almost daily, the Caucasus hits the front page. War in Chechnya, the struggles of breakaway republics, oil politics, security issues, and the election of autocrats are among the stories that bring the region to our attention. Much of recent scholarship has focused on these issues in which violence, as it so often does, speaks for itself. At best, one finds a language of challenge and riposte in which conflicts are read as retributive justice for past violence in a dialectical exchange of blows. Yet the more common practice after years of the Chechen war, in Russia and elsewhere, is to venture that the peoples of the Caucasus are by nature violent or corrupt. In this article, I argue for a close reading of the lived experience of violence in the Caucasus in the patterned artifacts of Russian popular culture that have been keystones of knowledge for Russians and Caucasians alike. Asking how diverse genres of Russian popular culture have come to constitute the Caucasus as a zone of violence to Russian audiences not only illuminates these particular logics of sovereign rule but invites a more nuanced view of violence and its consequences in this region.

For almost two hundred years, Russian poets, short story writers, novelists, journalists, choreographers, opera librettists, and filmmakers have narrated a remarkably persistent story of kidnapping in the Caucasus. Taking the social, political, and economic dislocations of Russia's early 19th-century imperial campaign as its setting, this tale of two star-crossed lovers—the kidnapped young Russian man-in-chains and the Caucasian woman who sets him free—presents one of the dominant means by which successive generations of Russian publics have come to know and understand the fractious populations living along their mountainous southern border. This story builds on a recursive set of encounters in the serrated southern edges of what was once the colonial Russian empire, then the socialist Soviet Union, and what is now a more fragmented commonwealth of newly independent states. From the 19th-century poetics of Aleksandr Pushkin to the cinema screens of a post-perestroika Russia, the detailed renderings of this specific colonial encounter have changed surprisingly little. Yet for all the well-studied vectors

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, Vol. 20, Issue 1, pp. 39–67, ISSN 0886-7356, electronic ISSN 1548-1360.
© 2005 by the American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, www.ucpress.edu/journals/rights.htm.

of violence in the complex Caucasus region, it is less clear why the idiom of the prisoner has resonated so long with audiences despite the establishment of a firm stronghold in the south.

My goal in this context is not to rehearse the story of the “conquering victim,” discussed by historian Richard White (1991) and many others, but to analyze instead the remarkable persistence of the “good prisoner” symbol. As the taste for colonial captivity narratives from the Americas and the Middle East waned among Euro-American publics in the 19th century (Pearce 1947:17), in Russia the popularity and ideological hegemony of such narratives have endured.¹ How has this near-epic folkloric staple sustained its power for so long and why? What might this very modern mythography tell us about particularly Russian notions of power and selfhood? By drawing on classical anthropological theories of exchange, I would argue that we need to see this myth as an art of emplacement; one that generates a powerful symbolic economy of belonging in a highly charged setting. In contrast to the often chaotic everyday violence in this region, popular understandings of this violence are strikingly patterned. Myths of the “good Russian prisoner” do not merely indicate the repercussions of violence in the Caucasus; they naturalize that violence in ways that enable diverse Russian publics to frame their government’s military actions there as persuasive.

The Caucasus is a region of some 170,000 square miles wedged between the Black and Caspian seas, a place long famed as the mountain crossroads of early and prosperous trade between Europe and Asia. Known today primarily through the ongoing war in Chechnya, few appreciate the degree to which the Caucasus region is remarkably diverse for its compact size—a babbling tower of religions, languages, peoples, and conflicts. Today the region is commonly divided into the North (including, but not limited to, Circassia, Chechnya, and Dagestan, which are all formally parts of the Russian Federation) and the South (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—sometimes known as Transcaucasia, a term that recalls the days of the Silk Road in the 9th century). Over 50 languages are actively spoken among the roughly twenty million people who live there today (Geiger 1959; Comrie 1981).² This plurality demands a degree of historical specificity that scholars from both the North and South Caucasus, as well as from Russia and abroad, have scrupulously labored to map. But this plurality is also seen as internal to another kind of mapping in which the Caucasus is depicted as a single region in ways that speak to sovereign ambitions.

A Promethean Beginning

Since earliest recorded times, the Caucasus has been famous for its extreme cultural pluralisms—and its violence—brought about by successive waves of foreign intervention: Greek, Roman, Arab, Turk, Mongol, Persian, Ottoman, and Russian. Since the time of the Arab conquest in the 7th century, the region has been predominantly Muslim but not exclusively so and neither does Islam define

a religious continuum: Armenia and Georgia are largely Christian; Azerbaijan is mainly Shi'i; and Dagestan has the region's largest Sufi communities. Many regard Chechnya as notoriously militarized with a Wahhabi stripe of recent vintage, although the Russian press routinely takes note of the failure of political leaders to recall how many times a day the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer.

The alpine Caucasus has long been configured as a mythic place: it was here that Zeus exiled Prometheus. In the tale told by Aeschylus, Prometheus was a trickster figure who used his privilege to bestow the gifts of civilization on mankind—skills such as hunting, healing, divination, and prophecy.³ However, when Prometheus stole fire, adding this to the gifts of his civilizing mission, Zeus, tyrant and autocrat, condemned him to eternal exile, chaining him to the summit of Mount Caucasus, where each day an eagle descended to devour his liver, only to come again the next and devour it once more.

While all of mankind stood and wept for this generous and long-suffering captive of the Caucasus, the only persons actually mentioned by Aeschylus were Caucasian highlanders—already famous for their military prowess in 5th-century B.C.E.—who observed him from neighboring mountaintops.⁴

Araby's flower of martial manhood,
Who upon Caucasian highlands,
Guard their mountain-cradled stronghold,
Host invincible, armed with keen spears, in the press of battle. [Aeschylus 1932:81]

In this context, we might note that the mighty Caucasian mountaineers, despite their strength, are cast as spectators in their own land. They receive the gifts of civilization, and what do they give in return? They give their thanks and their vigilance; they watch over the captive and weep for him. In a telling pattern that sets the stage for literally centuries of retelling this story, Prometheus is the good prisoner who suffers for his generosity.

Prometheus leads us to the Caucasus as a narrative place that scores of Russian and European literary critics would later identify as a "literary Caucasus" or a "literary topos." It was at this very crossroads of multiple and competing realities—the physical, the mythic, and the narrative—that one of the most legendary bards of the Caucasus made his entrance. The first modern author of the prisoner story was the Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin. Pushkin was exiled to the South after publishing one of his earliest poems in 1817. "Ode to Liberty" was a rare open criticism of tsarist autocracy that brought about Pushkin's exile from Petersburg just a few years later. With plans afoot to banish the poet to Siberia—the empire's harshest destination for political prisoners—Pushkin's advocates protested that the young artist still had a bright career ahead in the service of Russian culture. And so Pushkin was sent to the Caucasus to begin his six years of exile from the Russian capital (Sandler 1989). Of these years, Pushkin's actual time there was limited to just two months in 1822 spent at a hill-station spa where he penned his long narrative poem entitled "Kavkazskii Plennik" (Prisoner of the Caucasus).⁵

Six years of exile left a profound impression on the poet who never ceased to bridle under the imperial censorship that followed him to his grave. It seems fitting, then, that Pushkin's tale is about another prisoner—an alienated cosmopolitan not entirely unlike himself—who finds himself at the summit of Mount Caucasus. Indeed, Pushkin's choice of the Caucasus as the setting for his political love poem, which was written at the height of the Russian military conquest of the Caucasus in the 1820s, should remind us that, as in Aeschylus, prisoners can sometimes be tricksters. For this poem introduces more than one imperial sleight of hand.

In Pushkin's tale, a young Russian aristocrat leaves his "fickle life" of high society for freedom and adventure in the north Caucasus. He is taken captive by cold-spirited Circassian highlanders—"tribes of robbers," as Pushkin calls them (1997:58). But among the Circassians, a young girl falls in love with the Russian and angles to set him free.

The moon above is shining clear
 But, in the deep peace, who comes here?
 What feet so stealthily have strayed?
 The Russian started, his eyes meeting
 A tender but unspoken greeting;
 Here stands a young Circassian maid,
 Whom he, without a word, inspects.
 This is a false dream, he reflects,
 A mean trick which fatigue has played . . .
 And she would sigh and, now and then,
 Tears in her eyes would overbrim. [Pushkin 1997:60–61]

In the dark of night, the maiden brings the prisoner a saw and sets him free. They run to the edge of the river, where she halts at the shore.

I know my future lot is picked;
 My father and my brother strict
 Would sell me, an unloving wife,
 For gold into some village other. [Pushkin 1997:67]

The young woman may be held back by fate, but the young man takes the inspiration for freedom from the Circassians around him: he swims to the opposite bank and turns back to see his loved one, only to discover that she has apparently committed suicide.

