

An Inconvenient Footnote:

Lermontov's "Bela" and the Circassian Expulsion

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Circassians, my warrior people,

Be ready at any hour

For death's sacrifice...

*Черкесы, мой народ военный,*

*Готовы будьте всякий час*

*На жертву смерти...*

Lermontov, "Circassians"

(*Cherkesy*)<sup>1</sup>

I've taught Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* many times, both in Russian and translation. Each October at Montclair State University, I introduce a new group of students to the novel in a course on Russian Prose and Drama. This course is not only a requirement for the Russian minors in my department, Modern Languages and Literatures; it is also one of a handful of General Education courses that satisfy the World Literature requirement for all undergraduates at the university. As it turns out, this cross-listing was approved only a few years before my arrival. The proposal had met with considerable resistance from other departments on the curriculum committee. The argument that finally won over the committee was as follows: Russian literature counts as World Literature because Russia is West and East *simultaneously*. I wholeheartedly agree with this tidy resolution to a centuries-old debate. Nowhere on my current syllabus is the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Iu. Lermontov, "Cherkesy," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 10 vols., ed. G. N. Seleznev et al. (Moscow: Voskresen'e, 1999–2002), 3: 7, lines 71–73.

need for a cross-cultural approach to teaching more evident than in the case of “Bela.”

This is easier said than done, however. My students generally like reading and discussing “Bela,” the opening section of Lermontov’s novel. From a pedagogical perspective, they are immediately drawn to the dark and mysterious Pechorin, and it does not require undue effort on my part to nudge class discussion from his callous deeds toward the intricate levels of narration through which they unfold. Yet despite being a crowd-pleaser, “Bela” has always proven a challenging text to teach. This is especially true in seminars, my preferred format for literature courses. The difficulty lies with the connection, at once tenuous and pressing, between the fictional tale “Bela” and a certain series of extra-literary events. On the one hand, these events—which may be provisionally termed the Caucasian War<sup>2</sup> (1817–1864)—involve exceptional levels of historical violence that remain a matter of contention to the descendants of all parties involved. On the other hand, this entire history is virtually unknown to North American students. As a non-specialist in the region, I myself do not feel qualified to speak about, let alone speak for, all the peoples to which Lermontov alludes in “Bela”: Circassians, Ossetians, Georgians, Tatars, Chechens, and so on. In terms of classroom dynamics, I’m faced with the task of presenting a makeshift lecture on a brutal war that not only eats into student discussion of Lermontov’s text but that threatens to predetermine the terms under which that text should be discussed. In teaching “Bela,” I’m always anxious that this inconvenient footnote, once pointed out to students, may render the text above it moot, or worse, mute.

In short, my pedagogical dilemma is whether to lecture or not to lecture. There is

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<sup>2</sup> For a classic account of the Caucasian War, see Willis Brooks, “Nicholas I as Reformer: Russian Attempts to Conquer the Caucasus,” in *Nation and Ideology: Essays in Honor of Wayne S. Vucinich*, ed. Ivo Banac, John G. Ackerman, and Roman Szporluk (New York: East European Monographs, 1981), 227–63. See also Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

certainly much to be said in defense of the latter option. Even without a lecture, “Bela” offers more than enough formal and thematic material to fill a productive seminar session. This includes discussion of the rhetoric of empire. My better students are able to identify and analyze “Bela” in terms of stock elements from such genres as the “travelogue” or the “oriental tale” (terms I slip early into conversation). By way of analogy with, say, popular films about native Americans (or, more recently, the blockbuster *Avatar*), the characters Pechorin and Bela can be approached through familiar oppositions: settler and native, civilized and savage. Students who are conversant with Said’s Orientalism from English or French literature courses have likewise been struck with similarities in the ways that gender, religion, and ethnicity are thematized in “Bela.” Such analogies across different imperial contexts, if superficial, serve as convenient points of departure for close examination of Lermontov’s text. Thus cross-cultural issues arise as students and I walk through each step in the tale’s central love plot, from Pechorin’s attendance at a Circassian wedding to Bela’s deathbed lament that she and her husband, as Muslim and Christian, will not reunite in Paradise. Such discussion usually takes on a political dimension, moreover, as students pick up on Maxim Maximich’s ethnic slurs or tease out the allegorical possibilities suggested by a Russian soldier’s abduction of a woman from occupied territory. There are ways even to avoid having to pause for mini-lectures on foreign terms. On a few occasions, for example, I’ve solicited volunteers to do a quick online search on the different ethnic groups named in “Bela.” The following class each volunteer is usually able to say a few meaningful things about their assigned group’s culture. This is better than my saying these same things in lecture. Yet none of this information tends to generate much class discussion. More importantly, the complex history between these groups and the Russian empire passes unnoticed. The one exception occurred in the Fall 2009 semester, when I had the exceeding good fortune of

