

The dilemmas of enlightenment in the eastern borderlands: The theater and library in Tbilisi.

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The Dilemmas of Enlightenment in the Eastern Borderlands: The Theater and Library in Tbilisi*

Austin Jersild and Neli Melkadze

[The theater] cultivates taste, acquaints us with the works of great artists, with the ideas of geniuses, and presents to the crowd the beginnings of the fine arts, that is, the most noble aspirations of humanity.

[Russian] G. S., Kavkaz, 1854

The awakening of the people is of no significance without theater and folk poetry.

[Georgian] A. K., Droeba, 1876

The Russian field is quickly accumulating a wide variety of works on Russian imperialism. These works now rival the field of colonial studies on the Western empires, and include explorations of imperial ideology, the multiethnic service elite, educational policy, missionary activities, cultural borrowing and interaction among the diverse peoples of the empire, and native responses and challenges to Russian rule.¹ The new studies often venture out to the eastern borderlands of [End Page 27] the empire, such as the Volga-Urals and Turkestan, and complement and complicate a more developed historiography on the western borderlands and its peoples, such as Poles, Balts, Ukrainians, and Jews. Studies of the western frontier often highlight the problem of "Russification," which generally meant the series of late-19th-century repressive policies designed to limit the economic and cultural activities of the non-Russian peoples.²

As this article will illustrate, imperialism in the East (the southern borderlands of Crimea and the Caucasus were part of the East or Orient [*vostok*] of the imperial imagination) included an impulse to promote and foster rather than curtail cultural expression. This made perfect sense for a Russia that was itself an eastern borderland of a Europe understood by many Russians since the 18th century to be the primary source of their own unfolding "enlightenment" and cultural progress. Russians (and many non-Russians) presented Russia's connection to enlightened Europe as a justification for imperial rule over the peoples and regions of the distant eastern borderlands. Especially from the 1840s, there [End Page 28] emerged a well-developed Russian ideology of empire preoccupied with matters of culture and enlightenment, which posed an important contrast to traditional Russian militarism and imperial conquest of the frontier.

There were limitations to the promotion of culture on the distant fringes of the empire, however. Many of the imperial promoters of enlightenment had trouble imagining a world in which enlightenment might be spread in the small and exotic languages and cultures of the borderlands. Georgians might participate in imperial *obshchestvo* (educated society), present the plays of Shakespeare, and collect and read French books, but would they develop their own educated society (*sazogadoeba*), and publish their own newspapers and books? Was there a place for non-Russian cultural traditions that did not take their cue from the worlds of Russia and Europe, or for expressions of local culture that questioned this equation of enlightened benevolence with Russia? Early empire-builders and promoters of enlightenment, such as Mikhail Semenovich Vorontsov, the special viceroy (*namestnik*) appointed in 1845, could not even imagine that there ever would be such a dilemma in the eastern borderlands, while later officials reacted with suspicion and hostility to this developing world of cultural politics in a place such as Georgia. They foolishly attempted to limit the meaning and spread of enlightenment, which had, since the 1840s, been one of the basic

justifications for Russian rule in the borderlands.

Georgia offers an ideal location for the exploration of the problem of high culture and the idea of (European) enlightenment within the context of the multiethnic (and Eurasian) empire. Georgia was a great source of hope for imperial officials hoping to establish an administrative foothold in the complex and turbulent Caucasus. Georgians of course share with Russians a common heritage of Eastern Orthodoxy and Byzantine influence. The modern historical consciousness of both peoples was strongly influenced by the memory of struggle with Islamic empires and cultures. Georgia's enemies included...

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* Austin Jersild would like to thank and recognize his Georgian language teachers, Tamara Chakhtauri, Tamara Koshoridze, and Ramaz Kuradze, the American Council for International Education, and Ronald Suny and the other participants of the Midwest Russian History Workshop held at the University of Chicago, 20–21 October 2001. Both authors are grateful for the comments and suggestions of *Kritika*'s anonymous reviewers. For Georgia's contemporary capital we use the Georgian word Tbilisi rather than the Russian Tiflis, except in those cases where the name refers to an "imperial" institution or administrative designation. The Georgian language does not use capital letters, and neither do we in the transliterated footnote references to Georgian materials. In the text, however, we follow English convention and capitalize names and titles.

¹ On imperial ideology, educational policy and missionary work, see Mark Bassin, *Imperial Vision: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840–1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Michael Khodarkovsky, "Ignoble Savages and Unfaithful Subjects: Constructing Non-Christian Identities in Early Modern Russia"; Yuri Slezkine, "Nations versus Nations: Eighteenth-Century Russian Scholars Confront Ethnic Diversity"; Dov Yaroslavski, "Empire and Citizenship"; Susan Layton, "Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery"; Bruce Grant, "Empire and Savagery: The Politics of Primi-



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