

“Listen Then, Avars, to What I Tell You”: The Unification of Chechen and Avar Oral Culture in Tolstoy’s *The Cossacks* and *Hadji Murat*

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Abstract

This essay examines the subversive potential of folk song and performance in Tolstoy’s first novel, *The Cossacks* [1863] and his final novel, *Hadji Murat* [1916]. I trace Tolstoy’s ethnographic interest in the Dagestani Avar *Song of Khochbar* back to his pioneering transliteration and translation of Chechen *uzami* in 1852 and examine how Avar and Chechen folk song traditions influenced these novels. Arguing that Tolstoy privileged the oral tradition over written text as an instance of ethical cultural expression, I show how this position informed *The Cossacks* in the novel’s presentation of Chechen resistance to Russian imperialism, and addressed the conflicting identities of Russians, Terek Cossacks, Chechens, and Dagestani Avars. I argue that Tolstoy revisited the distinction between oral performance and writing in *Hadji Murat* by adapting the *Song of Khochbar* to his representation of the historical Avar resistance fighter, Hadji Murat. Finally, I discuss how the oral performance characteristic of Chechen and Avar communities poses a sociopolitical challenge to the Russian empire’s colonial hegemony by troubling and resisting the writing culture that represents and legitimizes it.

Introduction

On 30 May 2021, the literary-ethnographic museum dedicated to Lev Tolstoy in Starogladovskaia, a village and former Cossack settlement in Chechnya, celebrated the 170th anniversary since Tolstoy’s arrival in the Caucasus with a new exposition: “*L.N. Tolstoi – pisatel*” [L.N. Tolstoy, writer]. Presiding over Tolstoy’s photographs, manuscripts, and documents, along with swords belonging to Sado Misirbiev, Tolstoy’s Chechen companion (*kunak*, also “guest”), the Chechen Republic Minister of Culture, Khozh-Baudi Dasaev, observed, “Именно в станице Старогладовской при помощи двух друзей Садо Мисирбиева и Балты Исаева Лев Николаевич записал первые две чеченские народные песни с переводом. И именно эти две записи у нас считаются первым письменным памятником чеченского языка и первым опытом записи чеченского фольклора” [It was in this very Starogladovskaia village (*stanitsa*), with the help of his two friends, Sado Misirbiev and Balta Isaev, that Leo [Tolstoy] recorded two Chechen folk songs, along with their translations. And it is precisely these two recordings that we regard as the first written artifact of the Chechen language and the first attempted recording of Chechen folklore] [Ministry of Culture of the Chechen Republic 2021]. The twenty-four-year-old

Tolstoy recorded the two songs in his journal in 1852 by means of transliteration using the Russian alphabet with diacritics; the songs were accompanied by Tolstoy’s own translation into Russian. While indicating an important moment in Chechen cultural history, the recording also marked the beginning of Tolstoy’s lifelong literary engagement with the oral literature and folklore of the Caucasus, as evidenced in his early stories, such as “*Nabeg*” [“The Raid,” 1853] and “*Rubka lesa*” [“The Wood-Cutting,” 1855], and his first novel, *Kazaki* [*The Cossacks*, 1863]. More than four decades later, in 1897, Tolstoy recorded in his journal his delight in a traditional Dagestani Avar folk song, *Pesnia o Khochbare* [*The Song of Khochbar*]; the song was part of the material that comprised Tolstoy’s ethnographic study of the North Caucasus as he prepared to compose his final significant work of fiction, *Hadji Murat* (1912).

This paper will examine two scenes of performed resistance to imperialism in Tolstoy’s first and final novels, *The Cossacks* and *Hadji Murat*, and discuss how they were informed by the oral literatures of Chechnya and Dagestan. I shall argue that the key passages in the texts draw on and develop the theme of Caucasian political resistance by juxtaposing the Russian empire, as represented by its writing culture, with the oral performance culture of the Caucasus. Finally, I examine Tolstoy’s use of the narrative elements of irony, quadrangulation of ethnic identity, and framing. These techniques convey how oral performance facilitates the act of bearing witness to colonialism in the Caucasus and the mountain communities’ capacity to resist domination by means of, first, tiered metonymic protest in which an Avar ballad represents the horror of conquest and, second, by controlling historical narrative through performance.

Song Culture of the Chechens and Terek Cossacks

After joining the Russian army in 1851, in the final decade of the Caucasian War (1817-1864), Tolstoy was stationed with the artillery battery in Starogladvoskaia, a Cossack military base on the mountainous southern frontier of the Russian Empire [Wilson 1988: 78-80]. The war was part of the wider effort of imperial expansion into the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and predominantly mountainous Caucasus region between Asia and Europe, and was fought against an alliance of tribes, which included the Chechens and Dagestani Avars, led by Imam Shamil (1797-1871). The Cossacks, self-governing military communities who settled along the empire’s expanding border, fought the mountaineers on behalf of the Russian Empire. (1) In return for acting as a stabilizing border force between the empire and the diverse ethnic groups of the Caucasus, the Cossacks were granted a significant degree of land and autonomy. In terms of customs, material culture, and way of life, however, the Cossacks were closer to the mountaineers they battled than to the Russian empire they battled for. Despite religious differences between the two groups—the Cossacks were mostly Christian, and the mountain communities predominantly Muslim—and the raids and counterraids that characterized their relations, it was not uncommon for trade,

cultural exchange, religious conversion, friendship, and even intermarriage to take place [Friedrich 2003: 127].

Tolstoy's novel *The Cossacks*, conceived during his time in Starogladovskaia and developed over the next decade, articulates both the affinities and tensions that characterized the Cossack and Chechen communities in their mutual contempt for imperial domination:

Терек [отделяет] казаков от горцев [...]. Живя между чеченцами, казаки перероднились с ними и усвоили себе обычаи, образ жизни и нравы горцев; но удержали и там, во всей прежней чистоте, русский язык и старую веру. [...] Казак, по влечению, менее ненавидит джигита-горца, который убил его брата, чем солдата, который стоит у него, чтобы защищать его станицу, но который закурил табаком его хату. Он уважает врага-горца, но презирает чужого для него и угнетателя солдата.

[The Terek River [separates] the Cossacks from the mountaineers [...]. Living among the Chechens, the Cossacks intermarried with them and adopted the customs, way of life, and manners of the mountaineers, but maintained, even there, in all its original purity, the Russian language and old belief. [...] A Cossack is less inclined to hate the mountaineer horseman [*dzhigit*] who killed his brother, than the soldier who is quartered on him to protect his village but who has filled his hut with smoke. He respects his enemy mountaineer but despises the foreign and oppressive soldier] [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 15-16].