having a Circassian-American student on my class roster. She jumped at the chance to inform her classmates about the Circassian expulsion from tsarist Russia—that is, the hundreds of thousands of Circassians who were forced or coerced to migrate from the Northwest Caucasus to Turkey and other countries in the late 1850s and early 1860s. As she put it to me after class, her friends never know anything about her background, but that when she tells them, “they are blown away.”

This is indeed the crux of my dilemma. The tragic fate of the groups known collectively as Circassians is a compelling and even urgent story in its own right. This story extends long before, and long after, the few months in 1837–38 between the stationing of the dragoon officer Lermontov at the Caucasian front and the writing of “Bela” on his return to St. Petersburg. Descendants of the Circassian women who would have been Bela’s contemporaries now live in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and even New Jersey, which did receive a belated wave of Circassian refugees in the wake of the Six Day War.<sup>3</sup> Yet such a formulation of the problem already risks being too reductive. Ultimately, the thin line that connects Bela’s story and the story of the *muhajirs*, or “migrants,” is at least as much intertextual as it is historical. Either way, the connection hinges on an unstable term: Circassian (*cherkes*). In the case of “Bela,” it’s hardly clear that the eponymous heroine is Circassian at all. Kamennyi Brod, the fortress on the Aksai River where the story is set, lies to the west of the territory demarcated as “Circassia” (*Cherkesiia*) on imperial Russian maps. Literary critics, sifting through the ethnographic *realia* that the multiple narrators deploy, have proposed that Bela may be Kabardian, Chechen, or Kumyk—only the first of which represents a Circassian group.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Rieks Smeets, “Circassia,” *Central Asian Survey* 14, no. 1 (1995): 107, 125.

<sup>4</sup> On Bela’s possible ethnicity, see S. N. Durylin, “*Geroi nashogo vremeni*” *M. Iu. Lermontova* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatel'stvo, 1940), 49–50; B. S. Vinogradov, “Gortsy v

Be that as it may, Maxim Maximich and Pechorin identify Bela and her female companions throughout the story as “Circassian” (*cherkeshenka*). Far from being scientific, this ethnic label suggests the influence of a conventional literary figure—the Circassian beauty. The cultural traditions surrounding this figure extend well beyond the borders of imperial Russia. The Circassian beauty appears in Turkish and Arabic folklore as well as in the poetry of Byron and Pushkin, and from the critical reviews of Belinsky to the poster art of the P. T. Barnum circus.<sup>5</sup> The Circassian beauty may be a princess, or a slave, or a princess sold into slavery. As Voltaire explained as early as 1734, “The Circassians are poor, their daughters are beautiful, and indeed it is in them they chiefly trade.”<sup>6</sup> Lermontov’s tale “Bela” playfully reworks these clichés, down to the macaronic pun in the heroine’s name (“beautiful woman” in Italian; “misfortune” in Turkish). It is not the Sultan, but a Russian officer, who trades goods for a Circassian beauty. Pechorin himself seems aware of these traditions; before seeing Bela at the wedding, he is unimpressed: “I had a much higher opinion of Circassian women” (*Ya imel gorazde luchshee mnenie o cherkeshenkakh*).<sup>7</sup> In defending his abduction of Bela to Maxim Maximich, Pechorin repeatedly appeals to the supposed marriage customs of her people. A stolen wife is still a wife

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romane Lermontova ‘Geroi nashego vremeni’ (Tezisy doklada),” in *M. Iu. Lermontov. Voprosy zhizni i tvorchestva*, ed. A. N. Sokolov and D. A. Gireev (Ordzhonikidze: Severo-osetinskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1963), 55–56; V. A. Manuilov, “Geroi nashego vremeni” *M. Iu. Lermontova: Kommentarii* (Leningrad: Prosveshchenie, 1966), 91–93.

