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## Essay

### 28 The Resurrection of Alexander Pushkin

By John Oliver Killens

To the majority of literate Americans, the giants of Russian literature are Tolstoy, Gogol, Dostoevsky and Turgenev. Nevertheless, 97 years ago, at a Pushkin Memorial in Moscow, Dostoevsky said: "No Russian writer was so intimately at one with the Russian people as Pushkin. Those multitudinous writers who have taken the people as their theme compared to Pushkin, are, with, at the most, two exceptions, only gentlemen writing about the masses. Even in those two gifted exceptions, Tolstoy and Turgenev, there is apt to appear upon occasion a flash of haughtiness, which seems like an effort to bring happiness to the masses by raising them to the writer's level. Without Pushkin, we would have lost, not literature alone, but much of our irresistible force, our faith in our national individuality, our belief in the people's power, and most of all, our belief in our destiny."

Franco-Russian biographer Henri Troyat wrote in his biography on Pushkin: "Pushkin grew with the years. Every other Russian writer claimed descent from him. Inexplicably, the whole of Russian literature proceeded from his genius. Poetry, novels, short stories, history, theatre, criticism—he opened up the whole gamut of literary endeavor to his countrymen. He was the first in time, he was the first in quality. He was the source. Neither Gogol nor Tolstoy could have existed without Pushkin, for he made the Russian language; he prepared the ground for the growth of every genre."

The question is: Why is it that most literate Americans know so little about this great Afro-Russian? And how did Alexander Pushkin happen to find himself in imperial Russia at the beginning

of the 19th century? Here is how it came to pass.

In the early part of the 18th century, in that sprawling subcontinent that took up one-sixth of the earth's surface, extending from the edge of Europe thousands of miles eastward across grassy steppes (plains), mountain ranges and vast frozen stretches of forest, lakes and unexplored terrain, was a land known as the Holy Russian Empire, forerunner of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which is so vast, even today it has seven time zones. For example, the United States of America has only four. The Emperor of this empire was Peter the Great, Czar he was of all the Russians.

The Russian aristocracy had a severe inferiority complex vis-a-vis the rest of Europe, especially the French. Many Europeans looked upon the people of Russia disdainfully as "barbaric Asiatics." The Russian nobility worshipped French as if it were a fetish that would ward off evil spirits, secure to them the keys to the kingdom and bring all happy things to pass. The French language, the way of life, the entire culture were servilely worshipped and adulated. All imperial documents, all official papers, the literature, all decrees were in French instead of Russian. A man might have been a street hoodlum or a garbage collector in Paris. In Russia he was a *uchitol* (house tutor) in one of the great Russian households.

In those days it was fashionable in Europe to have at least one Negro in the imperial palace, or Ethiopie, or Blackamoor, as Black people were designated in the courts of Europe in that far-off era. Usually the Blackamoor played the role of lackey, footman, court jester or buffoon. It was the *in* thing in Europe, a kind of European-type feudalistic tokenism, as seen today in all levels of government. Great Peter was a Europhile, and if at least one Negro graced

every one of the courts of Europe, then Peter felt that he had to have at least one for his imperial court. Therefore, he sent the word out to all of his Ambassadors in Europe:

"Find me a Negro!"

Meanwhile, Turkey and Ethiopia had been at war, and in one of the skirmishes a young African prince had been captured and brought back to Turkey and placed in a harem. He had been eight-years-old and was going to be trained to be a eunuch. In the Sultan's harem, young boys were fattened and castrated somewhat like wealthy race horsemen have done to their geldings, so these boys could move among the beautiful nubile women of the harem and have no sexual desires.

This is the fate that Pushkin's great-grandfather would have suffered had he not been kidnapped at the age of nine by the Russian ambassador to Turkey and brought to the court of Peter the Great. Peter took an immediate fancy to the lad, who was strikingly handsome and highly intelligent. He was promoted rapidly from lackey to footman to, at the age of 16, the office of personal secretary to His Most Imperial Majesty.