Then as the heavy waters smite
 There comes a distant moaning shout . . .
 Upon the wild shore he climbs out,
 Looks back . . .
 The shores are painted bright,
 Foam-flooded, of refulgent white;
 But the young girl is seen no more,
 Not on the hillside or the shore . . .
 The shores are sleeping; all is dead . . .
 But for a light breeze in the ears.
 As moonlight waters splash ahead
 A rippling circle disappears. [Pushkin 1997:74]

As in Aeschylus, Pushkin heaped praise on Caucasian military might. As if inheritors of his earlier poems on liberty, Circassians became the first in a long line of peoples of the Caucasus to earn the ironic title of *vol'nye obshchestva* (free societies), a term invoked widely in Russian literature and historiography.⁶ Hence, from the beginning, this story was about a contradiction. Well-armed Russians had been routing Circassians, Chechens, and Dagestanis for decades; a concerted campaign of colonization had begun 20 years before the exiled poet took up his pen.⁷ Yet in Pushkin's tale, the Russian protagonist is a captive, a noble victim. Indeed, it is the ultimate humanity of the captive—his attempts to wrestle with the tyrannies of the autocratic system to which he belongs and his efforts to love in a troubled setting—that earns him the admiration of the Caucasian woman who, like her kinsmen portrayed in Aeschylus, vigilantly guards him and weeps for him.

Pushkin's Russian prisoner proved a sensation for reading audiences and a sturdy model for the long line of those who would go on to imitate, recirculate, reconfigure, or entirely repossess this Russian key symbol up to the present day. A popular and commercial success, the poem was almost immediately translated and reissued in French and German; within six months it had been rendered for the Russian Imperial Ballet. The poem was refashioned—in some passages almost word for word—by a youthful Mikhail Lermontov, and it appeared again as a short story by Lev Tolstoy in 1872. The genres employed by the story's admiring 19th-century imitators ranged from the imperial opera composed in 1879 to the more popular circuit street fairs and cheaply produced bulletins circulating in Moscow and Petersburg (Barrett 1998; Zorkaia 1994). With each new iteration, the plot changed in small but significant ways. In his story, "Prisoner of the Caucasus," Tolstoy was the first to give the captive a name and the first to make him a Russian soldier, thus, explicitly presenting the tale as a romantic, if somewhat critical, narrative of Russia's colonial presence in the Caucasus. Published in a primer he designed for Russian schoolchildren across the empire, Tolstoy's story was reissued 28 times and sold more than 2 million copies by the time of his death in 1910 (Moores 1992:29).

Beyond Tolstoy, the Prisoner tale became the subject of a short feature film made at the dawn of Russian cinema in 1911;⁸ another short story set on the battlefields of the post-1917 civil war (Ergushov 1929); and a socialist realist ballet (Tarasenko 1938). In a series of lectures on the poem in 1946, Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein expressed his amazement at the Prisoner's enduring popularity. "Pushkin's characters are flat, not rounded," Eisenstein told his students. Echoing Charles Peirce's observation that the most resilient symbols are often the most ambiguous—and hence more widely available to disparate audiences—Eisenstein continued, "They are more like signs, conventions" (Eisenstein 1998:9).⁹ "The greatness of Pushkin," the theorist of cinematic hieroglyphs wrote, "is not for the cinema. But how cinematographic!" (1998:6). That is to say, for Eisenstein, how archetypal!



Figure 1

At Moscow's *Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus* restaurant, diners join mannequins of their favorite film characters. Source: www.restoran.ru.

Despite Eisenstein's doubts that the Prisoner cycle had any future beyond the ballet, it was in postwar cinema that the epic would find its greatest audience yet. Pushkin's title was the model for the satirical blockbuster motion-picture comedy *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* (*Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus* 1966).¹⁰ Widely loved as a parody of Soviet social typecasting, the film has, among its many legacies, recently become the inspiration for Moscow's upscale restaurant *Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus* (see Figure 1), decorated lavishly with photo stills and looping film clips. Since the 1960s, there has been an Armenian-themed prose version; a gay-themed prose version; and most recently, the Oscar-nominated film *Kavkazskii plennik* (released as *Prisoner of the Mountains* 1996). These diverse cultural productions encompass almost two centuries of a very active prisoner symbol.

Myth and Gift in the Colonial Encounter

At first glance, one could observe that this mythic cycle is fundamentally about the displacement of the Russian protagonist and the attendant anxieties of colonial power. Indeed, there are many excellent critical works on each iteration of the Prisoner cycle, most notably by historians, literary critics, and film critics (Austin 1984, 1997; Barrett 1998; Friedrich 2003; Gillespie 1999; Layton 1994; Ram 1999; Sandler 1989). The story has flexibly moved across genres to secure its place in the Russian cultural landscape from the imperial classics of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy to the commentaries of Eisenstein, the kinetic Soviet archetypes of Gaidai,

and the mass cultural resonances of the story's cinematic reappearance in 1996, which was contemporaneous with the precarious ending to Boris Yeltsin's first Chechen war. However, as with many literary renditions of an Orientalist project, most of these critical works seem content to reproduce this act of displacement as an end in itself. Or, at best, the Russian as prisoner is made into a symbol of the Russian love of suffering and the mysterious Russian soul. It is fair to suggest that the literary Caucasus overrode the Caucasus Mountains (in the way, perhaps, that Edward Said [1978:96] contended that "Orientalism overrode the Orient"). But resting here, as most studies do, tells us little about the very canny means by which colonial mythographies do their work—including communist mythographies, that faced no less difficult a task in winning over widely disparate constituencies in 1917.¹¹

I argue instead that the Prisoner cycle enacts an art of emplacement by which Russian actors used negative plotlines and unusual cunning of recognition to generate a symbolic economy of belonging in the Caucasus. They seized a physical place, found a mythic place, and generated a narrative place. By means of these narratives, the tale of the archetypal long-suffering Russian benefactor could be told and retold, possessed and repossessed, circulated and recirculated. This modern myth was more productive than merely suggesting that the peoples of the Caucasus were misplaced or that the Russians were displaced. The highly charged characters were a means by which Russian publics (among others) could be emplaced in the extremely chilly landscape of a distinctly unwelcoming Caucasus region. Although I root these stories in Russian cosmologies of persuasion, my goal is to examine the arts of statecraft, more broadly. Rather than focusing on the nature of statehood as seen in conventional diplomatic or military histories, I look to varied Russian traditions of expressive culture to identify subtler lines of support for the country's presence in divided lands. Seemingly apolitical tracts of poetry, prose, ballet, opera, and musical comedy generate a remarkably consistent theme of innocence abroad and the noble burdens of giving.

Before turning to the various renditions of the Prisoner cycle in more detail, let me identify two arts of emplacement that appear most actively. It is perhaps easiest to think of these as inversions, although it would be fairer, I think, to regard them as "sleights of hand"—in the spirit of a writer's pen or a cinematographer's mobile grip—dexterous and subtle craftings of plotlines that will produce new social outcomes.¹² The first of these are sleights of power. In a savvy gesture of dissimulation, the Prisoner tale is a chronicle not of activity but passivity, not of aggression but humility, not of sovereignty but of submission. The Russian is not captor but captive. These inversions rely heavily, in ways that few, if any, observers have discussed, on gender. In the Prisoner cycle, we find not the exchange of women—in the traditional sense of mountaineers kidnapping their brides from rival clans and villages—but the exchange of men. Gayle Rubin (1975) and, later, Luce Irigaray (1985) were among the first who suggested that the structuralist fascination with the exchange of women was ultimately about the homosocial,

that is, men's relations with men. Hence, although there is quite a powerful female agency at the heart of these stories (it is, after all, a Caucasian woman who sets the captive free), the themes of male harmlessness and impotence drive the plot.

In the second category, we find sleights of exchange. Each of the Prisoner plotlines is about an exchange, or, rather, an intended exchange that never manages to take place. In Pushkin's and Lermontov's works, aristocrats are simply held, unaware of their fates; in Tolstoy's work and the 1996 film by Bodrov Russian soldiers are intended for trades in exchange for Caucasians taken as Russian prisoners-of-war. Already this plotline is a puzzle: for despite the fact that the Caucasus had been famous for its Silk Road trade routes since the 9th century, the ironic premise in these stories is that the mountain highlanders had little of their own to barter. To participate in the new social order, Caucasians had to acquire a new currency of exchange value—a Russian body.

Bearing the language of exchange in mind, we need to ask what was gained from the persistent circulation of these fictional tales of captured Russian bodies within the real-life context of Russian military intervention. What might the authors, playwrights, choreographers, and filmmakers have seen in telling and retelling this particular tale? Why did a long line of Russian greats take such interest in giving these suffering bodies to their respective publics? In being so given, are these Russian bodies gifts—in the classic anthropological sense?