<sup>5</sup> For non-Russian treatments of this figure, see Linda Frost, “The Circassian Beauty and the Circassian Slave: Gender, Imperialism, and American Popular Entertainment,” in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 248–62; Thomas McLean, “Arms and the Circassian Woman: Frances Browne’s ‘The Star of Attéghéi,’” *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 3 (2003): 301–5; Setenay Nil Doğan, “From National Humiliation to Difference: The Image of the Circassian Beauty in the Discourses of Circassian Diaspora Nationalists,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 42 (2010), 77–102.

<sup>6</sup> Voltaire, *Letters on the English or Lettres Philosophiques* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), letter XI, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Lermontov, *Geroi nashego vremeni*, 220.

“among them” (*po-ikhemu*).<sup>8</sup> (One student asked me if it were really true that Circassians stole their brides!) Later, he explains that if they return Bela to her father, that “savage” will “sell her” or “tear her to pieces” (*esli ot dadim doch' etomu dikariu, on ee zarezhet ili prodast*).<sup>9</sup> For her part, Bela insists that she is “not a slave” but “a prince’s daughter” (*ya ne raba... ya kniazheskaia doch'!*).<sup>10</sup>

The term “Circassian” is also an unstable term in the history of the Caucasus. The term, perhaps of Turkish provenance, was not originally the self-identification of any particular ethnic group. In the nineteenth century, “Circassian” served in Russian state documents as an umbrella category for a number of linguistically-related groups in the Northwest Caucasus, including the Adyghe, Kabardin, and Shapsug. The Abkhaz, Ubykhs, and other groups were also usually included.<sup>11</sup> In the twentieth century, terminological practice diverged significantly between the minority of Circassians remaining in the Soviet Union and those living in the diaspora. Stalin broke the Circassians into four individual groups, as well as into different geographical regions, so as to forestall any formation of a unified national identity. The Russian Federation has inherited these regions and ethnic categories. Outside of Russia, however, especially in Turkey, the term Circassian came to refer to a broad number of ethnic groups that migrated from the Caucasus.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, memory of the expulsion helped underwrite this usage. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the term Circassian, as an identity position, has been increasingly embraced by organizations in Russia, the Middle East, and the United States in a coordinated effort to gain

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 228. Maxim Maximich here paraphrases Pechorin’s words.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>11</sup> Smeets, “Circassia,” 111; Stephen D. Shenfield, “The Circassians: A Forgotten Genocide?,” in *The Massacre in History*, ed. Mark Levene and Penny Roberts (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 162n2.

<sup>12</sup> See Zeynel Abidin Besleney, “Circassian Nationalism and the Internet,” openDemocracy, 21 May 2010, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/zeynel-abidin-besleney/circassian-nationalism-and-internet>.

global recognition.<sup>13</sup> Thus the phrase “Circassian genocide,” or *genotsid cherkaskogo naroda*, occurs in recent petitions to the Russian Duma, the UN, the European Parliament, and US Congress.<sup>14</sup> This phrase will likely gain further traction in the international press during the approach to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, where skiing events are set to take place on the site of the final battle in the Caucasian War.<sup>15</sup> In the early months of 1864, thousands of Ubykhs, native to the area, were either massacred or deported from Sochi, the same port through which so many other Circassian groups had passed during the previous six years. The Ubykh language has since become extinct. The last stand of the Ubykhs, by contrast, is still commemorated annually on May 21 by the worldwide Circassian community.<sup>16</sup>

In the classroom, the Russian conquest of Circassia represents one of those occasions—serfdom is another—where I feel compelled to step beyond the literary imaginary and into the “nightmare” of history (to rework Stephen Dedalus’ metaphor). If there is a moral imperative at work here, it is not a categorical one. There are too many historical narratives intersecting with each fictional text on my syllabus for all of them to be brought to the attention of students. One of the most dominant narratives surrounding *Hero of Our Time*—especially in the classroom—remains Lermontov’s biography. This is somewhat ironic. On the one occasion that Lermontov speaks in his own voice—that is, in his appended foreword—he denies that the novel is a self-portrait; he is not Pechorin, we are. From the point of view of literary analysis, Lermontov’s