Chechen communities reconciled the religion of Islam with the warrior ethos exemplified in their traditions of kinship vengeance, kinship loyalty, and ritualized theft [Friedrich 2003: 126]; the Terek Cossacks admired and sought to emulate these warlike virtues. The Cossacks were further united with their Chechen neighbors by the prevalence of traditional song performances in their respective aesthetic cultures, in which these songs carried both ethical and sociopolitical import. The Terek Cossacks among whom Tolstoy lived were the oldest of the Cossack groups and had a particularly well-developed song culture, with traditional songs acting as repositories of both ethical norms and history [Agadzhanova 1974: 13]. Their songs were important components of ritual, and expressed heroic, legendary, or lyrical subject matter [Agadzhanova 1974: 17-18]. The sanctity of song is evident in that, before performing, singers were expected to don fresh clothing, clean their huts, and consume several glasses of *chikhir*, a traditional wine of the Caucasus; crucially, if the audience was inattentive, or failed to show empathy, the song “*ne idet*” [does not go] and the singer became agitated and sometimes refused to perform altogether [Agadzhanova 1974: 14-20]. Unsurprisingly, much of the subject matter of the folk songs that crystallized during the 18th and 19th centuries involves war, reflecting how the Cossack hosts acted as the vanguard of Russian expansionism.

Despite imperial resistance to cross-cultural relations, the Cossacks, who were settlers before they were conquerors, struggled to maintain fluid boundaries between themselves and the mountaineers. Facing labor shortages and a dearth of fertile land and resources, the Terek Cossacks were almost entirely dependent on Chechen handicrafts and agriculture, obtaining not only essential goods, but also weapons and military accessories from them [Barrett 1999: 110-115]. The Cossacks’ famed *shashka* [sword], *kinzhal* [dagger], and rifle were all made in the native villages, where their production was an ancient craft [Barrett 1999: 120]. The liminal space of the frontier was psychologically difficult to occupy, and the songs of Terek Cossacks conveyed the suffering their warriors endured during expeditions and battles on the *chuzhaia storona* [foreign side] of the frontier, expressing their longing for home and those who waited for them there [Agadzhanova 1974: 25-26].

The neighboring Chechens, also known as the Vainakh (*vain nakh* [our people]) people—a term which also includes the related Ingush and Kist—lived between the Terek and Sunzha rivers in autonomous clans consolidated into larger tribal associations. These communities were direct descendants of the Nakh ethnic group that had occupied the area since at least the fourth century BC [Jaimoukha 2005: 24]. They benefitted from frontier trade and cultural exchange with the Cossacks and, when contraband trade was not possible, engaged in mutual raids along the frontier [Barrett 1999: 115]. The Vainakh people’s music and poetry were highly developed and included a vast corpus of legends in which pre-18th-century Chechen history, culture, and tradition was preserved and transmitted; this helps explain why cultural influence flowed almost entirely in one direction, from the mountaineers to the Cossacks [Barrett 1999: 148]. Native storytellers, who enjoyed a particularly high social standing [Jaimoukha 2005: 9], created folkloric-poetic renditions of historical events and conveyed them in melodic verse, no doubt in part because music was thought to have curative qualities [Jaimoukha 2005: 182]. In the 19th century, two genres of folk song became particularly significant for the Chechen people: the *uzam* and the *illi*. The *uzam* is a lyrical composition expressing sorrow and loss, sometimes focusing on a hero’s unavoidable death; the *illi* are epic ballads principally focused on praising heroism, freedom, and independence. Crucially, in the mid-19th century, both *illi* and *uzami* became a prevalent means of expressing and inspiring the Chechen struggle for freedom [Munaev 2005: 9; Jaimoukha 2005: 184].

In 1852, Tolstoy jotted down in his journal two such *uzami* in the first written record of Chechen folklore. The recording was consistent with Tolstoy’s tendency to make observations in his journal about the language, customs, sayings, and history of the Caucasus. These notes have an ethnographic quality, such as the reflection that the Russian exonyms for Caucasus groups have “nothing in common with the actual name that the *narod* [people] calls themselves” [Tolstoy 1937, 46: 278]; Tolstoy follows this remark with a list of Russian exonyms for groups such as the Circassians and Georgians along with their endonyms, which includes the Chechen *Nakh* (*nokhchi* in Russian). This shows Tolstoy’s sensitivity to the linguistic representation of the highlanders, and some specialists argue that

he understood the Chechen language well [Mal’sagova 1989: 140]. It also helps to explain why, when recording the *uzami* from the words of his Chechen friends, Tolstoy transliterated instead of simply translating them, presumably to convey as faithfully as possible their acoustic qualities:

Алалу вададай шилока шаи-ина баба вай—анни
 Ай Аай—ай ай ай! не приятно, родимая матушка, в тёсовой
 бажелера сёць онашле и хунда балейна хаи хунь
 молодецкого коня зачем привели, ты знаешь ли?
 Вай да да дай! ваим берчирь арджемажерь и хунде
 Аяй аиай ай, чье крымское ружье висит у нас на стене
 еина хащ хунь? хо лахо воучу гюрджи еле еина.
 зачем его принесли, знаешь ли? Пришел тебя сватать
 грузинский Князь, онь и принес его.
 Са нана сеидегуо теце еуцо ассайна лахна бусинах де день кант. —
 Матушка! не лежить к нему сердце; я сама себе сыскала
 такого молодца, который из ночи день делает.

[Ai aai, ai ai ai! How sad I am, my dear mother.
 Tell me why there is a fine stallion in our stable,
 Ai ai ai ai, why did they mount
 that Crimean carbine on our wall?
 A Georgian Prince brought the weapon,
 He came to be betrothed to you.
 Dear mother, my heart is not with him.
 I found such a molodets [fine youth] for myself,
 Who makes the night into day.] [Tolstoy 1937, 46: 89-90]

The significance of Tolstoy’s preservation of both *uzami* is striking given the lack of available material and rarity of such preservation and translation at the time. (1) Tolstoy’s ethnographic effort was pioneering and wholly improvisational, inaugurating the ethnographic study of oral culture in the Caucasus. Paradoxically, however, in the very act of recording songs, Tolstoy was also undermining the performance-oriented values of immanence, spontaneity, and authenticity which, as I intend to show, he attributed to the Cossack and Chechen oral cultures.

“Stupid as a Horse:” Tolstoy’s Anti-Intellectual Turn

Before investigating Tolstoy’s representation of Caucasian folk songs in *The Cossacks* and *Hadji Murat*, it is important to contextualize that representation by considering Tolstoy’s attitude to oral culture more generally and what he considered to be its place in intellectual history. Tolstoy’s encounter with the Caucasus oral culture marked the beginning of his writing career, and some of his earliest literary efforts were inspired by the folk songs he heard and learned. Referring in his journal in 1856 to a certain “Cossack song,” Tolstoy confesses, “I cried while singing a Cossack song. I’m beginning to love the epic legendary manner. I’ll try to make a poem out of the Cossack song” [Tolstoy 47: 82]. In 1852, while resident among the Cossacks whose songs he performed, Tolstoy began working on his first novel, *The Cossacks*. Indeed, the first version of the text was a poem that opened with a songlike call to a young Cossack woman:

Эй, Марьяна, брось работу!
 Слышишь, палат за горой:
 Верно наши из походу
 Казаки идутъ домой.
 [Hey, Mar'iana, leave off work!
 Hear them firing from the mountain?
 It must be our Cossacks
 Returning home from battle.] [Tolstoy 1935, 1: 99]

Early encounters with oral literature shaped Tolstoy’s intellectual development. In 1859, after re-reading the notes that he had made in his journal during his stay in the Caucasus, Tolstoy admits in a letter that it was there that he “began to think in a way that people have the power to think just once in their lives [...]. Never, neither before, nor since, have I achieved such height of thought” Given Tolstoy’s transformative experience in Starogladvovskaia, and subsequent emotion upon re-reading the notes he made there – which, we will remember, include the translated Chechen *uzami* and reflections on Cossack songs – it is unsurprising that he came to privilege traditional oral culture over its written counterpart.