To better understand how these stories were part of a broader colonial art of exchange, we can profitably defer to Georg Simmel, who reminds us that gifts make their entrance within embedded contexts. Hence, idioms of “first gift” and “second gift,” as the calculus sometimes goes, are already somewhat misleading. “What is starting point, and what is consequence here, is something that can perhaps not be determined,” Simmel writes in his 1907 essay on “Exchange” (1971:47–48), a work that preceded Marcel Mauss's (1990) more famous *Essay on the Gift*, written in 1924. According to Simmel:

Many actions which at first glance appear to consist of mere unilateral process in fact involve reciprocal effects. The speaker before an audience, the teacher before a class, the journalist writing to a public—each appears to be the sole source of influence in such situations, whereas each of them is really acting in response to demands and directions that emanate from apparently passive, ineffectual groups. The saying, “I am their leader, therefore I must follow them,” holds good for politicians the world over. [1971:43]

Once we move past the myths of isolated actors, as Simmel urges, most, if not all, renderings are not gifts but counter-gifts, actions that take place in settings already laden with values accrued from earlier interactions, earlier encounters, and earlier exchanges. And, of course, exchanges do not always take place among equal actors or in equal coin.

In this light, we need to bear in mind that these poems and ballets were not created in a political vacuum. From the 16th century onward, Russians were

facing active well-organized armed resistance to their colonizing overtures. What was being exchanged in this physical space was explosive volley. What was being exchanged in the narrative place was the story of the Prisoner from the Russians and cold shoulders (if not deaf ears) from the Caucasians.¹³ In this narrative space of encounter, some Russians offered a remarkable kind of persuasive art. Or, to put it in the words of one Azeri historian I sought out when I asked her about local Caucasian kidnappings: “These Russian fairy tales, they are worse than the bombs!” Focusing on these sleights of exchange brings us much closer to the kind of agonistic social gambits Simmel mapped so well.¹⁴

My argument that the Prisoner myth operates as an art of emplacement builds on these subtle inversions to reveal an imperial cunning of longing and belonging in the Caucasus—not just the mythification of Russian suffering. Despite violent plotlines in which Russians are ever the noble victim, they are also victims who give and victims whose generosity awaits reciprocal respect. As the tales talk of war, they offer narratives of cohabitation and, ultimately, resigned consent. Understanding these everyday idioms by which the Russian empire and its later communist successors worked to cement control over the Caucasus offers insight into the formulation of rule in a place not normally considered in broader debates about colonialism and sovereignty; yet it reaches out most broadly to the varied technologies of rule exercised by all states over diverse and uncertain subjects.

Negative Pleasures (From Pushkin to the Present)

“Prisoner of the Caucasus” was among a cycle of narrative poems produced during Pushkin’s early romantic period. As a rule, critic Stephanie Sandler writes, “These are not love stories with happy endings. . . . For all the lightness of tone and whimsy of foreign landscapes,” she writes, these are stories filled with “a vocabulary of domination and defeat” alongside “passions for violence and subjugation” (1989:141). Sandler calls these themes Pushkin’s “negative pleasures,” highlighting the poet’s famous ability to elevate the theme of inner torment to high art. Although this kind of generative “discourse of the negative” might for some evoke Hegel or Foucault, it draws on long-standing themes in Russian anthropological writing that reflects on the suffering of the Russian soul: Dostoevskii’s capacity for finding depths in the darkness, the microphysics of *khandra* (cultivated melancholy) as well as popular discursive practices of litany and lament (Pesmen 2000; Ries 1997).¹⁵ Not in spite of, but very much because of the open-endedness of Pushkin’s Russian and Circassian characters, a long line of imitators have taken satisfaction in the retelling and remaking of perilous encounters.

Pushkin expressed more than some reluctance about his poem when he first published it in 1822, not least because he had never actually met a Circassian; however Circassian names and places seemed to stand in collectively for all of Russia’s newly acquired southern possessions. To one correspondent, he admitted, “The blankness of the plot approximates the poverty of its invention; the description

of Circassian customs . . . isn't connected with the least reality, and has little bearing on [even] the likes of a geographic article or traveler's account." To another, Pushkin remarked that his Circassian passages were "a mere hors d'oeuvre" in the service of a simple story (Austin 1984:235). For all of Pushkin's magisterial poetry, this love story is indeed a simple one: Young woman falls for wounded man; man breaks woman's heart; woman liberates man from suffering; woman has no reason left to live. By all accounts, it was a curious choice of setting for a romance. Although Pushkin may have never met any of the Circassians he describes so confidently in the poem, he knew enough of the mayhem set in motion by ongoing Russian assaults and the mass dislocations of Caucasus life to observe elsewhere: "The Circassians hate us! . . . We have edged them out of their free pasture lands, their auls [villages] have been destroyed, and entire tribes annihilated. With every passing day they move deeper into the mountains and make attacks from there" (Layton 1994:63).¹⁶ Yet in this tangled projection of love, politics, and geography, Pushkin leaves little doubt where his sentiments lay. A lengthy epilogue to his poem praises the Russian military intervention and blames the Circassian defeats on their having abandoned their traditions, the very ones he himself did not know of but romanticized for so many others.

Although Pushkin wrote his romantic tale at the height of the Russian military campaign in the early 1800s, Russian expansion into the region had, in fact, begun centuries earlier in 1552 when Ivan the Terrible captured Kazan', the Muslim city-state closest to Moscow. By 1584, Ivan's expanding Muscovy stretched from the Arctic Ocean to the Caspian Sea. In the Caucasus, however, the new Russian overseers were only the most recent and demographically often the least significant of the diverse streams of governors and governed who had crisscrossed the region for centuries.¹⁷ Despite the exhaustive study of the area initiated by the Imperial Academy of Sciences, Russia's scholarly and popular reading publics of the 18th and 19th centuries saw very little in print about the Caucasus that was not heavily censored.¹⁸ Nothing appeared in the imperial press about the Russian assault on Chechnya in the 1780s, for example. So it would appear to be fate that Pushkin was acclaimed by his contemporaries as the leading source on Caucasian history and ethnography for the empire. Or, as the critic Belinskii crowned him, "he was the discoverer of the Caucasus" (Hokanson 1994:336; Layton 1994:16).

The Russian mission in the Caucasus was volatile from the outset, not least because the Russians were quick to adopt the very practices of kidnapping and hostage taking they perceived as so distinctive to mountain life. One early response from Russian imperial administrators was to turn their limited numbers into a positional strength, pursuing an explicit policy of social destabilization to disrupt internal clan and political alliances so that, as the new overseers, they might stand out as the only stable actor (Bournoutian 1994; Swietochowski 1995). Kidnappings were among the tools to this end.

In this volatile context, the rash of kidnappings selectively suggested to the Russian reading public by Pushkin and others was indeed very real.¹⁹ Yet Pushkin

clearly took inspiration from the well-worn pre-Russian traditions of bodily seizure that so many societies of the Caucasus had long known. Almost all the peoples of the Caucasus, for example, have practiced bride-kidnapping. This has been discussed intermittently by Western historians in terms of the exchange of women, but it is showcased more frequently in Soviet historiography as the ur-example of gender inequality in Caucasian societies (Amsler and Kleinbach 1999; Babaeva 1964; Halle 1938; Kisliakov 1969; Luzbetak 1951; Massell 1974; Smirnova 1986; Sultanova 1964; Werner 2004). An extensive system of small-scale military raids, recorded from at least the 16th century, contributed to the most extensive traffic in bodies: male and female, soldier and shepherd, and tyrant and tradesman. According to one historian, bodies sometimes prevailed over plunder:

While military campaigns and raids by the nomadic armies conjure up images of burning Russian towns and villages, neither large-scale military efforts nor small-scale war parties were engaged in indiscriminate burning and plunder. Rather, their goal was to seize captives who, whether they were later sold in the markets of Kaffa, Azov, Bukhara, and Khiva or handed back in return for a ransom, had always fetched a handsome price and were the most desirable prize in the raids and wars. [Khodarkovsky 2002:21]

One 16th-century Iranian observer reported that Dagestani hill farmers rarely ventured more than a mile from their village for fear of capture. A later Russian officer reported that in 1734 during his six-month posting in Georgia, there were over 43 major military raids over cattle and over 350 human captives taken for ransom (Bliev and Degoev 1994:113, 119; see also Datsiuk 1955; Ratushniak 1995). The more spectacular figures suggest that after West Africa, Eastern Europe and Russia together constituted the second largest supply of slaves in the world, with estimates of 150,000–200,000 Russians taken captive in the first half of the 17th century (Khodarkovsky 2002:21).²⁰ From 1551 to 1679, Russia imposed a special tax to raise ransom funds, encouraging “everyone—government officials, merchants, foreign envoys, and native rulers—to purchase the freedom of Russian captives” (Khodarkovsky 2002:23). The flow of Caucasian bodies to Russia, in turn, was advanced by the imperial policy of securing *amanat*, sons of local leaders taken as collateral in all manner of treaty arrangements. Muslim or Christian captives were the harvest of what some have called the almost “minute-by-minute shifts in allegiance [that transcended political lines] for military gain” (Bliev and Degoev 1994:121). Along the region’s long-famous “lines of uncertainty” dividing one group from another, ambiguity and plasticity worked to local advantage.²¹

Russian scholarly interpretations of kidnapping in the Caucasus have followed notable patterns over time. In the tsarist age, historians and travel writers cited the popularity among Caucasians of invoking the Qur’an and its most literal calls-to-arms against infidels as justifying Russian Orthodox missionary work in the area. In the Soviet era, it was more common to cite Marx and Engels on the transition from slaveholding to feudalism and to point fingers at Russian imperial overseers for having laid waste to traditional systems of social justice. Although

some Russian ethnographic accounts tie the traffic in bodies to clan relations, few, if any, go beyond generalized assumptions of utilitarian gain. Few sources discuss the semiotics of kidnapping at length, although one Azerbaijani historian suggests that, prior to the economic privations introduced by moving from a state of suzerainty under the Persians to the more total Russian sovereignty, local leaders used to turn to kidnapping as a show of status (Maya Iskenderova, personal communication, June 2001). That is to say, although clan patriarchs often sought the kidnapping of adversaries, it was not always for their exchange value but as a show of the very ability to kidnap the significantly ranked. Kidnapping, therefore, took place as a show of symbolic as much as physical force (Colarusso 2002).