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Paul Goble, “Circassian Diaspora Calls on Circassians in Russia to Declare Themselves Members of a Single People,” *Window on Eurasia*, 15 September 2010, <http://windowoneurasia.blogspot.com/2010/09/window-on-eurasia-circassian-diaspora.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “Caucasus Report,” *Radio Free Europe: Radio Liberty* 8, no. 23, July 15, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1341730.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Sufian Zhemukhov, “The Circassian Dimension of the 2014 Sochi Olympics,” *PONARS, Policy Memo No. 65*, Georgetown University, September 2009, <http://ceres.georgetown.edu/esp/ponarsmemos/page/78357.html>.

<sup>16</sup> A day of mourning is observed on May 21, the date of a large Russian victory parade in 1864. Armed fighting between Russian and Ubykh forces ended a few days earlier.

personal ties to the region—childhood trips, military exile, fateful duel—constitute historical digressions no more or less than do other potential Caucasian narratives. This is true as well of his posthumous canonization as the “poet of the Caucasus,” a legacy that extends to multiple national traditions within and beyond the Russian Federation.

Even in matters of the Caucasus, some narratives have only recently attained currency in Russian literature courses. In 1992, Peter Scotto noted with some justice that the historical connection between “Russia’s literary engagement with the Caucasus” and the “discourse and practice of imperialism” had not received adequate scholarly attention in either North America or the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Twenty years later, and after several more wars in the Caucasus, this connection between literature and empire has been much more thoroughly established, thanks in large part to the work of such scholars as Susan Layton, Katya Hokanson, and Harsha Ram. As Layton observes, the formative works of the “literary Caucasus”—those of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, and Bestuzhev-Marlinsky—were written between 1822 and 1863.<sup>18</sup> Hokanson likewise emphasizes Pushkin’s constitutive role in “defining the narrative of the conquest of the Caucasus” for subsequent Russian culture.<sup>19</sup> The heyday of the Caucasian tale, both in prose and narrative poetry, thus coincides with the standard timeline of the Caucasian War. This coincidence of historiography is more conspicuous than it might appear at first sight. The Caucasian War, vastly underreported in comparison with the Patriotic War (1812–13) or the Crimean War (1853–56), was a protracted and non-continuous conflict fought under three tsars over multiple fronts. In the case of Circassia, the Russian Empire intervened militarily in the

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Scotto, “Prisoners of the Caucasus: Ideologies of Imperialism in Lermontov’s ‘Bela,’” *PMLA* 107, no. 2 (1992): 246–47.

<sup>18</sup> Tolstoy’s *Hadji Murat* (1912) is the key exception. Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Katya Hokanson, “Literary Imperialism, Narodnost’ and Pushkin’s Invention of the Caucasus,” *Russian Review* 53, no. 3 (1994): 336.

region from the beginning of Catherine II's reign, long before General Alexei Ermolov's early fortifications along the Sunzha River in 1817–18; incidents of Circassian resistance, and migration, also continued for decades after 1864. In terms of literary history, Ram traces an imperial poetics as far back as the 1730s in Russian poetry. Yet he, too, concurs that Pushkin's *Prisoner of the Caucasus* proved instrumental in "consolidating" a specifically Caucasian theme.<sup>20</sup>

How much the Caucasian tale sustained the tsarist project of empire-building, or led its critique, represents a related and more controversial subject. Pushkin and Lermontov in particular have had critical pressures brought to bear on their literary reputations in light of their letters, poems, and fiction relating to the early stages of the Caucasian War. The long-term ideological consequences of the Caucasian tale constitute a legitimate problem of inquiry. In 1995, to note just one well-publicized example, Jacques Chirac, defending Russian policy in a French presidential debate, referred to the "vicious Chechen" of Lermontov's "Cossack Lullaby." As Layton rightly observes, Chirac's citation reflects both a historical continuity in certain stereotypes about Chechens and a crude misreading of Lermontov's Chechnya.<sup>21</sup> I've encountered similar misreadings of this poem in the comment sections of various Russian blogs and newspapers.