By the decade of 1880, already an established author famous for *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878), Tolstoy opens one of the chapters of his 1882 autobiographical work, *Ispoved’* [*A Confession*], with the following admission: “How often I envied the peasants their illiteracy and lack of education” [Tolstoy 1927, 23: 52]. This envy is occasioned by Tolstoy’s belief that the absence of education and intellectual activity help beget moral wisdom. He recounts in Chapter 14 of the same text that he was struck by the spiritual wisdom in the “conversation of an illiterate peasant” [Tolstoy 1927, 23: 52]. That Tolstoy chooses to mention the peasant’s *bezgramotnost’* [illiteracy] after admitting to envying it shows that the wise peasant’s inability to write is not incidental. The relationship between lack of formal education and wisdom is emphasized a few sentences later, when Tolstoy adds that he is interested in the stories of peasants whom he describes as “illiterate” and “stupid” [Tolstoy 1927, 23: 52]. The adjective Tolstoy uses, *glupye*, which Jane Kentish’s translation of *A Confession* also renders as “stupid” [Kentish 1987: 72] can also be translated as “foolish” or “dumb.” Indeed, the absence of formal education and indifference to advanced knowledge was, for Tolstoy, a prerequisite for moral insight. If one was not fortunate enough to have remained illiterate, intellectual activity is best renounced: “[T]he life of our class, the rich and learned [...] lost all meaning. All our activities, our discussions, our science and our art [...] it is not possible to find meaning in it” [Tolstoy 1927, 23: 40]. Consistent with his rejection of intellectual life, Tolstoy observed in a 1908 introduction to a printed catalogue of artworks, titled *Russkie muzhiki* (*Russian Peasants*) produced by Nikolai Orlov (1827-85), an artist who painted scenes of peasant life, that the works conveyed the moral struggle between the Western-educated intelligentsia and the “as yet unruined” [Tolstoy 1956, 37: 275] Russian peasants: “[T]rue religious understanding of life was and still is possessed by the Russian illiterate, wise, and holy peasant *narod*” [Tolstoy 1956, 37: 277].

Sophisticated intellectual activity is contrasted, in Tolstoy’s view, with wisdom expressed in folk art that is based on collective knowledge requiring neither formalized education nor technology. This knowledge, as Tolstoy recounts in Chapter 13 of *A Confession*, is conveyed to the common people by traditions expressed in “legends, sayings and tales” [Tolstoy 1927, 23: 47]. Given this attitude, Tolstoy’s paradoxical (and unsuccessful) efforts to distance himself from intellectual and creative work lead him to both privilege and attempt to imitate “stupid” life. In an 1870 letter to the poet Afanasiĭ Fet (1820-1892), Tolstoy mocked literature and praised straightforward, manual labor: “I am, thank God, as stupid as a horse this summer. I work, chop wood, dig, mow and, thank God, give no thought to nasty lit-t-erature and lit-t-erators” [Tolstoy 1953, 61: 36-237]. In referring to himself as “stupid,” Tolstoy uses the same word—“*glup*”—that he had used to refer to the “illiterate and stupid” peasants. Tolstoy’s unique definition of stupidity is not the conventional one of ignorance or foolishness but is a sort of vital innocence that is uncorrupted by decadence and intellectualism as represented by written and printed literature.

Tolstoy found a practical ethics in oral literature, expressed in productions such as Homer’s *Iliad* and Russian folk tales. Despite their distance from one another in terms of not only culture and language, but also millennia, Tolstoy regarded such works as fundamentally similar in their reflection of folk values as distinct from that of the educated classes, observing in an 1862 article: “[T]he *narod* [folk] can live without the society of progressives and somehow satisfy all their human needs: by labor, revelry, love, thought, and creation of artistic productions (Iliads, Russian folk songs)” [Tolstoy 1936, 8: 346]. In other words, for Tolstoy, folk productions are legitimized by their independence from institutional support and modern values. Tolstoy concluded his argument against alleged social improvements offered by modern technology by appealing specifically to both folk art and religious texts: “I ask the reader to notice that Homer, Socrates, Aristotle, German fairy tales and songs, Russian epic, and, finally, the Bible and the Gospels, had no need of the printing press to remain eternal” [Tolstoy 1936, 8: 342]. It is evident from these extracts, found both in published and unpublished materials, that Tolstoy found both aesthetic power and moral goodness in oral tradition and culture.

Scene I: The Cossack and the Russian

It is in the context of Tolstoy’s personal involvement with the oral traditions of the Caucasus and the strain of anti-intellectualism running through his thought that we must approach *The Cossacks* and its dozens of references to songs and singing. The semi-autobiographical novel follows the young Russian aristocrat, Olenin, who joins the army and resides in a Cossack village during the Caucasian War. In search of authenticity, Olenin attempts to befriend the Cossacks, particularly the old Eroshka and the young warrior, Luka, and falls in love with Mar’iana, a young Cossack woman. Ultimately unable to reconcile his spiritual

insights with the violent Cossack culture and rejected by Mar'iana, Olenin returns to Moscow.

First, note that Tolstoy's Cossacks and Chechens sing in nearly every imaginable situation: they sing softly to themselves [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 23], they sing while working [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 26-7; 110], when celebrating an occasion [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 58-9], when expressing sorrow [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 104-5], when drinking and dancing [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 107, 127, 134-136], when at war [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 123], when playing as children [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 127], when courting [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 137], when bidding farewell [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 149], and when preparing to die [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 144]. The songs, often included in full, are about brave heroes, courtship, and freedom. Near the end of the novel, a song is distinguished from the others in the text by the way it is performed, its stated Dagestani origin, and its explicitly anti-Russian sentiment. As we will see, this song brings together the voices of the Terek Cossacks, Chechens, and Dagestani Avars in a singular way. Examining the chiasitic chapter structure and metonymy in *The Cossacks*, Paul Friedrich has argued that the novel's attitude to the Chechens is ambivalent, ultimately presenting them as simultaneously dehumanized and admirable [Friedrich 2003: 138]. However, I argue that performed song, by juxtaposing traditional oral culture and writing culture, transcends the ethnic and political tension between the pro-Russian Terek Cossacks and the Chechen and Avar mountaineers, uniting the three groups in their resistance to empire. In Tolstoy's narrative, the power of song and performance is shown to subvert the dominant status quo.

In Chapter 28 of *The Cossacks*, Olenin locks himself in his hut to write about the importance of self-sacrifice and love for others. As he is writing, old Eroshka enters unexpectedly, dressed in “новом красном бешмете, обшитом галунами” [a new red jacket (*besmet*) embroidered with galloons] [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 106] and carrying a stringed musical instrument (*balalaika*) which was obtained “из-за реки” [beyond the river] [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 106]. While the narrator strongly implies that Eroshka procured the instrument from the Chechens, the Cossack's attire is also salient for our purposes. Although the narrator does not say so, Eroshka's outfit is wholly Chechen: a *besmet* is a traditional Chechen tunic, which sometimes included galloons—metallic trims—sewn on for show [Jaimoukha 2005: 147]. Newly attired, Eroshka arrives and is disappointed that Olenin is writing. At first, the Cossack behaves cautiously, “как будто предполагая, что какой-нибудь дух сидит между им и бумагой” [as though some spirit sat between [Olenin] and the paper] [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 106], but soon grows restless because he wanted to talk [Tolstoy 1936, 6, 106]. Olenin makes polite but cool conversation until the determined Eroshka offers to perform a song:

—Я мастер играть; татарскую, казацкую, господскую, солдатскую, какую хошь.

