
The Concept of National Identity and Historical Memory in the Works of Alexander Pushkin

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Abstract: This article explores how Alexander Pushkin, the father of modern Russian literature, conceptualizes national identity and historical memory in key literary works. Through close readings of *The Bronze Horseman*, *Boris Godunov*, *Poltava*, and select historical poems, this article shows how Pushkin intertwines personal, political, and poetic dimensions to shape an enduring vision of Russianness rooted in both admiration and ambivalence toward authority, fate, and national destiny.

Keys words: Pushkin; national identity; historical memory; Russian literature; empire; cultural heritage; *The Bronze Horseman*; *Boris Godunov*; historical narrative;

Introduction

Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) stands at the intersection of Russian literary innovation and historical consciousness. His engagement with national themes goes beyond romanticism or personal lyricism, extending into the realm of collective memory and cultural identity formation. This article examines the ways in which Pushkin's major works reflect, critique, and reimagine Russia's historical path, interrogating what it means to belong to the Russian nation. Pushkin's historical sensibility is inseparable from the political landscape of early 19th-century Russia—a time of imperial expansion, post-Napoleonic restoration, and emerging national consciousness. His works such as *The Bronze Horseman*, *Boris Godunov*, and *Poltava* offer dramatic retellings of pivotal moments in Russian history, serving as vehicles through which national identity is both preserved and problematized.

Methods

This study employs qualitative textual analysis rooted in literary theory, especially narrative analysis and cultural studies. The works analyzed are selected based on their explicit historical content and relevance to the themes of nation-building and memory. Each text is examined in terms of:

- Representation of historical events or figures
- Construction of cultural myths
- Interplay between individual agency and national fate
- Symbolic use of landscape, language, and power structures

Scholarly interpretations from Russian and comparative literature are incorporated to contextualize Pushkin's cultural impact.

Results

The Bronze Horseman – Imperial Power and Individual Loss. Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* (1833) epitomizes the duality of Russian national identity. On one hand, it celebrates Peter the Great as a civilizing hero who “cut a window to Europe” and founded St. Petersburg. On the other, it presents the tragic story of Evgenii, a humble clerk crushed—literally and symbolically—by the very city and empire Peter built. The titular monument (the bronze statue of Peter) becomes a symbol of the state's oppressive grandeur, and Evgenii's madness reflects the psychological cost of Russia's rapid modernization. This tension between imperial myth-making and personal suffering encapsulates a core conflict in Russian identity: reverence for state power coupled with a fear of dehumanization.

Boris Godunov – Historical Memory and Legitimacy. In the historical drama *Boris Godunov* (1825, published 1831), Pushkin tackles the Time of Troubles—a chaotic period in Russian history. The titular tsar, accused of ascending the throne through murder, becomes a vehicle for exploring legitimacy, memory, and guilt. Pushkin's use of multiple voices (from peasants to nobles) highlights the fragmented nature of collective memory. The famous line “The people are silent” (*Narod bezmolvstvuet*) at the play's end underscores the ambiguity and unresolved tension surrounding historical judgment. Pushkin's dramatic method, modeled after Shakespeare, emphasizes that national identity is not a fixed essence but a site of contested narratives, shaped by power, rumor, and silence.

Poltava – Heroism, Betrayal, and the Imperial Narrative. Pushkin's *Poltava* (1829) romanticizes the 1709 Battle of Poltava where Peter I defeated the Swedish king Charles XII and Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa. While Peter is lionized as a unifying figure, Mazepa is depicted as a traitor, torn between personal love and political ambition. This binary narrative reinforces official imperial ideology but also opens space for ambiguity, especially in Mazepa's human motivations and tragic downfall. The poem reflects imperial identity formation through the vilification of dissent and the glorification of unity. Yet, Pushkin's nuanced portrayal hints at the costs of suppressing regional identities for the sake of a singular national narrative.

Discussion

Across these works, Pushkin engages with history not merely to commemorate, but to mediate memory. His writings reflect the 19th-century shift toward romantic nationalism, yet they resist simplification. Rather than offering a univocal celebration of empire, Pushkin's literary history is filled with dissonance, silences, and symbolic dislocation. Importantly, Pushkin explores how poetic voice itself becomes a vessel of national identity. Whether through dramatic monologues, epic narration, or lyrical interjection, Pushkin fuses individual expression with national themes, suggesting that to write as a Russian poet is to shoulder the weight of historical meaning. Furthermore, Pushkin's historical imagination reveals both admiration for Russian resilience and a critical awareness of authoritarian excess. His ability to inhabit opposing viewpoints—tsarist ambition and popular suffering, heroism and fatalism—gives his works enduring interpretive richness.

Conclusion

Alexander Pushkin's treatment of national identity and historical memory exemplifies the power of literature to both reflect and construct collective consciousness. Through his dramatizations of foundational myths, critique of power, and invocation of silenced voices, Pushkin helped shape the Russian cultural psyche. His legacy is not merely literary; it is civic and philosophical. Pushkin teaches us that national identity is not static but is always in dialogue with its own memory—fluid, poetic, and contested.

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