For students in search of essay topics, I often recommend that they explore this vibrant scholarship on empire and literature. The gap between this scholarship and the classroom is nevertheless difficult to bridge. In my annual class on "Bela," students, almost without exception, are introduced to the Caucasian tale and the Caucasian War for the first time. The

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<sup>20</sup> Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 25–26, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Layton, "A Russian Reverie: Chechnya's Literary," *History Today* 47, no. 2 (1997), 6.

situation differs somewhat between students with Russian backgrounds and those without. The former tend to know more about the Caucasus in general and to have a greater stake in how events from Russian history are perceived in class. In the case of the latter, lack of familiarity and a third-party perspective present challenges that set the topic of the Caucasian War apart from many analogous teaching contexts. When I was an instructor for Columbia's Contemporary Civilization seminar, for example, my students were all too aware of subsequent German history when reading about the "slave mentality" of Jews in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. Their initial unease became a productive starting point for open dialogue on the relationship between words and events, ideology and its aftermath. (To what extent do ideas shape the course of history? Is an author responsible for the ways that others later use his or her words? And so on.) There is little comparable to draw on for the Caucasian War. Even the Second Chechen War, now almost ten years old, occurred too early to inform the collective memory that my current students bring with them to the classroom. The problems deriving from such unfamiliarity increase the more discussion approaches the darkest chapters of the Caucasian War, moreover. The moral implications of the Circassian expulsion in particular arguably extend beyond the pragmatics of mere warfare and into the grim calculus of decimation. From 1860 to 1865, around 370,000 inhabitants of Western Circassia—to take the most conservative estimate—migrated to Turkey, while between 74,000 and 100,000 were relocated to other areas in Russia.<sup>22</sup> Estimates on the numbers who perished, whether due to massacre, hunger, disease, or drowning, are more speculative and vary widely, from a few hundred thousand to as many as one-and-a-half million.<sup>23</sup> In the end, the vast majority of surviving Circassians were no longer living in

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<sup>22</sup> Dana Sherry, "Social Alchemy on the Black Sea Coast, 1860–65," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 1 (2009): 7.

<sup>23</sup> Shenfield, "The Circassians," 154.

Circassia. As one British observer summed up the situation in May 1864, “Circassia is gone.”<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, my decision to lecture, right or wrong, arises from a desire to make heard, to fill a silence with a counter-story. Here Chinua Achebe’s famous critique of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* offers a useful pedagogical parallel. At the time Achebe delivered his 1975 lecture, *Heart of Darkness* was, as he put it, “the most commonly prescribed novel in twentieth-century literature courses in English Departments of American universities.”<sup>25</sup> Yet somehow Conrad’s racially fraught representations of Africans had escaped serious discussion either in scholarship or in the classroom. In attacking Conrad over the issue of racism, Achebe aimed to diminish the place of *Heart of Darkness* in the canon of English literature. Whatever the merits of his attack, it has had a lasting impact in the classroom, which is no small feat in itself. In retrospect, Achebe’s influential essay did not so much prevent *Heart of Darkness* from appearing on North American syllabi as it altered the terms under which the novel was discussed. The essay and the novel are now indeed often assigned in tandem.<sup>26</sup> After Achebe, it was no longer feasible to reduce Africa, with all of its history and peoples, to the level of a footnote on Conrad’s novel or Kurtz’s psyche—or as Achebe writes, to assign Africa “the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind.” Moreover, whether or not Conrad was a “thoroughgoing racist,”<sup>27</sup> as Achebe notoriously alleged, became a question that demanded close reading of the novel’s rhetorical strategies. On the one hand, Achebe’s provocations, when handled with balance and in a spirit of open-ended dialogue, provided an exemplary opportunity for “teaching the conflict,”

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<sup>24</sup> Bulwer, quoted in Paul B. Henze, “Circassian Resistance to Russia,” in *The North Caucasus Barrier*, ed. Marie Bennigsen Broxup (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 101.

<sup>25</sup> Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness,’” in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 14–15.