Оленин еще раз взглянул на него, усмехнулся и продолжал писать.

—Ну, брось, отец ты мой! Брось! —сказал он вдруг решительно.
[...] Ну, что пишешь, пишешь! что толку? [...] Что кляузы писать?

Ерошка [...] вскочил с пола и принялся показывать свое искусство в игре на балалайке и петь татарские песни. ‘Что писать, добрый человек! Ты вот послушай лучше, я тебе спою. Сдохнешь, тогда песни не услышишь. Гуляй!’ [...] [В]ыпив еще стакана три чихиря, он [...] запел настоящие казацкие и татарские песни. [...] Особенно трогательна была [...] одна тавлинская песня [...] вся прелесть ее заключалась в печальном припеве: «Ай! дай, далалай!» Ерошка перевел слова песни: «Молодец погнал баранту из аула в горы, русские пришли, зажгли аул, всех мужчин перебили, всех баб в плен побрали. Молодец пришел из гор: где был аул, там пустое место; матери нет, братьев нет, дома нет; одно дерево осталось. Молодец сел под дерево и заплакал. Один, как ты, один остался, и запел молодец: ай, дай! далалай!» [...] Оленин, выйдя за ним на крыльцо, молча глядел в темное звездное небо ... В доме у хозяев были огни, слышались голоса.

[‘I’m a master at playing any song you want: Tatar, Cossack, a squire’s, a soldier’s.’

Olenin glanced at him one more time, chuckled, and continued to write.
[...]

‘Well, drop it, my lad! Drop it!’ [Eroshka] said with a sudden firmness.
[...] ‘So, you write and write! What’s the point? [...] Why write slanders?’

Eroshka [...] leaped from the floor and began to demonstrate his art in playing the *balalaika* and singing Tatar songs. ‘Why write, good fellow! Instead, listen to what I’ll sing for you. When you die, you won’t hear any songs! Make merry!’ [...] [A]fter drinking about three glasses of *chikhir*, he [...] began to sing authentic Cossack and Tatar songs. [...] Particularly poignant [...] was one Tavlinian song [...] all its charm consisted in its melancholy refrain: ‘Ai! Daī, dalalai!’ Eroshka translated the song’s words: ‘A *molodets* [fine youth] herded sheep from the *aul* [mountain village] to the mountains, the Russians came, burnt the *aul*, killed all the men, took all the women prisoner. The *molodets* returned from the mountains: where the *aul* stood, is now an empty space. No mother, no brothers, no home, only the tree remains. The *molodets* sat beneath the tree and wept. Alone, like you, he’s left alone, and the *molodets* began to sing: аї, даї! Dalalai!’ [...] Olenin, following [Eroshka] out to the porch, gazed silently at the dark starry sky [...]

There were lights in the homeowner’s house, and he could hear voices]
[Tolstoy 1936, 6: 106-109].

This important passage, which contains not quite a song, but the chorus and summary of a song, has been interpreted variously by critics. Friedrich argues that metonymy is exploited here by Tolstoy to reference the Chechens as victims of ethnic cleansing [Friedrich 2003: 136-7]; however, it is important to consider also the performative and wholly deliberate nature of the metonymic protest, which is formally linked to traditional Chechen *uzami* and challenges the interiority of writing. Donna Tussing Orwin contends that Eroshka interrupts Olenin’s writing because he fails to understand Olenin’s ethical cogitations, “Civilization brings with it, for better as for worse, a more developed reason [...] Eroshka [...] has no knowledge of this higher reason [...] [and] obviously takes a dim view of writing [...] the very moment Eroshka is making fun of him Olenin is penning an affirmation of his love of others” [Orwin 1993: 96]. If we read the passage in light of Tolstoy’s privileging of oral tradition and suspicion of intellectual culture as represented by “lit-t-erators,” whose work he mocks for not reflecting the interests of the *narod*, we see that it draws its rhetorical and political power from the challenge posed to what Orwin describes as “civilization.” Russia’s superior civilization, represented in Tolstoy’s text by the writing process, is shown to be neither civilized nor superior. There is a striking similarity between the melancholy refrain of the song that Eroshka performs, consisting solely of the phrase “*aī, dalalai,*” and the phrase in the opening and third lines of the Chechen song that Tolstoy had translated in 1852: “*Aī aī, aī aī aī! [...] / Vai da da dai!*” It is not unlikely that the Chechen folk song informed the representation of Eroshka’s performance, particularly since Tolstoy was aware of the cross-cultural nature of the Cossack and Chechen oral traditions. When we consider that, first, Eroshka’s song resonates with the Chechen folk song in terms of acoustic similarity, and second, that Eroshka obtained his instrument from the Chechens and is sporting a traditional Chechen outfit, we see that the passage subtly articulates the very collective continuity that Tolstoy admired in oral culture.

Oral Performance: Irony, Quadrangulation, and Framed Narration

Let us examine the passage cited above in terms of three separate but related narrative strategies and extradiegetic commentaries, and how they function within the text: irony, quadrangulation, and framed narration. First, the setting in the passage functions as an extension of, and political encounter with, ethnic identity. There is a profound irony in the fact that Olenin, a member of the Russian military and aristocracy who exists entirely as the beneficiary of empire, is composing affirmations of his love for colonized others while locked away from those others in a private space. When Eroshka, a member of the Cossack community that is exploited and leveraged by the Russian empire, arrives, Olenin ignores him. He rejects the simple human connection the visitor seeks and continues jotting his lofty ethical insights. In this reading, it is not Eroshka’s superstitious nature and

insensitivity that prompt him to see a mediating “spirit” between Olenin and his paper, or to describe Olenin’s writing as “slander,” but rather his heightened sensitivity. In a profound sense, Olenin’s writing about love for others is, in fact, “slandrous” because that love is demonstrated by his immediate interaction with Eroshka to be false. Consistent with this feeling, Eroshka recognizes that writing is mediated by an external force that intervenes between writer and writing, rendering both inauthentic. There is also a deeper, and more bitter, multiplicity of historical ironies that informs the symbolic setting in this passage, stemming from the Terek Cossacks’ internalization of the North Caucasus warrior code. Olenin’s views of self-sacrifice critique the violence the Terek Cossacks enact on behalf of imperialism—a violence which takes its form, weapons, and fighting ethos from the very communities the Cossacks and Russians seek to destroy.