Following this logic that captives were part of a broader cosmological framing that made them “good to think” for Caucasians (Lévi-Strauss 1963), Russian audiences also soon seemed to agree. But the story proved in need of some fixing. Many readers objected to Pushkin’s conclusion that allowed the Circassian woman to drown while praising Russian military glory—this kind of patriotism suggested stark limits to the empire’s benevolence toward its new constituents. As such, within only six months of the poem’s printing, a more politically agreeable version was produced at the Petersburg Imperial Ballet (see Cover). The ballet was a remarkable first step in the transformation of Pushkin’s tale for new audiences. This time the Circassians are the aggressors, and Russian troops take up arms only in their efforts to free their compatriot. The Circassian woman ably swims to shore with her beloved; the two are wed in holy matrimony; and her Circassian khans take pains to pledge allegiance to the Russian crown publicly.²²

Not all later renditions of the Prisoner cycle adopted this happy ending (uncommon for late-19th-century Russia),²³ yet the new ballet story captured public consciousness in a way that soon had nearly everyone wanting to try their hand. At the age of 14, Mikhail Lermontov penned his own Caucasus oeuvre in a series of poems ranging from: “The Circassian Girl,” “The Blue Hills of the Caucasus are Calling You,” and, of course, “Prisoner of the Caucasus” (Lermontov 1969). It was Tolstoy’s 1872 prose version of the Prisoner tale that was perhaps the most liberal of its day and was later to become the most prized in the Soviet period for its critiques of Russian imperialism in the southern mountain region. Nonetheless, although Tolstoy allowed his soldier to express more faith in the humanity of his Muslim captors, his rendition of the region remained remarkably resistant to the specifics of the setting, in spite of the surge in reporting on the history and ethnography of the region among the Russian intelligentsia from the 1820s onward.²⁴ Ethnonyms and place names appear to be largely interchangeable: effacing the Circassian question, Tolstoy used the more general term *Tatar*, effectively placing all of Russia’s (then) five million Muslim residents under one umbrella. Virtually none of the hundreds of short stories and poetic works on Caucasian life by that time were set in cities, despite the fact that Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, and their contemporaries had passed through the ancient capitals of Kazan’, Erevan, Baku, and Tbilisi en route to their hilltop writing stations.

Let me now turn to what labor the idea of the prisoner or captive might perform in Russian discourses. It is perhaps appropriate given the constant borrowing, imitation, recirculation, and repossession of the prisoner myth that the Russian word *plennik* (captive) is itself a linguistic borrowing. Although some consider it to be taken from the Latin word *pellis* (fur or skin), the word is more commonly traced to the Old Church Slavonic *plen*, a term with a wide range of meanings: plunder, spoils, trade good, harvest, or profit (Fasmer 1971:314–315).²⁵ Of course not all captives are held for ransom: they might be killed, sold, absorbed into their new communities, or lost in escape. But this etymology is suggestive in its invocation of an exchange of bodies both real and imagined.

This leads back to the notion of negative pleasures and their negative capabilities. What is perhaps most striking about the use of the term *plennik* is that in story after story, captivity is willingly given. Although certain tales such as “Prisoner of the Caucasus” simply assume circumstances of captivity (eschewing any explanation of how the prisoner came to be captured or why), the many references to captivity throughout Pushkin would seem to have occurred by romantic volition (Vinogradov 1929). As Russian critic Vladimir Propp (1968) might have it, such circumstances are necessary to get any myth off the ground; the transgression of the protagonist casts him from home and leaves him to wander in alien lands. Yet why this particular mythopoeisis? Rather than looking at this narrative in terms of displacement, we should ask, what kinds of emplacements are effected?

The prisoner stories are about encounters—deeply unequal exchanges of cosmology, arms, bodies, and emotions in which Chechens, Circassians, Azeris, and other Caucasian peoples are always spoken for, but quite literally, rarely speaking. Some Caucasian peoples managed these encounters more smoothly than others: ample historical records suggest that the perceived commonality of Christianity made it easier for Armenians and Georgians to navigate the new corridors of Russian viceroy administration. Responses in the predominantly Muslim regions, by contrast, ranged from the resigned consent of Azeris to the more fearsome resistance of most Chechens (Berzhe 1866–1904). But the collective Caucasian *froideur* to Russian governance was perhaps the coldest of any the Winter Palace had encountered. In this context, the aestheticized giving over of the archetypal Russian prisoner into Caucasian hands was surely one of the more popular and influential ways of narrating the benevolent good will of the Russian crown.

The Art of Self-Giving

Prometheus, most likely, would not have chosen to spend 30 thousand years chained to a rock at the top of a mountain. But Prometheus was not only a selfless giver but a foreteller of the future. His name comes from the prefix *pro* (before), the Greek verb *manthano* (to learn), and the agentive suffix *eus*. Prometheus, then, becomes by name: “He who knows beforehand.”²⁶ Prometheus knew that his punishment for giving fire to mankind would be a long and painful one. But he

gave of his self for this greater cause. In this spirit, the well-known Russian semiotician Iurii Lotman suggests that self-surrender, or what he calls “self-giving,” has long-standing roots in the Russian political arts. In the expressly unequal relations between profane supplicants and divine sovereigns, seemingly one-sided rhetorical gifts are offered upward, as if unconditionally. In so doing, the seemingly unconditional gift places the giver in a fresh state of social relations. Taking the example of one 13th-century Russian work, “Daniel the Prisoner,” Lotman recalls how one early Russian captive curries favor with his more powerful warden and talks his way out of captivity through self-abnegation. Daniel was said to entreat to his captor: “You may say [to me], oh Prince [that I] have lied like a dog. But princes and noblemen love a good dog” (Lotman 1984:130). Seeing these early wiles transformed in the 18th and 19th centuries, Lotman notes that even the tsars themselves were known to engage in their own sleights of power—playing the underdog as it were. Lotman writes:

It is typical that although everyone knew that Russia was an autocracy, and that to [understand] this was . . . [both] official ideology . . . [and] practical government, it was considered a breach of taste to acknowledge it as fact. . . . Alexander I [who had exiled Pushkin to the Caucasus] would repeatedly stress that autocracy was an unfortunate necessity which he personally did not favor. [1984:136]

The phenomenon of willingly rendering oneself captive perhaps reaches its apogee in 1969 with Andrei Bitov’s *Prisoner of the Caucasus* (Bitov 1992), one of the handful of instances in which little more than the title and captive symbol are borrowed. In his series of short travel stories in Armenia, Bitov finds ready ground for romantic projection, describing the republic as:

A land where everything was what it was: a stone was a stone, a tree was a tree, water was water, light was light, an animal was an animal, and a person was a person. . . . Where all the stones, herbs, and creatures had their own corresponding purposes and essences [and] where primordial meanings would be restored to all concepts. [1992:63]

In this travel memoir, Bitov falls in love with a non-Russian-speaking Armenian woman, so alien to him in her beauty that he names her Aelita after the interplanetary goddess of the famous science fiction story and cinema classic *Aelita Queen of Mars*.²⁷ He rhapsodizes:

I’m locked up. I’m in a cage. Every day they transfer me from cell to cell. The diet is good; they don’t beat me. I don’t know how long I’ve been here. The sentence should come soon. I don’t know if I’ll see you, my [love]. . . . I’m in a cage—everybody’s looking at me. No. They’re the ones looking at me from inside a cage! I’m the one on the outside! I’ve tricked them all!” I’m . . . a captive of the Caucasus. [Bitov 1992:90]

In this most extreme example of self-giving, Bitov, casting himself as yet another Prisoner-Trickster, makes a place for himself in a primordial world. He is in love with Aelita, yet he never openly tries to seduce her. He is the epitome of the good Russian prisoner—at home while abroad.



Figure 2

Natal'ia Varlei, as Nina, and Aleksandr Demianenko, as Shurik, in Leonid Gaidai's 1966 blockbuster, *Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus*. Courtesy of Russian Cinema Council.