<sup>26</sup> Padmini Mongia, “Why I teach Conrad and Achebe,” in *Approaches to Teaching Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness” and “The Secret Sharer,”* ed. Hunt Hawkins and Brian W. Shaffer (New York: Modern Languages Association of America, 2003), 105.

<sup>27</sup> Achebe, “An Image of Africa,” 11, 12.

to borrow a catchphrase from the 1990s culture wars.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, the novel, for all its formal virtuosity, became entangled in a web of competing narratives deriving from European interventions in central Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. New Criticism, in other words, had given way to New Historicism in the classroom.

It is this second shift that presents the greater pedagogical burden in the case of “Bela.” Like *Heart of Darkness* in English curricula, Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time* is one of the most commonly assigned texts in North American Slavic Departments. It is usually the first full-length novel I have my own students read in my survey on Russian prose. The point is not that it should not be there, but rather that Lermontov, or rather his novel’s characters and narrators, should not emerge as the first and last word that students ever hear in a classroom about the Circassians. The peoples represented in the novel have greater claims on the attention of students than as mere background for the understanding of Lermontov’s art, Pechorin’s psychology, or the *Russian zeitgeist*—the “our” time in the novel’s title. If students have heard nothing about Circassian history or culture beforehand, they will not learn much discussing the novel among themselves in class.

In the past, I’ve considered including other texts for counterbalance: Tolstoy’s *Hadji Murat*, for instance, or a scholarly article. Students could read a Circassian Norts saga, thanks to John Colarusso’s invaluable anthology,<sup>29</sup> or they could watch a video clip featuring a contemporary Circassian wedding dance, one that could be compared to the dance that Pechorin observes in the novel. As in all syllabus revision, however, adding one text means dropping another. Over the past few iterations of the course, the text I’ve chosen to add is a brief lecture.

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<sup>28</sup> The phrase was popularized by Gerald Graff’s *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: Norton, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> John Colarusso, ed. and trans, *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus: Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

The advantage to this approach lies in its minimized opportunity costs; namely, extended class discussion or lectures on other topics. The attempt to balance a novel with a lecture is nevertheless not readily reconciled with those twin pillars of contemporary pedagogy in the humanities: open dialogue and close reading. Both are central to my own approach. In contrast to modern seminars, the tradition of lecturing carries connotations of learning by rote, professional privilege, and a rhetoric of authority. In an age when students have online access to the classics, there is no longer any need for a lectern, that medieval contraption for mounting rare books. During my own training in Great Books courses, I was taught to resist the urge to lecture. This was a task to which I proved utterly inadequate, and I soon became resigned to lecturing as a sort of necessary evil. Now I view lectures as an integral component of seminar method. The danger is not too much lecturing so much as poor time management. In Chekhov's *A Boring Story*, the protagonist embarks on his own physiology lectures without a "single prepared thought in [his] head"; yet he strives throughout to keep his speech "literary," his definitions "short and precise," and his phrasing "simple and elegant": "each minute I must sit back and remember that I have at my disposal *only an hour and forty minutes*."<sup>30</sup> Twenty minutes is my upper limit for lectures in seminar sessions.

In classes on "Bela," I postpone my lecture on the Caucasian War till the end of class, so that students have ample time to work through the text on terms unrelated to my own preoccupations. I begin the lecture with a few words about the war's origins. The rationale for the war can be illustrated with a map of the region, such that students can see how its diverse peoples are situated between seas on the east and west and between an expanding Russian

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<sup>30</sup> Emphasis added. A. P. Chekhov, "Skuchnaia istoriia (iz zapisok starogo cheloveka)," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh, Sochineniia*, ed. S. D. Balykhatyi et al., (Moscow, 1974–1982), 7: 261, 262.