Second, Eroshka offers to sing “any song,” whether it is Cossack, Chechen, or even a Russian soldier’s, indicating the cross-cultural nature of his imminent performance. The ballad that strongly moves Olenin is identified as a “*tavlinskaia pesnia*” [Tavlinian song]. This exonym refers to the Dagestani Avars of the Northern Caucasus, who posed the most significant military threat to Russian hegemony in the 19th century, led by Imam Shamil and the resistance fighter, Hadji Murat (1818-1852). The “Tavlinian song” functions as a tiered metonymy, used metonymically to stand in for the Avar experience of conquest and murder at the hands of Russian invaders, which itself stands in for the horror of ethnic cleansing in the Caucasus region. Including the Avars in an analysis of the passage results a quadrangulation between Russian, Terek Cossack, Chechen, and Avar identities, with the latter group underwriting the anti-Russian sentiment of the mountaineers as their ballad is performed in their absence. The passage metonymically unifies the multiplicity of mountaineer identities in their resistance to imperial domination in the singing, dancing, weeping, and commanding body of Eroshka; a Cossack who crosses the fraught boundary line separating the Cossacks and Chechens, is dressed in traditional Chechen clothing and is accompanied by a Chechen-made, Russian folk instrument, and who performs a traditional Avar ballad for a Russian military audience. The presence of the distant Chechens both informs and calls into question the Terek Cossacks in their position as the vanguard of Russian imperialism. Simultaneously, the absent presence of the Avars calls into question the Chechens in their association with the pro-Russian Cossacks, also serving to put the Cossacks into question in regard to their Russian hosts and, crucially, vice versa: Olenin’s presence in the village is sharply criticized by the Avar song he witnesses.

Despite its inclusion in the novel of full Cossack songs and Chechen *uzami*, in the passage we are considering, the narrator avoids representing the Avars’ song. Instead of including the full text of the composition, only a cryptic summary of its content is offered; of course, this may be because, since the song was Avaric, Tolstoy was left to either transliterate or translate. Indeed, Eroshka translated the words into Russian. The ballad’s content is strong evidence that Tolstoy did not simply make it up or, if he did, that he drew on traditional Avar compositions to do so; Dagestani folklore features a genre of lamentation songs that convey the

suffering of victims of mountain raids [Bobrovnikov 2007b: 253]. However, the theme of violence toward ruling tyrants rather than fellow mountaineers was developed and fully crystallized in Avar folksong during the 18th-century tsarist incursion [Bobrovnikov 2003a: 202], reflecting a rich tradition of ballads in Avar folklore that brought together the historical and lyrical genres [Adjiev 2018: 594]. Unlike the reader, Olenin is privy to the Avaric form of the song, though he does not understand its content; the song’s content is then translated into Russian for both Olenin’s and the reader’s benefit. I link the meaning of this positioning—Russian listening to the voice of the absent Avar mediated through the body of the Chechenized Cossack—with one that Cathy Caruth [2016], in her development of trauma theory, identifies with traumatic experience. Caruth sees trauma as repeated and unknowing wounding, taking the form of an event, “[T]raumatic experience [is] the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that [the hearer] cannot fully know” [Caruth 2016: 2-3]. Put differently, Eroska is “the wound” because the Terek Cossacks bear the imperial body’s injury through conquest. They express, through their liminal existence along the frontier, the voice of the highlander “other” whom they are attempting to reduce to nonexistence by compulsion. Olenin, as the beneficiary of empire, has a historical imperative to bear witness to a truth that he cannot fully know: the trauma of violence and erasure.

The ballad’s facilitation of bearing witness to trauma is realized in one of the final passages of the novel, when Olenin participates in a battle between the Terek Cossacks and the Chechens. The Chechens, who are surrounded and expect to soon be killed, begin to sing. Importantly, the song is identified as a “заунывн[ая] песн[я], похожей на ай-да-ла-лай дяди Ерошки. Чеченцы знали, что им не уйти, и [...] запели предсмертную песню” [a mournful song, similar to Eroska’s *ai-da-la-lai*. The Chechens knew that they could not escape and [...] they began to sing their death song] [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 144]. The Chechens are singing either the same Avaric ballad, or one similar, that Eroska had performed about the destructive violence of the Russian conquest. The ventriloquized voice of the absent Avars breaks from the frame established earlier and enters the narrative. In hearing the Chechens’ song of lament before witnessing their death at the hands of the Chechenized Cossacks who fight for the tsar, Olenin, as the representative of empire, is bearing witness to the historical trauma that empire creates.

I endeavored to show above how the narrative elements of irony, quadrangulation, and framing, along with the historical imperative of bearing witness to trauma, combine in the section of *The Cossacks* under discussion here. These three elements directly inform the juxtaposition between literate and nonliterate cultures developed in the passage: Olenin’s private subjectivity is challenged by the claims of shared intersubjectivity. Eroska does not merely wish to talk; as noted at the beginning of this paper, a traditional Chechen song often requires the singer to don fresh clothing, drink several glasses of *chikhir*, and command the attention of the audience. The Cossack’s new outfit, rapidly

gulped glasses of *chikhir*, and demand for Olenin’s attention—the imperative to bear witness—are associated with ritual behavior and indicate that he is about to perform a traditional song. Since, here, Eroshka acts as a stand-in for unified mountaineer identities, it is significant that the ballad he performs belongs to the Dagestani folk tradition: it was the Avar imamate under Shamil that sought to unify the communities of the Caucasus and thus led the most successful resistance to the tsar in the 1830s and 1840s.

Olenin’s thoughts, however admirable, are shown to be asocial. In being set down in an artificially linear way, they also do not have the immanence inherent in song. Since a folk song is defined primarily in terms of its being in oral circulation, transmitted from singer to singer and group to group through generations [Elbourne 1975: 11], Eroshka’s *uzami* and *illi* do not merely convey but actively maintain a living tradition. The song’s collective voice possesses a historical continuity that undermines the legitimacy of Olenin’s private, intermittent reflections, showing them to be pointless (Eroshka observes, ““So, you write and write! What’s the point?”” [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 107]). Unlike writing, song comes into being in the act of singing and disappears immediately after. As performance theorist Peggy Phelan remarked, “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” [Phelan 1996: 146]. Since performance is an event that can unfold only once in time, it succeeds in recalling Olenin into sociality, as evidenced in Olenin’s emerging from his hut to see the lights of homes and hear the sound of human voices.

The Chechenized Cossack’s performance of an Avar ballad disrupts Olenin’s “civilized” composition and thus subverts, by means of oral song, the unequal relationship between colonized highlander and empire. In demanding that the latter bear witness to the former, the traditional folk song, articulating the unified voices of generations of Caucasian mountaineers, empowers and invests the singer with a living and embodied agency. The Russian’s abandonment of his writing project to listen to the Avar ballad and subsequent exit from his solitary hut to stand in responsive muteness—“Olenin, following [Eroshka] onto the porch, silently gazed at the starry sky” [Tolstoy 1936, 6: 108]—is testimony that the voice of empire is not monolithic and has been, albeit momentarily, silenced.

Avar Folk Song in *Hadji Murat*

If traditional Avar folklore informed in only distant, subtle ways the tension developed in Tolstoy’s first novel between the mountaineers and the Russian empire and between nonliterate and literate cultures, it featured prominently in Tolstoy’s final novel, *Hadji Murat*. Set in the Caucasus between 1851 and 1852, the novel retells the final months of the historical Dagestani Avar leader, Hadji Murat, who fought for Shamil against Russia. Following a political crisis between the two men, Murat turns to the Russians with the offer to defeat Shamil if, in return, the Russians help rescue Murat’s family, whom Shamil is holding hostage.