These sleights of power were, in fact, lampooned in the 1966 motion picture *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* (*Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus*; see Figure 2) directed by Leonid Gaidai, a musical comedy of near-cult status and the source for dozens of lines committed to heart by millions of viewers. In this version, the male Russian hero is the hapless bottle-blond anthropologist Shurik, who tells the story of one of his expeditions to study toasting rituals in "a mountainous region." Shurik is so cheerfully inept that he attempts to start his donkey as he would a car and is so easy to intoxicate, despite fervent protest that he does not drink, that he is eventually held against his will at the local detoxification center after breaking up a ceremony at the Palace of Weddings by drunkenly demanding that everyone speak more slowly so that he can get it all down in his field notes. He is soon in love with the comely Nina: student, Communist Youth League member, and sportswoman. In a plot so cartoonish that one recalls the cycle of Donald Duck films made by the U.S. State Department in the 1940s to improve trade relations with Latin America (Burton 1992; Dorfman and Mattelart 1975), three Caucasian stooge gangsters see their opportunity to kidnap Nina for marriage to a local official.²⁸

Playing on Shurik's ethnographic obsessions, they persuade him that bride-kidnapping is a vital, time-honored tradition, and that Nina herself will only symbolically protest as they carry her away. Heartbroken that Nina has seemingly chosen someone else, Shurik wistfully waves her goodbye as she is bundled off in her sleeping bag on an overnight camping trip. In a telling inversion of just who has the agency in the entire Prisoner cycle, on realizing what has happened, Shurik vows: "I'm the one who stole her, I'll get her back!" Meanwhile, Nina the sportswoman is well able to liberate herself, despite Shurik's own valiant (albeit less-effective) male attempts. Before the couple ride their donkey off into the sunset, the three gangsters are brought before a Soviet tribunal to shame them for their backward patriarchal behavior.

In *Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus*, as elsewhere, the specifics of who the Caucasian protagonists really are or where the story takes place is left to the imagination. The film's opening voiceover pledges an ecumenical approach: "Shurik insists that this story really happened in one of the mountain regions. He didn't say *which* region, so as not to be unfair to all the other regions where just such a story might also have happened." The film's flexibility with well-entrenched Soviet archetypes worked to great advantage. As Vladimir Etush, who played the character of Comrade Saakhov, noted in an interview, the Armenians liked to think he was playing a Georgian, and the Georgians liked to think he was playing an Azerbaijani. "Everyone liked it when they thought I was making fun of their neighbour."²⁹ Yet in the tradition established by Pushkin, who glossed all the Caucasus as Circassian, and the more liberal Tolstoy, who called everyone a Tatar, the massive and scrupulous Russian ethnographic corpus is sidestepped to striking advantage. By the late 20th century, the more popular gloss becomes Chechen.

In the most recent film rendition of the Prisoner cycle, director Sergei Bodrov (see Figure 3) eschewed satire for a return to the grittier, if somewhat muffled, political critique of Tolstoy. Filmed in Dagestan and set in an unnamed North Caucasus locale that unmistakably evokes the Chechen war of the early 1990s, a Russian soldier named Zhilin is now the only son of a single-working-mother schoolteacher in the Ural Mountains. Despite the often brutal military setting, the theme of harmlessness and seemingly harmless sexuality begins from the very first scene, as dozens of nude Russian army recruits parade before their indifferent female medical examiners. Once in Caucasian captivity, Zhilin shows his quiet charms by fixing clocks for his captor's companions and making toy puppets for his (in this version) very young female warden. In a fitting turn for the subject at hand, the production's hired bodyguards took one of the French cameramen hostage to provoke salary renegotiations after learning that the film's 12-year-old lead actress was receiving a greater pay packet than all of them together (Specter 1996).

In the film, the vectors of gender and power are flipped at key junctures. After a mountain elder takes the Russian soldier captive to bargain for the return of his son from a Russian military prison, the male Russian commander "lacks the nerve to make the exchange."³⁰ Both men decide to summon the soldier's mother.



Figure 3

Sergei Bodrov Jr. as Zhilin in the 1996 Oscar-nominated, *Prisoner of the Mountains*. Courtesy of Boris Giller Productions and MGM CLIPSTILL.

The Russian commander admits to her that the pathos (and anger) of a mother's physical presence is needed to accomplish such illicit trade in wartime. And, once again, it is a young girl—the captor's 12-year-old daughter with whom Zhilin has platonic but affectionate ties—who finally sets the strapping soldier free.

For all the gracious humility of the Russian soldier in this variant, again the nameless Caucasians meet their by-now expected end. As the unshackled Zhilin meets freedom while crossing onto an open plain, a charge of helicopters (making a nod to the Ride of the Valkyries in *Apocalypse Now* 1979) fly overhead to bomb the village where the soldier was being held. Almost wistful about the corpses left in his wake, the soldier remarks in a voiceover: "I always wish for them to come to me in my dreams—these people that I loved, these people I [know I] will never see again. But they just don't come." Despite the film's ominous conclusion—and the real-life war going on as it was filmed—the director has often explained his work as a peace film, preferring to look at love, rather than helicopters (Gillespie 1999). The film has nothing to say about Russian policy in Chechnya as good or bad: instead, all wars are bad. Deep down, all combatants are good.

Although the chilly reception found by Russians in the Caucasus from the 1820s to the present day suggests that the Russian civilizing mission has yet to win over its disparate non-Russian publics, we might also recall Eisenstein's insight that Pushkin's characters were flat, not rounded, more like signs that could take

on new signifiers and signifieds in each retelling. Even in the few instances in which the Prisoner myth is used to actively question Russian interventions in the Caucasus, the arts of emplacement are strikingly consistent—relying on sleights of history, sleights of power, and sleights of exchange. The resounding silence of the Caucasian highlanders, for example, persists even in the openly antiwar Prisoner short story by Vladimir Makanin (1995), published in the same year Bodrov's film was made. On this battlefield, gender and its capacity for plot reversals are again at issue. The Russian army takes a handsome Chechen soldier, and the Russian protagonist Rubakhin has to wrestle with his uncomfortable erotic longings for his silent captive. Again the action comes to a close in water: carrying the Chechen on his back in a routine river crossing, Rubakhin and his company become targets for distant sniper fire. Fearing for his life at the height of his own homosexual panic (set off by what is later revealed to be friendly fire), Rubakhin strangles and drowns the object of his affections.³¹ Unable to stop dreaming of the Chechen whose life he has taken, the Russian soldier asks himself with annoyance, "What's so interesting about these mountains?" The film's narrator Makanin concludes: "[The soldier] wanted to add, 'How many years now!' But instead he said, 'How many centuries now!'" (1995:19). This is a savvy ending for Makanin and perhaps the most openly restless of all the Prisoner cycle. But once again the myth is loosest on the foreign appeals of its own arts of emplacement: whereas the Russian foregrounds his own inner torment, the Caucasian somehow always dies in the end.

The Arts of Emplacement

Since the fall of the USSR, dozens of armed conflicts in the Caucasus have begun or began anew. Although Russia has formally acted as a mediator in some, there have been calls to purposely destabilize the region once again—as advocated by a respected Russian newspaper in 1997—arguing that unity among the political trading partners of the Caucasus would shut out Russian economic and security interests (Anonymous 1997).³² In the course of what are now two full-fledged Chechen wars ongoing since 1994 as well as armed conflicts in the various breakaway republics—bringing massive impoverishment to the region and over a million internally displaced persons—thousands of Russian soldiers and civilians have been kidnapped across the North and South Caucasus (Dixon 2000; Filipov 2000; Gordon 2000; Koval'skaia 1998; LeVine 1997; Musaeva 2001).³³ In this context, the "good prisoner" symbol has lost little of its salience, serving as the basis for countless news headlines and, perhaps most notably, in Russian defense ministry press releases, in which the term *Kavkazets* (Caucasian) is most commonly conflated with Chechen (Ram 1999:15).³⁴

The objective in both beginning and ending this discussion of Russia's nearly 200 years of troubled rule in the Caucasus with accounts of real-life kidnappings is to point out that 19th-century Russian colonization, with its violent social, political, and economic dislocations, took this ritual structure of bodily seizure,

aestheticized it, created a popular demand for it, routinized it, and recounted it interminably. The protracted life of this modern political myth was caused by the labor it performed to minimize, if not efface entirely, the more violent dimensions of Russia's many battles in the region. Yet this kind of functionalist logic only takes us so far. These narratives offer, in addition, very specific kinds of negative pleasures, with powerful capabilities built on long traditions of self-giving in which some actors can, if only in narrative form, place themselves alongside powerless brothers-in-arms (or well-armed brothers) who are, bombs aside, only human.

Dissimulations of power and selfhood may have taken from Pushkin a certain lead in the Russian colonial arts, but they were no less active in the communist era. The Bolshevik "victory of the proletariat" was one of the most rhetorically skillful renditions of the power of the underdog in the 20th century—although it is more likely Shurik whom Soviet-era audiences remember most warmly. Whether Russian writers and publics continue to find satisfaction in the sufferings of noble givers remains to be seen: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is among the conservative Russian voices who urged his countrymen to give up the secessionist Caucasus territories. Russians, he writes, have been giving too much of themselves for too long (Solzhenitsyn 1990).