empire on the north and south. I discuss the initial stages of the war under General Ermolov's direction, a person whom Maxim Maximich mentions fondly,<sup>31</sup> as well as the rise and fall of the Chechen leader Imam Shamil. As an oral text, delivered from minimal notes, the details change each time round. I do prepare more thoroughly a description of the war's conclusion: General Nikolai Evdokimov's scorched-earth campaign from the late 1850s to 1864, which left scores dead in burned-out villages; and the severe hardships that Circassian refugees faced as they migrated over land and water to the Ottoman Empire. I provide conflicting statistics on the numbers of dead and displaced, on how many died on the road versus how many during attacks, so as to give some sense that this history, hardly set in stone, is still deeply contested. There is continuing debate over the extent to which the migration was forced, coerced, or voluntary, as well as over how large a role deportation assumed in official tsarist policy.<sup>32</sup> Among the most controversial questions is what to classify this movement of people—one of the century's largest mass migrations. *Makhadzhirstvo*<sup>33</sup> appears frequently in Russian scholarship, an Arabic-derived term that evokes the migration of Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina. As for common nouns, "expulsion," "emigration," "genocide," and "ethnic cleansing" are leading contenders. The last two terms, which derive from a mid-twentieth-century lexicon, I introduce only as an afterword to my own narrative, if at all.

A lecture, of course, is by nature a monolog. Yet I hope that my lecture is not monologic,

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<sup>31</sup> Lermontov, *Geroi nashego vremeni*, 238.

<sup>32</sup> For diverging opinions on this controversy, see Sherry, "Social Alchemy on the Black Sea Coast," 7–30; James H. Meyer, "Immigration, Return, and the Politics of Citizenship: Russian Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007), 15–32; Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 23–58; Shenfield, "The Circassians," 149–62; A. Kh. Kasumov and Kh. A. Kasumov, *Genotsid adygov: iz istorii bor'by adygov za nezavisimost' v XIX veke* (Nal'chik: Logos, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> G. A. Dzidzariia appears to have popularized this term through the monograph *Makhadzhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii XIX stoletia* (Sukhumi: Alashara, 1975).

a finalizing word about either Circassian history or Lermontov's text, and that my retelling of the *muhajirs'* story, though Lermontov plays only a tertiary role in it, never ceases to be in dialogue with the story "Bela." My primary teaching objective is to defamiliarize the story "Bela" by juxtaposing to it a radically different example of a Circassian tale. This second story is not meant as a "key" to Lermontov's text, yet neither is it, in the end, a mere "footnote." How these two Circassian stories relate is, in fact, my final question for students. Does our understanding of Lermontov's novel change when viewed alongside this second story? I find it hard to answer this question myself. Some students respond that the new story changes little; for example, it helps clarify that the novel is set at a time of war, something that many students miss on first reading. Such responses have led in the past to a consideration of Pechorin's seeming disinterest in the war's aims and conduct. Other students tackle the question of authorial intent. If, as one student put it, Lermontov intended to present a "realistic" portrait of the Caucasus, then he bears some responsibility to "represent" its peoples in an accurate manner. This formulation generated considerable discussion about the kinds of truth claims that the narrators make about the peoples and landscapes of the Caucasus. Finally, it is worth noting that, in response to my lecture, I cannot remember a single student turning on Lermontov personally, or liking his novel any more or less than before.

Aside from such discussions, which often spill over into the next class, this particular lecture is designed with longer-term pedagogical goals in mind. In the last two weeks of the course, students present on topics of their own, by which point they will have heard almost two dozen brief lectures from me. As a group, these lectures are meant to model particular types of reading practices, from formalism and genre analysis to feminism and cultural history. In lecturing on Circassia in a class on "Bela," I hope to give students license and even

encouragement to step outside the texts we read, so as to see from perspectives that these texts preclude. These perspectives, in turn, open onto new texts and new stories. Whether students ever return to Lermontov's novel, or to the North Caucasus, is not crucial. We read "Bela" early in the course. Later in the same novel we'll see a Tatar boatman, Ukrainian smugglers, and a Serbian gambler—not to mention the ritual of a duel, a Western export that Russian officers smuggle with them to the Caucasus.<sup>34</sup> All of these textual figures offer potential openings into history. It is not possible to tell a lecture in each case. Yet after expanding one such footnote into a story of its own, I hope that my students sense that there are always other narratives beyond what we're reading, and that a few of them will follow the document trail, on- or offline, necessary to reach them.

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<sup>34</sup> On the foreign roots of dueling in Russia, see Irina Reyfman, *Ritualized Violence Russian Style: The Duel in Russian Culture and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 45–96.