Realizing that the Russians will neither help his family nor give him military command, Murat flees from his imperial “hosts” to the mountains in a desperate gamble to save his family; furious at the betrayal, Russian forces track and kill Murat after a final, bloody battle that concludes the novel.

Although Tolstoy had been thinking about the novel for many years, he began to gather historical material for the novel in earnest at the end of the 1890s. In 1902, he wrote letters to those who had personally known the real Murat, requesting detailed information about his hero for the sake of historical accuracy [Tolstoy 1954, 73: 353]. In addition to gathering personal testimony, Tolstoy consulted archival material sent to him from Tbilisi and turned to the multiple editions of the *Sbornik svedenii of kavkazskikh gortsakh* [*Collection of Information About the Caucasian Mountaineers*], the first edition of which was published in 1868, which contained the first academic essays on Caucasian history and folklore.

Tolstoy was aware that the scholarly “discovery” of the poetry of the Caucasus in the late 19th century was revolutionary for literary activity, as evidenced in his 1875 letter to Fet, where Tolstoy recounts his research, “During this time I have been reading books about which nobody has any inkling, but in which I reveled. It is a collection of reports about Caucasian mountaineers, published in Tiflis (Tbilisi). It has mountaineer’s legends and poetry and extraordinary poetic treasures” [Tolstoy 1953, 62: 209]. In 1897, displaying the same ethnographic interest that had once prompted him to transliterate Chechen songs, Tolstoy took notes on multiple editions of the *Sbornik* in preparation for writing *Hadji Murat*, compiling information on Caucasian wedding and funerary rituals, spiritual beliefs, and practices of blood vengeance. In his notes, Tolstoy praised the folk songs of the Caucasus recorded in the *Sbornik*, referring to the “песни о мщении и удалстве” [songs of revenge and daring] as “*chudnye*” [marvelous] [Tolstoy 1950, 35: 276]. He was particularly taken with the Avar *Song of Khochbar*, a composition he described as “*udivitel’naia*” [astonishing] [Tolstoy 1950, 35: 276].

The *Song of Khochbar* is the most famous production of Dagestani heroic folklore, set down in writing for the first time and then translated from Avar into Russian by the Russian linguist Peter von Uslar (1816-75). The composition is an epic poem about a legendary Avar warrior from the Gidatlin tribe, Khochbar, who is betrayed by his host, the Khan of Khunzakh, and sentenced to death by fire. Before leaping into the flames, Khochbar snatches up the khan’s two infant sons and all three burn to death. Although he could not refuse the khan’s invitation for fear of being accused of cowardice, Khochbar outwits him; by forcing the khan’s sons to share his cruel and unjust death, Khochbar robs the khanate of heirs. Thereby, he asserts Gidatlin’s independence while punishing the great sin of disobeying guest-friendship etiquette. Scholars traditionally date the origin of the epic to sometime between the 16th and 18th centuries. Its eponymous hero has passed into oral cultural memory as having fought bravely against the khanate’s raids upon independent Avar tribes. Khochbar is a complicated figure, initially celebrated as a trickster and thief with a fearsome reputation for violence. He is a

skilled singer and musician, playing the *chagan*, a string instrument similar to a violin, as he self-consciously performs an improvised song about his exploits before the khan, or *nutsal*. Although Vladimir Bobrovnikov has offered an updated translation into Russian of the song [Bobrovnikov 2003a: 181-83], I include here my translation into English of an excerpt from Uslar’s 1868 Russian translation because the latter is the version that Tolstoy had encountered and is therefore more relevant for our purposes:

“Слушайте же, аварцы, расскажу вам кое-что, и ты не мешай мне, Нуцал, стану и петь. Влез я к тебе в окно и унес шелковые шалвары любимой жены твоей; снял я серебряные запястья с белых рук любезных сестер твоих; резал я ручного тура твоего. Вот, наверху—овчарни; кто угнал из них баранов, отчего они опустели? Вот, внизу—конюшни; кто угнал табун, отчего они развалились? Вот, на крышах вдовы; кто сделал их вдовами, убив мужей? Вокруг нас сироты; кто убил их отцов и сделал их сиротами? Не перечеть всех, кого убил я и в поле и в лесу. [...] Разве не я убил шестьдесят человек из вашего общества? Вот, Нуцал, какие совершаются подвиги, а то, что за подвиг, обманом звать к себе человека и умертвить его! [...] Остроконечное копье, не раз пробивало ты грудь ханским нукерам!”

[Listen then, Avars, to what I tell you, and don’t you interrupt, Nutsal, I’ll rise and sing. I got through your window and carried away your favorite wife’s silk trousers, silver bracelets off your lovely sisters’ wrists; I butchered your pet mountain goat. Why these barns there, above, empty! And who took the lambs? Who took the herd of horses—look below—and why were the stables destroyed? There are widows sitting on the roofs; who made them widows, who killed their husbands? There are orphans all around, but who killed their fathers? Countless are those that I killed in the fields and the forests. Wasn’t it I who killed sixty people of your village? That’s how heroes are made. But is it an act of bravery to summon a man and treacherously kill him? There, above, the sheepfold; who drove off the rams from them, why are they empty? There, below, the stables; who drove off the herd, why have they fallen apart? There, on the roofs, are widows; who made them widows, killing their husbands? Around us are orphans; who killed their fathers and made them orphans? You cannot count all those I killed in the field and in the forest [...]. There, Nutsal, what feats are accomplished, but is it a feat to invite a man and kill him? [...] My sharp-edged spear, more than once you pierced the breast of the khan’s vassals!’] [Uslar 1868/2017 153-54].

What is most relevant for our analysis is that the *Khochbar* figure is an *abrek*, a term with a politically significant history. It denotes a mountaineer warrior, a figure prominent in Caucasian folklore, who is simultaneously an outlaw and a

hero. In medieval Dagestani and Nakh languages, the term designated a vagabond and later came to indicate strangers who had fled their communities, fearing blood vengeance because they were guilty of murder, rape, or other significant crimes [Bobrovnikov 2007b: 246]. However, during the Caucasian War, those who deserted from either side and fled were also called *abreks*. In 19th-century Russia, the term came to indicate any non-peaceful (*nemirmie*) mountaineers whose very existence became criminalized and synonymous with banditry. In the collective memory of the Dagestani Avars, the figure of Khochbar began to be associated less with the exploits of a wandering trickster who exacts revenge for a violation of hospitality and more with a steadfast courage in the face of the cruel and oppressive enemy [Bobrovnikov 2003a: 199]. Khochbar’s thefts and murders were transformed into rebellion, and the *abrek* became a politicized freedom fighter. The adaptation of the Song of Khochbar to Chechen folklore demonstrates aptly the cross-cultural relations between the people of Dagestan and Chechnya. Khochbar became Khushpar in the Chechen variant of the song [Munaev 2005: 340], which preserved the basic storyline and came to participate in Chechen folklore as an instance of the heroic *illi* genre. Significantly, scholars have determined that the *illi* was developed among the Vainakh people between the 16th and 19th centuries in a context of both intercommunal conflict and colonial conquest (Gould year: 202). *Illi* protagonists were typically drawn from historical events and, as the war in the Caucasus wore on, came to celebrate the heroic and solitary *abreks* who struggled against colonialism but always met with defeat, “Having relinquished any prospect of victory, the pathos of their lives is their progress toward death” [Gould 2014: 202].