As I noted at the outset, the historical record of life in the Caucasus is as diverse and lively as it is temporally far-reaching. The sheer volume of Greek, Latin, Arabic, Armenian, Persian, Turkish, Azeri, Georgian, and Russian language sources alone—to speak only of the larger language groups that have traversed the region—has tended to keep even the most overconfident of nationalist historiographers at bay. During the Soviet period, the Academy of Sciences everywhere emphasized the mixing of peoples and their origins, given their own reasons for supporting ethnic merger in the service of a new Soviet citizenry (Bregel 1997a, 1997b).

However, a different story—printed by the millions of copies, performed on the ballet and opera stages, and made into at least one blockbuster—has joined the rank of classics. Although some might be reluctant to see poetry, ballet, motion picture musical comedy, and restaurant interiors as politically significant, both tsarist Russia and the USSR had public spheres in which the circuitous languages of patriotism and dissent were raised to high art. This very reluctance to see the power of aesthetic production is precisely what enables such wide-ranging and deeply rooted effects. The very discretion of these colonial and communist arts lent them fantastic productivity, enabling Russian poets and statesmen alike to craft new places in unwelcome spaces, to generate new realities, new cognitions, and new forms of political legitimacy.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Research for this article was advanced by the support of the Burkhardt Fellowship of the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Councils for International Education, the National Humanities Center, and Swarthmore College. I gratefully acknowledge the editorial counsel of *Cultural Anthropology* and its three

anonymous reviewers, alongside the generous reading and comments extended by Jean-Vincent Blanchard, Marisol de la Cadena, Paulla Ebron, Aleksei Elfimov, Sibelan Forrester, Farha Ghannam, Lisa Hajjar, Maya Iskenderova, Atiga Izmailova, Aidyn Jebrailov, Paul Manning, Anne Meneley, Fikret Mirkerimov, Rachel Moore, Serguei Oushakine, Stephanie Platz, Nancy Ries, Seteney Shami, Julie Taylor, Ol'ga Vainshtein, and Robin Wagner-Pacifi. Earlier versions of this project were presented to colloquia at Harvard University; New York University; University of California, Davis; and University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Their criticism and colloquy made this text better.

1. For a wide range of approaches see Colley 2002; Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 1993; Ebersole 1995; Kolodny 1981, 1993; Matar 1999; Pearce 1947, 1953; Ramsey 1994; Sayre 1997; Slotkin 1973; and Vitkus 2001. In the anthropology of early North America, Pauline Turner Strong has written of the "hegemonic tradition" of captivity narratives as a "remarkably resilient fabrication of identity" for colonizers and colonized alike (1999:1, 200). Strong's innovation was to draw on extant Native American representations of captivity to reconstruct the non-European coding of stranger, guest, exchange, and hostage taking so central to understanding the mutualities of the colonial encounter. The longer version of my project on kidnapping in the Caucasus likewise looks at the ways in which varied practices such as small-scale raiding and bride-kidnapping informed experiences of bodily seizure across both North and South Caucasus. See Tilton 1994 for a sustained study of one mythic narrative in colonial lore.

2. I rely on the popular gloss of "Circassia" to signal the northwestern Caucasus area occupied today by some 30 thousand inhabitants. In the 19th century, the tsarist government identified them as one people speaking one language; today the area is delimited by three autonomous regions established in the 1930s: the Adyge, Karaevo-Cherkess, and Kabardino-Balkar republics. They are all within the Russian Federation. Population figures from the North and South Caucasus, based on the 1989 Census of the Soviet Union, must be taken as approximate given the sizeable out-migration from the region amidst the political and economic instabilities that marked the first decade of the post-Soviet period.

3. "In these few words learn briefly my whole tale: Prometheus founded all the arts of man" (Aeschylus 1932:87).

4. The Prometheus of Aeschylus is a populist reformer, later lionized in Marx (1977:799) as the ur-working man and celebrated in the former Soviet Union as "the patron saint of the proletariat" (Lehmann 1938; Thomson 1972; Ziolkowski 2000). This Prometheus might have been unrecognizable to readers of the Greek poet Hesiod, approximately three centuries earlier, for whom Prometheus' interference with Zeus made him "a common malefactor" (Hesiod 1983; Thomson 1972). Colarusso (2002) and Tuite (1996) remark on the linguistic and archeological evidence that suggests earlier Caucasian sources for the Prometheus myth, implying that it had been borrowed by the Greeks. The fullest template for this kind of study is Tuite's work on a "proto-Achilles" in the Caucasus (1998).

5. The first four years of Pushkin's exile (1820–24) took him to Kishinev (present-day Chisinau in the Republic of Moldova) and the city of Odessa in Ukraine. From 1824–26, Pushkin was confined to his family's estate in Mikhailovskoe close to the northern Russian city of Pskov.

6. For an extended discussion of the theme of *vol'nost'* in the Caucasus, see Bliev and Degoev 1994.

7. Cardinal works on Russian colonization of the Caucasus include Baddeley 1908; Berzhe 1866–1904; and Kazemzadeh 1951, 1974. Among the most fruitful recent studies are Bliev and Degoev 1994, Khodarkovsky 2002, and Osmanov 1998.

8. The film referred to here was *Kavkazskii plennik* (Prisoner of the Caucasus), released by Timan and Reinhardt Studio, February 15, 1911. Vishnevskii lists the director as Vitrotti,

using the 1879 score by César Cui and the actor M. Tamarov in the lead role (1945:15). By contrast, Likhachev lists the director as Krivtsov (1927:182–183). Although the film appears not to have been archived, it is also discussed in Savushkina 1988:22.

9. Eisenstein did not lecture on the 1911 film but spoke approvingly of the ballet adaptations, for which he felt Pushkin's superficial characters were best suited.

10. The literal translation is "Female Prisoner of the Caucasus." I have glossed it as "Girl Prisoner" given the satiric genre of the film and the status of the heroine identified in the script as a *devushka*, a term that approximates "girl" in the eligible sense, more so than "woman" or "female."

11. One might also join the critique by Ahmad 1992 that by laying so much emphasis on the rhetorical superiorities of the European scholars and travel writers of the Orientalist tradition, Said endows them with even more power.

12. I prefer the term *sleight* over *arts*, which can appear as too mild, or *strategy*, which overstates conscious intent. By contrast, sleight is borne of skill, adroitness, and best of all, habit. When it is done well it is hardly noticed.

13. Tolstoy's character Hadji Murad offered this commentary to his companions on the subject of early cultural exchange in the Russian empire, "'We have a proverb,' said Hadji Murad to the interpreter, 'The dog gave meat to the ass, and the ass gave hay to the dog, and both went hungry,' and he smiled. 'Its own customs seem good to each nation'" (Tolstoy 2003:117).

14. Do these arts have to be seen as expressing intent? Simmel would suggest not, for in an exchange the giver only wants one thing: "Giving up something else therefore does not have the effect of being a detraction from the satisfaction he seeks. . . . It does not count as a price" (1971:58). Hence, although it may seem curious to find a recurring Russian archetype of the Promethean long-suffering giver who gives his own body in the cause of civilizing and improving mankind, Simmel tells us that self-sacrifice is "by no means an external barrier to [one's] goals. It is rather the inner condition of the goal, and the way to it" (1971:48). See also Beidelman 1989.

15. The term *khandra* and its corresponding imperfective verb *khandrit'* is taken from the Latin *hypochondria* (Fasmer 1971:221). The term is so closely associated with Pushkin that it is common to refer to the art of melancholic swooning as *pushkinskaia khandra* (Vinogradov 1929:799–800).

16. The citation is from Pushkin's essay "Journey to Arzrum." While traveling to the Turkish border in 1835, Pushkin finds a copy of his own "Prisoner of the Caucasus." He "reads it with great satisfaction. It was all weak, youthful, incomplete; but a great deal was discerned and expressed correctly" (Greenleaf 1991:943).

17. See Layton 1994:3–5 for more on early Russian imperial designs in the region.

18. The Imperial Academy of Sciences lost one of its botanists to kidnapping in 1774; see Austin 1984.

19. Two of the best-known cases in the years leading up to Pushkin's work included the capture of the Russian General Potto by Chechens in 1811 and the Russian Major Shevtsov, who was reported as captured by the Circassians while going to visit his aging mother. For a full trajectory of 19th-century kidnapping events from a Russian perspective, see Austin 1984, Barrett 1998, Khodarkovsky 2002, and Markelov 2002.

20. Tolmachev 2002:17 cites Russian Major General V. A. Potto's figures of just under 6,000 Russian soldiers taken captive in the Caucasian wars of 1801–1864. The Russians were less mindful of the numbers of Caucasians killed or taken during the same period.

21. Historian Thomas Barrett writes, "Because of intermarriage, interactions, conversions, acculturations, and desertions, it was often difficult to tell just who was who

in the Caucasus" (1995:600). One needs to stress that this was, nonetheless, the Russian perception, not the well-documented insight of longer-term residents acutely aware of local differences.