Eventually, Peter adopted the lad and became his godfather. The Queen of Poland became his godmother. But the lad was proud of his African origin and refused to adopt the Christian name of his imperial godfather. Instead, he chose the name of an ancient ancestor and named himself Ibrahim Petrovich Hannibal. Under the sponsorship of Great Peter, he received an education in France in Army engineering. Back in Russia, after the death of Peter, he was exiled to Siberia where he remained until the reign of Empress Elizabeth, who had been his playmate when they were children in the court of Peter the Great. Under the regimes of Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine the Great, his



star went into orbit. He became a general in the Russian army and acquired an estate with a thousand serfs. He lived almost a hundred years. Ibrahim Petrovich Hannibal was the maternal great-grandfather of Alexander Sergeievich Pushkin, the father of Russian literature.

Pushkin was born on May 29, 1799. He was proud of his African ancestry. One of his unfinished works, published after his untimely death in 1837 in a duel, was "The Negro of Peter the Great," a novel about his great-grandfather.

How did I get hooked on Pushkin?  
What was my initial inspiration?

I was at my home in Brooklyn about 14 years ago when I got a phone call from Paris, France, from a friend of mine—Harry Belafonte. He called to tell me that he had been with Russian film producers who wanted to do an English-speaking movie on the life of Alexander Pushkin. They wanted him to play the role of Pushkin, he said, and that I was chosen to do the screenplay. "What do you think, John," he said.

"Greatest idea you ever had, Harry."

"Why in the hell don't you start the research then?" he demanded.

"I would start if you'd stop running your mouth and get the hell off the telephone."

The next morning, I made it up to the Schomburg Collection—a library at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue. I researched for three weeks and came away with about 100 pages of material on the life and times of Alexander Pushkin. By the time Belafonte returned from Europe, he brought with him about 20 or 25 books by or about Alexander Pushkin, from which I amassed 200 more pages of research. For whatever reason, the Russian film project fell through. It didn't matter though. By

then I was hooked. I had an Afro-Russian on my back, and loving it. I would go away from him and write another book, then back to Alexander Sergeievich, another book, back to Pushkin, until I began to get invitations from the Soviet Union to attend the annual Pushkin festivals.

What is a Pushkin festival?

During the last week of May and a couple weeks into June, an annual festival is held in the Soviet Union to which writers from all over the world are invited to celebrate the life and contributions of Alexander Pushkin to world literature and the humanities. In 1968, my wife and I decided to attend a Pushkin festival. We flew to Moscow and caught a midnight train to Leningrad, which was called Saint Petersburg in Pushkin's days. In Leningrad, we went to all of the places where the great man lived out his brief tumultuous life so precariously. We visited the duel ground where he was fatally wounded and his apartment on Moika Street.

From Leningrad then to a city where he studied at the Lycee, an elitist school for the "future leaders of the empire." It was the location of the imperial Summer Place in Pushkin's time and was called Tsarkoye Selo. It has been renamed "Pushkin."

From *Pushkin* finally to his grandfather's estate at Mikhailovskoye, where thousands of people of myriad nationalities had been gathering all week, living in tents, trailers and so on. With Pushkin's larger-than-life portrait in the background on a raised platform, writers read poems and essays to Pushkin before thousands who gathered in an open field. I spoke to them about my novel. From Mikhailovskoye we went nearby to participate in a ceremony at his tomb on Holy Mountain. I took some dirt from the great one's grave and put it in an envelope.

Back to Moscow and to Pushkin Square, a plaza located in the heart of town where stands a gigantic monument to Pushkin at the foot of which fresh flowers are placed each day of the year, excepting of course those frigid snow-covered days of Moscow winters. Hundreds of his countrymen and women were lined up to take their turn to stand and gaze at Pushkin's magnificent larger-than-life monument-in-bronze.

As a boy, Pushkin spent a lot of time alone with his books. His brother, Leo could boast that at the age of 11, Pushkin knew all of French literature by heart, including Moliere, Racine and Voltaire. At age 12, he wrote continuously and in Russian idiom, which was not the style in those days in Russia. He was published at 15. At 20, he was banished from St. Petersburg to the south of Russia for revolutionary activity and his inflammatory verse, such as his *Ode To Freedom*, calling on the serfs to rise up and throw off their shackles, and his *The Dagger*, in which he extolls the use of violence as a means of liberation. He wrote *Derevnya*, *The Village*, in which he romanticizes the idyllic aspects of pastoral life, but, being a romantic revolutionary and a realist, in the same poem he attacks the landed gentry and their treatment of serfs on their estates.