When the Chechens joined the Avars in the Northeast Caucasus to battle against the tsarist army, the folklore of both groups shared a nearly identical song genre: the heroic ballad of resistance. I argue that the storyline of Hadji Murat corresponds with that of the Song of Khochbar to a marked degree: both narratives follow heroic *abreks* famed for violence who have challenged the ruling khanate, enter hostile territory, are betrayed by their hosts, and die in a desperate act of defiance. While it is impossible to determine whether Tolstoy deliberately imitated the ballad in his text or was simply following the historical narrative, it is my contention that there are multiple resonances between the folk song and the text, not least of which are those of narrative design, character, language, and use of epithets. In addition, it is almost impossible that, having encountered the folk song in preparation for composing Hadji Murat, Tolstoy did not surmise that the historical Murat would have invariably been privy to the Song of Khochbar as both challenge and inspiration. However, I am here interested in the folk song’s representation of the subversive potential of oral performance and how Murat’s performance in Tolstoy’s text undermines imperial domination.

Scene II: The Avar and the Russian

In one of the pivotal scenes of *Hadji Murat*, the eponymous hero recounts his personal history to the interpreter Mikhail Loris-Melikov, who is tasked with

taking notes on Murat’s life for administrative purposes. The autobiographical narrative occupies the central chapters of the novel, indicating their privileged position in the text [Weir 2011: 118-19]. The section is important for two related reasons: first, it includes historical epistolary extracts from the viceroy of the Caucasus, Mikhail Vorontsov (1782-1856), and the Russian General Kluge von Klugenau (1791-1851), regarding Hadji Murat’s defection to the Russians; second, a significant portion of the direct discourse in the section is conveyed in the voice and from the point of view of Murat. This juxtaposes the voice of empire, represented in the medium of writing, with the voice of the Dagestani Avars, here conveyed exclusively by direct and free indirect discourse. If the distant voice of the Avars informed *The Cossacks* despite their total absence from that text, Tolstoy makes the Avar voice fully present and central to his final novel. Chapter Eleven opens with Loris-Melikov, pen in hand, inviting Hadji Murat to recount his history, ““Ты Расскажи мне ... а я запишу, переведу потом порусски, и князь пошлет государю”” [Tell it to me, and I will write it down and translate it into Russian and the prince will send it to the emperor] [Tolstoy 1950, 35: 49]. This exchange initiates the juxtaposition between empire and the Caucasus as represented by literate and nonliterature expression, with the former seeking to exert sociopolitical control over the latter: the words of Murat will be fixed to paper, transformed into the language of empire, and transferred along the administrative military hierarchy to the tsar. Seeking to control Murat’s narrative indicates that not only this story, but how it is expressed, has power; it is, therefore, important to possess it in writing.

Agreeing to disclose his past, Murat recounts his childhood with Avar khans who were later murdered by Murids, a Muslim coalition engaged in holy war against Russia. Initially, Murat sought to avenge the khans, then joined the holy war, in which his military successes brought him into direct conflict with Shamil. Note Murat’s self-assurance as he takes time to prepare his thoughts before commanding Loris-Melikov to begin writing:

Хаджи-Мурат опустил голову и долго просидел так; потом взял палочку [...] достал из-под кинжала с слоновой ручкой, оправленной золотом, острый [...] булатный ножик и начал им резать палочку и в одно и то же время рассказывать:

— Пиши: родился в Цельмесе, аул небольшой, с ослиную голову [...] Недалеко от нас, выстрела за два, Хунзах, где ханы жили. [...] Лорис-Меликову приходила мысль [...] что выход Хаджи-Мурата и его рассказы о вражде с Шамилем был обман [...] Мюридов было тридцать человек, нас — двое. Они убили брата [...] а я отбился, выскочил в окно и ушел. [...] Аварцы [...] звали меня управлять ими, — с спокойной, уверенной гордостью сказал Хаджи-Мурат. — И я согласился. [...] Но тут случилось то, что у меня спросили, кому быть имамом после Шамиля? Я сказал, что имамом будет тот, у кого шашка востра.

[Hadji Murad lowered his head and sat in that position for a long time. Then he took a stick [...] drew a little knife with an ivory gold-inlaid handle [...] from under his dagger and started whittling the little stick with it and speaking at the same time.

“Write: Born in Tselmess, a small *aul*,” ‘the size of an ass’s head’ [...] Not far from it, about two cannon-shots, lies Khunzakh where the Khans lived.” [...] It occurred to [Loris-Melikov] that [...] Hadji Murad’s surrender and his tales of hatred of Shamil might be false [...] “There were thirty [...] and we were only two. They killed my brother [...] but I kept them at bay, leapt through the window, and escaped. [...] The Avars [...] called me to rule over them,” he went on, with tranquil, confident pride, “and I agreed.” [...] “[I]t happened that I was asked who would be Imam after Shamil, and I replied, ‘He will be Imam whose sword is sharpest!’” [Tolstoy 1950, 35: 49-60].

Murat’s narration is interspersed with quotations from General Klugenau’s letters, and Chapter 14 is dedicated exclusively to Vorontsov’s missive, in which the latter calculates the *abrek*’s usefulness to the Russians and observes that imprisoning him would be “*nespravedlivo i nepolitichno*” [unjust and impolitic] as it would hinder the tsar’s cause in Dagestan, adding that Murat requests a convoy of “brave” Cossacks to help him fight Shamil [Tolstoy 1950, 35: 61-62]. Susan Layton has remarked on the opposition between speech and writing in the passage, arguing that “the simple syntax and colloquial diction convey Hadji Murat’s directness and honesty [...]. Hadji Murat upgrades talk as the more reliable, fully human mode of communication” [Layton 1995: 277]. However, the passage conveys opposition not between writing and speech, but between writing and performance, which is a complicated, deliberate, and culturally informed activity. Consider, first, that the term “*rasskaz*” [tale, story] is used several times to refer to Murat’s narrative. The verb *skazat*’ [to speak, tell] is related to the spoken *skaz*, a narrative that implies a teller, and to *skazka*, a folktale or fairy tale. Importantly, Tolstoy used the term *rasskazyvat*’ [to tell, narrate] to indicate the act of singing a Cossack song [Tolstoy 1937, 47: 82; see page 8 above]. Indeed, this imaginative quality of *rasskaz* is implicit in Loris-Melikov’s suspicion that Murat is not being forthright.