22. In the work of ballet director Charles Didelot, Pushkin continued to express his amazement at the mass interest in what he considered to be one of his least thoughtful works. Writing of the ballet adaptation, he penned in one stanza:

My captive isn't the least bit pleasing. He is cold (boring), useless, And so, my captive is not me. For nothing [is he] praised [or that] Didelot should make him dance. My captive therefore is not me. [Tarasenko 1938:51]

For a review of Didelot's work in Moscow, see Anonymous 1827:61–63.

23. Tsivian 1991 explores the tensions Russian film directors had to face in generating at least two endings to feature films: one for domestic Russian audiences, in which the main characters all died, and a second for European export, in which everyone lived happily ever after.

24. Tolstoy's is perhaps the least changed from Pushkin's work; at Lermontov's hand, the Russian prisoner is shot on escape, and the Circassian girl knowingly flings herself into the river. In his discussion of Tolstoy's stories set among Chechens, Paul Friedrich offers a more positive view of Tolstoy's anthropological voice (2003).

25. The noun and adjective forms *plennik* and *plennyi*, used almost exclusively in this cycle from Pushkin onward, are closer to "captive" than "prisoner." I alternate between the two to avoid repetition. The Russian *zakliuchennyi*, denoting someone who is intentionally taken by clear designs of institutional law with a fixed term of confinement, is the conventional term for "prisoner."

26. Beidelman 1989 invokes a slightly different translation based on *pro* and *metis* (cunning), suggesting that the name means "fore-cunning."

27. The 1923 story by Aleksei Tolstoy (1985) was made into a film by the early Soviet director Iakov Protazanov (1924).

28. See Prokhorov (2003) for an excellent discussion of the cult status of Gaidai's "Three Stooges," Vitsin, Nikulin, and Morgunov, known collectively among fans as the *troika ViNiMor*.

29. These are extracts from the 2001 DVD release of *Kavkazskaia plennitsa*, released in English as *Kidnapping Caucasian Style*. Moscow's *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* restaurant shears away this generality by billing itself as Georgian. Gaidai shot the film on location in the Russian Republic town of Adler, outside of Sochi, on the Crimean Peninsula.

30. For the liner notes for the film, see *Kavkazskij plennik* (1996), from Internet Movie Database.

31. In yet another sleight of power, it is striking that Russians, however lost in alien lands, are (with the exception of the Prisoner's inconvenient wife in the 1823 imperial ballet) always able to cross the river—a watery symbol of border—whereas the Caucasian inevitably drowns. Russians make themselves out to be border crossers, and yet they pale in comparison to the long-famous Caucasus tradition of constant motion, trading, and travel. For more on the theme of the border in Russian literature's Caucasian repertoire, see Greenleaf 1991.

32. This position resonates with the earlier findings of Bournoutian (1994) and Swietochowski (1995) on Russian interest in keeping the Caucasus destabilized in the early 19th century.

33. In the most widely reported cases, foreign businessmen and aid workers have been among the kidnapped in the wave of seizures of the last decade (e.g., Lomsadze 2002). Among the non-Russians, the most widespread disappearances are of Chechen civilians taken by Russian forces (Dudayev 2003).

34. Non-Russian media have largely followed suit, with one example perhaps most plainly suggestive of the political uses of captivity: see Gordon 2000, "Freed in Chechnya: A Kidnap Victim Serves Russia's Needs."

References Cited

Aeschylus

1932 *Prometheus Bound*. George Thomson, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ahmad, Aijaz

1992 *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. New York: Verso.

Amsler, Sarah, and Russ Kleinbach

1999 *Bride Kidnapping in the Kyrgyz Republic*. *International Journal of Central Asian Studies* 4:186–216.

Anonymous

1827 *Review of Kavkazskii Plennik*. *Damskii Zhurnal* 20(October):61–63.

1997 *SNG: Nachalo ili konets istorii?* *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, March 26: 5.

Austin, Paul

1984 *The Exotic Prisoner in Russian Romanticism*. *Russian Literature* XVI:217–274.

1997 *The Exotic Prisoner in Russian Romanticism*. New York: Peter Lang.

Babaeva, R.

1964 *Materials for the Study of Marriage Ceremonies on the Apsheron Peninsula in the Past*. *Soviet Anthropology and Archeology* 6(2):3–11. [First published in 1964 in *Russian in Azerbaidzhanskii etnograficheskii sbornik* 1:177–190.]

Baddeley, John

1908 *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*. London: Russell and Russell.

Barrett, Thomas

1995 *Lines of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the North Caucasus*. *Slavic Review* 54(3):578–601.

1998 *Southern Living (in Captivity): The Caucasus in Russian Popular Culture*. *Journal of Popular Culture* 31(4):75–93.

Beidelman, Thomas O.

1989 *Agonistic Exchange: Homeric Reciprocity and the Heritage of Simmel and Mauss*. *Cultural Anthropology* 4(3):227–259.

Berzhe, Adolph, ed.

1866–1904 *Akty sobrannye kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi kommissiei*. 12 vols. Tiflis: Glavnoe upravlenie namestnika Kavkazskago.

Bitov, Andrei

1992[1969] *A Captive of the Caucasus*. Susan Brownsberger, trans. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Bliev, Mark M., and Vladimir V. Degoev

1994 *Kavkazskaia voina*. Moscow: Roset.

Bodrov, Sergei, dir.

1996 *Kavkazskii plennik (Prisoner of the Mountains)*. 98 min. BG Productions, MGM Home Entertainment. Moscow.

Bournoutian, George A.

1994 *A History of Qarabagh: An Annotated Translation of Mirza Jamal Javanshir Qarabaghi's Tarikh-e Qarabagh*. Costa Mesa: Mazda.

Bregel, Yuri

1997a Notes on the Study of Central Asia I. Rewriting Central Asian History. *Vostok* 5:109–123.

1997b Notes on the Study of Central Asia II. American Scholarship and Central Asia. *Vostok* 6:5–25.

Burton, Julianne

1992 Don (Juanito) Duck and the Imperial-Patriarchal Unconscious: Disney Studios, the Good Neighbor Policy, and the Packaging of Latin America. In *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds. Pp. 21–41. New York: Routledge.

Colarusso, John

2002 *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Colley, Linda

2002 *Captives*. New York: Pantheon.

Comrie, Bernard

1981 *Languages of the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coppola, Francis Ford, dir.

1979 *Apocalypse Now*. 153. min. Zoetrope. Hollywood.

Datsiuk, B. D.

1955 *Rabovladel'cheskii stroi i rabovladel'cheskie gosudarstva*. Moscow: Vysshiaia partiinaia shkola.

Derounian-Stodola, Kathryn, and James Arthur Levernier

1993 *The Indian Captivity Narrative, 1550–1900*. New York: Twayne.

Dixon, Robyn

2000 Chechnya's Grimmiest Industry: Thousands of People Have Been Abducted by the War-Torn Republic's Kidnapping Machine. *Tales of Survivors Read Like Relics from a Barbaric Past*. Los Angeles Times, 18 September: A1.

Dorfman, Ariel, and Armand Mattelart

1975 *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. New York: International General.

Dudayev, Umal't

2003 Chechnya: Disappearances Mount. Caucasus Reporting Service 178. Electronic document, <http://www.iwpr.net>, accessed May 9.

Ebersole, Gary

1995 *Captured by Texts: Puritan to Postmodern Images of Indian Captivity*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Eisenstein, Sergei

1998 *Planirovka mesta deistviia na materiale "Kavkazskogo Plennika"* (Lektsii S. M. Eizenshteina vo VGIIke). Moscow: Muzei Kino.

Ergushov, P.

1929 *Kavkazskii plennik: Povest' iz vremen grazhdanskoi voiny*. Prague: Izdanie avtora.

Fasmer, Maks

1971 *Etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo iazyka*. Tom III. Moscow: Progress.

