

Title: Saving the Persian Princess: Stepan Razin in the Creative Work of Russian Formalists and Futurists

Author: Anna Aydinyan, Kenyon College

Abstract:

In his historical novel *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar*, Yuri Tynianov alludes to the literary and folkloric figure of the seventeenth-century Cossack rebel, Stepan Razin. Razin's character is particularly interesting for Tynianov, as a writer undertaking a portrayal of Russia's relations with Iran, because of the Cossack leader's raids of Persian and Caucasian coastal cities on the Caspian Sea in which he was engaged for two years prior to his Volga uprisings.

In the works of Tynianov's contemporaries, the Russian literary avant-garde, Stepan Razin, represents the violent revolutionary transformation of the Russian society and culture. The futurists Vasily Kamensky and Velimir Khlebnikov are especially preoccupied with figure of the Cossack leader, and Khlebnikov even identifies with him. Representing Razin as a revolutionary, both poets encounter the problem of justifying a violent episode from Stepan Razin's legendary rebellious life, his alleged drowning of a captive Persian princess which goes against the ethos of a proletarian internationalism.

Khlebnikov, who lived in Persia in 1921 as a "Kul'tprosvet" lecturer in the headquarters of the Russian Revolutionary Army that was helping the short-lived Republic of Gilan, solves this problem by proclaiming himself "Razin the opposite" and "Razin inside out." If the Razin of the past drowned the princess, Khlebnikov is planning to save her by transforming Persia with his futurist poetry and his messianic theory of numbers. Juxtaposing the representation of Stepan Razin in the works of his nineteenth-century protagonist, Alexander Griboedov, and his contemporaries, the futurists, Tynianov reveals both the imperialist agenda of the former and the revolutionary expansionism of the latter as problematic approaches to the relationship between Russia and Iran.