While Murat is probably not lying, as an inheritor of the epic *Song of Khochbar*, he is controlling his narrative and performing his history, which means that his *rasskaz* is not naïve and has been both polished and embellished. It is not a folk song, but I suggest that Murat’s narration is a performance with a distinct beginning, climax, and suspenseful conclusion. Its action is underscored and accompanied by Murat’s practiced manipulation of traditional mountaineer weaponry, a sharp knife with an ivory gold-inlaid handle; the tale, like the stick that is being whittled, comes into being as he speaks. Second, Murat’s narration shares aspects with traditional performance. He begins with silence, indicating not spontaneity but preparation, which resonates with the ritualistic, mnemonic

aspects of oral storytelling; even Murat’s pauses and omissions have rhetorical force. (2) He speaks with lyrical eloquence, using epithets, metaphors, and well-sketched characters: the village of his birth is “the size of an ass’s head” and it is “two cannon-shots” distance from the home of the khans; his companion was “телом сильный, как бык, и храбрый, как лев, а душой слабый, как вода” [as strong in body as a bull and as brave as a lion, but his soul was weak as water] [Tolstoy 1937, 35: 51]. The tale communicates colorful, improbable adventures (it is unlikely, for example, that Murat could have fought alone, and then escaped from, thirty armed men by leaping through a window). He ends his tale on a boastful note about the “sharpest” sword, which recollects the knife in his hands and reiterates almost verbatim Khochbar’s gloating about his “sharp-edged spear”—a symbolic object that each man believes entitles him to power. There is another hint that Murat’s narrative is a tale rather than spontaneous speech. Two chapters prior, there is a parallel scene of dictation: the illiterate mother of the Russian soldier, Petia Avdeev, is dictating a letter to the local church clerk intended for her son. Her speech contains ruptures and mundane news:

В письме Петрухиной матери было писано, во-первых, благословение, во-вторых, поклоны всех, известие о смерти крестного [...]. Упоминалось о гостинце, рубле и прибавлялось то, что уже прямо от себя, и слово в слово, пригорюнившаяся старуха, со слезами на глазах, велела написать дядю: «А еще, милое мое дитяtko, голубок ты мой Петрушенька, выплакала я свои глазушки, о тебе сокрушаючись. Солнушко мое ненаглядное, на кого ты меня оставил? [...]» На этом месте старуха завывла, заплакала и сказала: — Так и будет. Так и осталось в письме...

[In her letter Peter’s mother first sent him her blessing, then greetings from everybody, the news of his godfather’s death [...]. There was a reference to the present of a ruble, and a message was added which the sorrowing old woman had dictated with tears in her eyes and ordered the church clerk to take down exactly, word for word: “And also, my darling child, my sweet dove Peterkin, I have wept my eyes out lamenting for you. The light of my eyes, to whom have you left me? [...]” At this point the old woman wailed, wept, and said: “That will do!” So, the words in the letter remained...] [Tolstoy 1937, 35: 39].

The old woman’s speech is very different from Murat’s rhetorically powerful narration. It is not a “tale,” yet, like Murat’s story, the mother’s message is fossilized in writing “word for word” and “the words in the letter remained” without embellishment. The diminutives and endearments (“Peterkin,” “sweet dove”) employed by the grieving mother draw on the genre of lament songs, or *plachi*, which feature hypocoristic (endearments, or nicknames, such as “Peterkin” for “Peter”) and fixed expressions [Bailey 1995: 475]. Natalie Kononenko has argued that, while the epic and lament genres resemble one

another, until the turn of the 20th century in Russia, laments were performed solely by women, while epic songs were the domain of men [Kononenko 1994: 18]. I suggest that Murat’s dictation to Loris-Melikov is resonant with the epic song of the eponymous protagonist in the *Song of Khochbar*, who performed his grandiloquent history. If we link Murat and Khochbar as Avar *abreks* performing their history before their powerful enemies, the subversive potential of oral song performance in Tolstoy’s text becomes apparent. Khochbar’s supreme act of resistance is the immolation of the khan’s young sons, which both concludes his performance and yet can also be regarded as part of the performance. In a profound sense, Khochbar performs his death, with which he punishes the tyrannical khan and demonstrates the subversive power of oral folk song.

Murat’s performance also leverages the same narrative elements of irony, quadrangulation of identity, and framing which characterized Eroshka’s performance in *The Cossacks*. The irony transcends the boundary of the text insofar as it is the Avar *abrek* and not the Russian military administrator, who is controlling the narrative at both the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels of narration; Loris-Melikov is privy to Murat’s retelling of recent history, as is the reader, and he may be the one taking notes, but it is Murat’s performance that the text emphasizes and makes memorable. While the narrative frame for Murat’s narration indicates an opposition between Avars and Russians as represented by Murat and Loris-Melikov, the former’s performance deploys the conflict between four ethnic identities: Avar, Chechen, Cossack, and Russian. His narrative centers and unifies Avar and Chechen voices, recounting how their communities joined the holy war against Russia (“Чеченцы все перешли [...] и аварцы стали переходить” [The Chechens all went over [...] and the Avars all began to go over, too]) [Tolstoy 1937, 35: 50]. From Vorontsov’s letter, we learn that Murat had included the Cossacks in his tale in terms of their submission “[Murat] просит отослать его [...] с конвоем из двадцати или тридцати отважных казаков, которые бы служили ему” [Tolstoy 1937, 35: 62] [[Murat] asks to be sent back [...] with a convoy of twenty or thirty brave Cossacks who would serve him]. This ironic quadrangulation of identity both within and without the narrative frame has the effect of forcing the imperial administration and the implied Russian reader to bear witness not to the horrors the tsarist army has committed in the Caucasus, but to the power of the Caucasus to unify and resist by articulating its own version of history and the knowledge of that history in the terms of its collective oral tradition.

Conclusion

If political power is maintained in part through the creation and distribution of knowledge, then historical knowledge as performed by Eroshka in *The Cossacks* and Murat in *Hadji Murat* asserts the political power of the Caucasus. This knowledge’s status as performance is what maintains its distance from, and subversion of, imperial domination as represented by writing. Since oral performance unfolds only once, its assertion of knowledge cannot be recorded or

preserved. Thus, despite his intentions and instructions, Loris-Melikov is powerless to set down, translate, transfer, or appropriate Murat’s narrative; he records not Murat’s tale, but its ghost. For the same reason, Eroshka’s song about how tsarism exploits and destroys the mountaineers both challenges and implicates Olenin, who is forced to set aside his writing and private reflections to witness the song and re-enter sociality. In each case, performance—which, as I have shown, is informed in Tolstoy’s texts by the oral folk songs of the Cossack, Chechen, and Avar cultures—acts as resistance and protest. The immanence of performance overflows and transcends the limited boundaries of writing. However, resistance to being recorded and antagonism to writing does not make performed knowledge inherently fragile; because oral performance draws on centuries of tradition, by the time Eroshka dances through Olenin’s hut and Murat enacts a carefully crafted *rasskaz* for his imperial audience, both have long been established and known in Caucasus cultures.

NOTES

1 For a discussion of the constructed nature of Cossack identity, see Popov 2012: 1739-57.

2 The Russian translation of the song was published for the first time in 2005 with the title, *Uzam samostoiatel’noi devushki* [*Uzam of an Independent Young Woman*]; the translator worked directly from Tolstoy’s manuscript (Munaev 2005: 351). The Russian linguist Peter von Uslar (1816-75) was the first scholar to systematically study the Chechen language; his monograph on the subject was published in 1862, a decade after Tolstoy’s transliterations and translations, and did not include the *uzam*. The first standalone collection of Chechen folklore, *Iz chechenskikh pesen* [*From Chechen Folk Songs*] by Aslanbek Sheripov, appeared in print in 1918, and did not include the *uzam*, either.

3 For a discussion of how Murat deploys silence in conversation, see Herman 2005: 1-23.

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