Pushkin was the first people's poet and he wrote in Russian, not in French as most Russian writers had before him. The people read his verses! Students knew his poems by heart. Workers who could read read Pushkin. Those who could not read had others read for them. Czarist spies sent word to the Emperor of workers in Karkov, a thousand miles away from the capital, who walked off their jobs after students read Pushkin's poems to them. He spent six maddeningly lonesome years completely out of touch with his comrades and his family. Notwithstanding, he continued

to write. Nothing could stop the flow of his genius.

It was during his terrible banishment that Pushkin began and almost completed his most outstanding literary achievement—his novel-in-verse, "Eugene Onegin." He spent the last two years of his exile on his grandfather's estate at Mikhailovskoye. Sometimes he thought about his great-grandfather buried in the frozen earth on nearby Holy Mountain, thousands of miles from the sunny clime and land that birthed him. And he would long for the land of his great-grandfather. If he could escape this frozen crazy hopeless Russia, which he loved with the deepest kind of helplessness, perhaps he would be whole again. The longing for escape flowed from his pen and joined the verses of the immortal "Eugene Onegin." Thus he wrote:

*When strikes my liberation hour?  
It's time, it's time—I bid it hail;  
I pace the shore, the sky I scour  
And beckon to each passing sail.  
Storm-canopied, wave-tossed in motion  
On boundless highways of the ocean,  
When will I win unbounded reach?  
It's time to leave this tedious beach  
That damps my spirit, to be flying  
Where torrid southern blazes char  
My own, my native Africa,  
There of dank Russia to be sighting,  
Where once I loved, where now I weep,  
And where my heart is buried deep.*

When the Emperor Alexander died suddenly, his brother Nicholas succeeded to the throne. Pushkin's comrades attempted a revolution. It was abortive, put down ruthlessly by the new Emperor. Seven were hanged, hundreds were sent to Siberia. Because the attempted revolt was in December, these insurrectionists are known to Russian history as the "Decembrists." Pushkin is known as "the bard of the Decembrists." At the trial of the martyrs, all claimed Pushkin as their

inspiration.

Besuzshev Rynumin testified: "My inspiration came from Alexander Pushkin and his *Ode to Freedom* and his *The Dagger*. Who could read Pushkin without committing himself to the overthrow of feudalism?"

In attempting to gain favor with the artists, the intellectuals and the Russian people in general, the new Emperor brought Pushkin back from exile and pardoned him.

Back from exile, the people hailed him everywhere he went as "The voice of Russia!" . . . "Our national pride!" . . . "The soul of our national genius!"

Upon leaving the Moscow Grand Theatre one night, crowds followed him down the street. "There he is!" they shouted. "Pooshkin! Our own! Our very own!" . . . "He's back!" . . . "He's really back!" Men and women embraced him, kissed him on his bearded cheeks, begged him for his autograph. A few weeks later, a woman poet described that memorable evening in the Petersburg *Neva Observer*, in a poem:

*The crowd pushed forward,  
I hear, look, he's coming!  
Our poet! Our glory!  
The people's darling!  
Distinguished, though not tall—  
Bold, quick and knowing.  
He walked past in front of me,  
And forever afterwards  
My dreams were ruled by  
His African profile  
And lighted by his flaming eyes!*

How come most Americans know practically nothing about this Russian giant? What kind of man was Alexander Pushkin? He was a man who loved life, but loved to live life dangerously. Throughout his brief eventful life, he had this crazy romance with change and revolution. He was forever fighting duels, which was the fashion in

those days. He seemed to take a special delight in cuckolding noblemen, making it with the wife of some general, baron, count, adjutant or some minister of state. He got out of one scrape and immediately got into another. Imperial informers literally breathed on his neck, peeked into his windows, read his personal letters. They even got Pushkin's own father to spy on him.

Alexander Sergeivich Pushkin was fatally wounded at the age of 37. At Pushkin's death, the Emperor feared a revolution. The Russian people moved, inexorably, toward the sudden void, the voice that would be heard no more. They came to the apartment on Moika Street in troikas, barouches, droschkas, in horse and donkey carts—thousands came on foot to that awful sudden silence on Moika Street. A 16-year-old Dostoevsky went on a hunger strike. Thousands stood in freezing weather outside the apartment building.