Filipov, David

2000 Kidnappers of all Stripes Thrive on Chaos in Chechnya. *Boston Globe*, July 4: A1.

Friedrich, Paul

2003 Tolstoy and the Chechens: Problems in Literary Anthropology. *Russian History/Histoire russe* 30(1–2):113–143.

- Gaidai, Leonid, dir.
 1966 *Kavkazskaia plennitsa* (Girl Prisoner of the Caucasus). Mosfilm. Moscow. 2001
Kavkazskaia plennitsa (Kidnapping Caucasian Style). 82 min. DVD. Russian Cinema Council. Moscow.
- Geiger, Bernard
 1959 *Peoples and Languages of the Caucasus*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Gillespie, David
 1999 *New Versions of Old Classics: Recent Cinematic Interpretations of Russian Literature*. In *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema*. Birgit Beumers, ed. Pp. 114–126. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Gordon, Michael
 2000 *Freed in Chechnya: A Kidnap Victim Serves Russia's Needs*. New York Times, January 4: A3.
- Greenleaf, Monika
 1991 *Pushkin's Journey to Arzrum*. *Slavic Review* 50(4):940–953.
- Halle, Fannina W.
 1938 *Women in the Soviet East*. New York: Dutton.
- Hesiod
 1983 *Theogony, Works and Days*, Shield. Introduction, Notes, and Translation by Apostolos N. Athanassakis. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Hokanson, Katya
 1994 *Literary Imperialism, Narodnost' and Pushkin's Invention of the Caucasus*. *Russian Review* 53(July):336–352.
- Irigaray, Luce
 1985 *This Sex Which is Not One*. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke, trans. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kavkazskij plennik
 1996 *Plot Summary for Kavkazskij plennik*. Electronic document, <http://us.imdb.com/Plot?0116754>, accessed February 2002.
- Kazemzadeh, Firuz
 1951 *The Struggle for Transcaucasia (1917–1921)*. New York: Philosophical Library.
 1974 *Russian Penetration of the Caucasus*. In *Russian Imperialism from Ivan the Great to the Revolution*. Taras Huncaz, ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Khodarkovsky, Michael
 2002 *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Kisliakov, Nikolai Andreevich
 1969 *Ocherki po istorii sem'i i braka u narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Kolodny, Annette
 1981 *Turning the Lens on "The Panther Captivity": A Feminist Exercise in Practical Criticism*. *Critical Inquiry* 8(2):329–346.
 1993 *Among the Indians: The Uses of Captivity*. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 3–4:184–195.
- Koval'skaia, Galina
 1998 *Kavkaz i plenniki*. *Itogi*, March 24: 60–62.
- Layton, Susan
 1994 *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lehmann, John

1938 *Prometheus and the Bolsheviks*. New York: Alfred Knopf.

Lermontov, Mikhail

1969 *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*. Tom II. Moscow: Pravda.

LeVine, Steve

1997 *Get Rich in Chechnya: Kidnap Your Neighbors*. New York Times, September 5: A4.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude

1963 *Totemism*. Rodney Needham, trans. Boston: Beacon.

Likhachev, B. S.

1927 *Kino v Rossii (1896–1926)*. Leningrad: Academia.

Lomsadze, Giorgi

2002 *Georgian Kidnapping: A Deadly Trend*. Caucasus Reporting Service 135. Electronic document, <http://www.iwpr.net>, accessed June 27.

Lotman, Iurii

1984 “Agreement” and “Self-Giving” as Archetypal Models of Culture. In *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*. Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, eds. Pp. 125–140. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions.

Luzbetak, Louis J.

1951 *Marriage and Family in Caucasia*. Vienna: St. Gabriel’s Mission Press.

Makanin, Vladimir

1995 *Kavkazskii plennyi*. *Novyi Mir* 840(4):3–19.

Markelov, N. V.

2002 “Where Martial Plunder Prowls the Mountains” (Prisoners of the Caucasus). *Russian Studies in History* 41(2):21–38.

Marx, Karl

1977 *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books.

Massell, Gregory J.

1974 *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Matar, Nabil

1999 *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mauss, Marcel

1990[1924] *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Norton.

Moore, Ralph Kerney

1992 *Tolstoy’s Kavkazskii Plennik Through the Prism of the Iuzhnaia Poema: Transcending Russian Orientalism*. M.A. thesis, Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Literatures, The Ohio State University.

Musaeva, Faniya

2001 *Trafficking in Persons as a Modern Kind of Slavery*. Central Asia Caucasus-Analyst. Electronic document, http://www.cacianalyst.org/July_18_2001/July_18_2001_Trafficking_in_persons.htm, accessed August 4.

Osmanov, A. I., ed.

1998 *Kavkazskaia voina: Spornye voprosy i novye podkhody*. Makhachkala: Academy of Sciences.

Pearce, Roy Harvey

1953 *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- 1947 The Significances of the Captivity Narrative. *American Literature* 19(1):1–20.
- Pesmen, Dale
- 2000 *Russia and Soul: An Exploration*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Prokhorov, Aleksandr
- 2003 Cinema of Attractions versus Narrative Cinema: Leonid Gaidai's Comedies and El'dar Riazanov's Satires of the 1960s. *Slavic Review* 62(3):455–472.
- Propp, Vladimir
- 1968 *Morphology of the Folktale*. Laurence Scott, trans. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Protazanov, Iakov, dir.
- 1924 *Aelita, Queen of Mars*. 100 min. Mezhrabprom Studios. Moscow.
- Pushkin, Aleksandr
- 1997 *Selected Poems*. A. D. P. Briggs, ed. London: J. M. Dent.
- Ram, Harsha
- 1999 *Prisoners of the Caucasus: Literary Myths and Media Representations of the Chechen Conflict*. Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series.
- Ramsey, Colin
- 1994 Cannibalism and Infant Killing: A System of “Demonizing” Motifs in Indian Captivity Narratives. *Clio* 24(1):55–69.
- Ratushniak, Valerii N.
- 1995 *Kavkazskaia voina: Uroki istorii i sovremennost'*. Krasnodar: Kubanskii gosudarstvennyi universitet.
- Ries, Nancy
- 1997 *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rubin, Gayle
- 1975 The Traffic in Women. In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Rayna Reiter, ed. Pp. 157–210. New York: Monthly Review.
- Said, Edward
- 1978 *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
- Sandler, Stephanie
- 1989 *Distant Pleasures: Alexander Pushkin and the Writing of Exile*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Savushkina, Nina I.
- 1988 *Russkaia narodnaia drama*. Moscow: Narodnyi universitet.
- Sayre, Gordon M.
- 1997 *Les Sauvages Américains: Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Simmel, Georg
- 1971[1907] Exchange. In *On Individuality and Social Forms*. Donald N. Levine, ed. Pp. 43–69. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Slotkin, Richard
- 1973 *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Smirnova, Ia. S.
- 1986 Avoidance and its Gradual Extinction among the Peoples of the North Caucasus. *Soviet Anthropology and Archeology* 25(2):1–56.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr
- 1990 *Kak nam obustroit' Rossiю? Posil'nye soobrazheniia*. Paris: YMCA.

Specter, Michael

1996 Updating Tolstoy, A Russian Director Faces War's Anguish. *New York Times*, July 22: C17.

Strong, Pauline Turner

1999 *Captive Selves, Captivating Others: The Politics and Poetics of Colonial American Captivity Narratives*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Sultanova, Akima I.

1964 *Shchastlivye zhenshchiny sovetskogo Azerbaidzhana*. Baku: Elm.

Swietochowski, Tadeusz

1995 *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Tarasenko, G. Ia.

1938 *Kavkazskii plennik: Balet v trekh aktakh*. Leningrad: Malyi opernyi teatr.

Thomson, George

1972 *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*. New York: Haskell House.

Tilton, Robert

1994 *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Timan and Reinhardt Studios

1911 *Kavkazskii plennik (Prisoner of the Caucasus)*.

Tolmachev, E. P.

2002 Russia's Annexation of the Caucasus (Some Conclusions and Consequences). *Russian Studies in History* 41(2):16–20.

Tolstoy, Aleksei

1985[1923] *Aelita, or The Decline of Mars*. Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis.

Tolstoy, Leo

2003 *Hadji Murad*. Aylmer Maude, trans. New York: Modern Library.

Tsivian, Yuri

1991 Early Russian Cinema: Some Observations. In *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds. Pp. 7–30. New York: Routledge.

Tuite, Kevin

1996 The Caucasus. *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. D. Levinson and M. Ember, eds. Pp. 181–185. New York: Henry Holt. 1998 Achilles and the Caucasus. *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 26(3–4):289–343.

Vinogradov, Viktor Vladimirovich

1929 *Slovar' iazyka Pushkina*. Tom III. Moscow: Inostrannye natsional'nye slovari.

Vishnevskii, Veniamin

1945 *Khudozhestvennyye fil'my dorevoliutsionnoi Rossii*. Moscow: Goskinoizdat.

Vitkus, Daniel J., ed.

2001 *Piracy, Slavery and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Werner, Cynthia

2004 Women, Marriage, and the Nation-State: The Rise of Consensual Bride Kidnapping in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan. In *The Transformation of Central Asia: States and Societies from Soviet Rule to Independence*. Pauline Jones Luong, ed. Pp. 59–89. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

White, Richard

1991[1947] *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ziolkowski, Theodore

2000 *The Sin of Knowledge: Ancient Themes and Modern Variations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zorkaia, Neia Markovna

1994 *Fol'klor, lubok, ekran*. Moscow: Isskustvo.

ABSTRACT *Beginning with a fabled narrative poem by Aleksandr Pushkin from 1822 entitled “Prisoner of the Caucasus,” this article is an exploration of how the idiom of kidnapping—in the ritual seizure, taking, and most importantly, giving of bodies across perceived cultural lines—has been central to Russians’ understanding of their troubled relations with the mountainous land holdings to their south for over 200 years. By juxtaposing classic ethnographic sources on Caucasian bride-kidnapping and the hostage taking of military figures as proxies in ritualized violence, alongside multiple renderings of Pushkin’s “good prisoner” story in poetry, prose, opera, ballet, and film, these seemingly apolitical artifacts of Russian popular culture work to generate a powerful symbolic economy of Russian belonging in the Caucasus Mountains. [Russia, Caucasus, kidnapping, gift, popular culture]*