*"Farewell, Pushkin!"  
"Goodbye, oh noble son of Russia!"  
"Poor Russia! The good lord has  
forsaken us!"*

These were Pushkin's people, the working men and women, peasants, students, businessmen, artists and intellectuals, the Third Estate, the lonely women on the far away Russian steppes who had read "Eugene Onegin" by a feeble fire.

Meanwhile, the Emperor waged war against a phantom. He banned the opening of his play, *The Covetous Knight* in St. Petersburg. Thousands were turned away outside the theatre. Newspapers were prohibited from mentioning Pushkin's name. University professors and students were prohibited from leaving their classes to attend the funeral. The police force was instructed to destroy all copies of a new Pushkin portrait bordered in black, with the caption underneath: "The fire has gone out on the altar."

32 A popular bookshop on Nevsky Prospekt sold out "Eugene Onegin" on the evening of his death. The next day, thousands thronged the bookstore while many others stood outside in 30-below-zero weather. Policemen raided the publishing house and destroyed the plates and printing presses. No matter, more than 60,000 copies were sold out in St. Petersburg alone.

The funeral was announced to take place at the St. Issaic Cathedral. Ten thousand turned out for the funeral, but the Emperor's police had secreted the body to a church on Stable Street, where the funeral was held attended only by those whom were extended printed tickets. Pushkin, dead and helpless, lay there among his enemies, while the people of the Third Estate scurried around the frozen city looking for their fallen poet. At the end of the funeral services, his enemies came up to his casket and kissed his hand and forehead and breathed their sighs of deep relief. Souvenir hunters cut off locks of his hair, tore buttons from his frock.

At Midnight, he was taken clandestinely by three troikas to Holy Mountain near Mikhailovskoye—hundreds of miles southwardly where he would be buried near his mother and his famous great-grandfather. Two policemen rode in the trailing sledge. Pushkin's coffin was in the second sledge. The Emperor authorized the poet's fellow writer and comrade, Turgenev, to accompany Pushkin's body to the final resting place. He rode in the first troika.

Some said of Pushkin that he was arrogant, was possessed of savage temper and temperament, which they attributed to his African blood. One thing is clear. He had a calm objective sense of his own value to the Russian people and to world history. Strange how revolutionaries seem to sense when the end is near. Malcolm

certainly sensed it. And Martin's speech about the "Mountaintop" indicates that he knew his days were numbered. Death is a realistic fact of life every revolutionary has to live with. Pushkin must have anticipated it. A combination of this mysterious foreboding and consciousness of his worth must have inspired his poem *Exegi Monumentum*, which he wrote shortly before his death.

What did Turgenev think of as he stood there crying unashamedly in the falling snow and watched the weeping peasants lower Pushkin's coffin into the frozen earth? Did he remember his great friend's poem, *Exegi Monumentum*!

*Unto myself I raised a monument,  
By hands, a track thereto the people's  
feet will tread;*

*Not Emperor Alexander's Shaft is as  
lofty as my pillar*

*That proudly lifts its splendid head.*

*Not wholly shall I die,*

*But in my lyre, my spirit*

*Shall, incorruptible, and bodiless  
survive*

*And I shall know reknown*

*As long as under heaven*

*One poet yet remains alive.*

*The rumor of my fame will sweep  
through vast Russia.*

*And all its people speak this name,*

*Whose light shall reign alike*

*For haughty Slav, and Finn, and*

*Savage Tungus and Kalmuk riders of  
the Plain.*

*I shall be loved and long the people  
will remember*

*The kindly thoughts I stirred—*

*My music's brightest crown,*

*How in this cruel age I celebrated  
freedom,*

*And fought for truth for those cast  
down.*

*Oh muse, as ever, be ye unafraid,*

*To praise and slander cool,*

*Demanding no reward, sing on,*

*But in your wisdom,*

*Be silent when you meet a fool. □*

John Oliver Killens, writer-in-residence at Howard University, recently completed "Great Black Russian," a novel on the life and times of Alexander Pushkin. He is the author of several other important books, among them, "Youngblood," "And Then We Heard The Thunder," and "The Cotillion." He wrote the screenplay for two major motion pictures, *Odds Against Tomorrow* and *Slaves*.