

Spring 4-1-2018

# Heirs to the Frontier: James Fenimore Cooper's Influence on Tolstoy

Christian Gum

*University of New Hampshire, Durham*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry\\_2018](https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2018)

---

## Recommended Citation

Gum, Christian, "Heirs to the Frontier: James Fenimore Cooper's Influence on Tolstoy" (2018). *Inquiry Journal*. 14.  
[https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry\\_2018/14](https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2018/14)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Inquiry Journal at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inquiry Journal 2018 by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).



## Research Article

# Heirs to the Frontier: James Fenimore Cooper's Influence on Leo Tolstoy

—Christian Gum

The summer of 2017 was the summer of reading. Before then, I had never considered that I could conduct intensive historical research as an undergraduate. But after numerous meetings with my thesis advisor and future mentor, history professor Cathy Frierson, I realized that a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) would give me a chance to work on my honors thesis, as well as conduct original research in my field. Professor Frierson knew of my passion for Russian literature, and she suggested investigating the popularity of foreign authors in Russia. In doing so, I found that one author was mentioned more than all others: James Fenimore Cooper. Because Cooper is most famous for his frontier stories (*The Last of the Mohicans* and others), I decided to investigate whether Cooper had influenced Russian literature's conception of the Caucasus, a region south of Russia and the target of imperial conquest.

Although other scholars had discussed Cooper's popularity in Russia, no one had made the argument that Cooper's writings influenced the Russian creation of the literary frontier (Thorp, 1954; Layton, 1994). To do this, I needed to consult scholarly journal articles, biographies, literary criticism, military history, and, most importantly, the primary sources written by Cooper and nineteenth-century Russian authors.

As part of my coursework during the semester before my summer research, I read Cooper's series of novels, *The Leatherstocking Tales*, along with works by Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, two of the first Russian writers who wrote about the Caucasian frontier. Based on their letters and diaries, we know these writers had read Cooper, but I couldn't find any meaningful connections between their works.

My breakthrough came in my second week of SURF research when I discovered the literature of Leo Tolstoy, one of the last Russian authors to write about the Caucasus during its frontier period. Tolstoy's stories about the Caucasus are drawn from his military experiences and include titles such as "The Raid" and "The Wood-Felling Expedition." I devoured Tolstoy's work in conjunction with Cooper's, finding that both authors shared a concern for the environment and how men should act when living on the edge of civilization and wilderness. By examining evidence from their public and



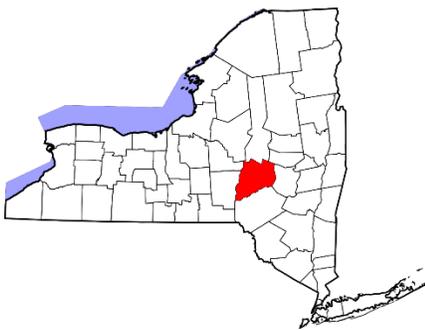
Christian Gum

private writings, I concluded that Cooper likely influenced Tolstoy's critical observations about the frontiersman's relationship with nature and with civilization.

## The Writers Behind the Myth

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) grew up looking out over the closing frontier of western New York, a land stripped of its native people and its resources. In his home at Cooperstown, founded in 1786 and named by James's father, William Cooper, the future novelist saw firsthand the impact of civilization. In his 1810 collection of letters, *A Guide to the Wilderness*, William Cooper recalls the natural abundance he found when camping in the future site of Cooperstown:

*I was alone, three hundred miles from home, without bread, meat, or food of any kind; fire and fishing tackle were my only means of subsistence. I caught trout in the brook and roasted them on the ashes.* (1897, p. 8)



This map highlights Otsego County, the home of Cooperstown and at one point the edge of the New York frontier. Map by David Benbennick (2006).

By the end of James Fenimore Cooper's childhood in the early 1800s, this natural abundance had been exploited by the Anglo-American townfolk. The forest disappeared and the fish became scarcer; the land had become civilized. The frontier-making process had transformed the natural environment of western New York, causing Cooper to adopt an ecocritical perspective in his famous series of frontier stories, *The Leatherstocking Tales*. Although Cooper was a champion of the frontiersman, those caught between Native American and European cultures, *The Leatherstocking Tales* took issue with the purely extractive nature of the frontier-making process (1985, p. 104).



The modern political boundaries of the Caucasus along with the regions within the Russian Federation. Map by Kbh3rb (2005).

Half-way across the world and sixty years after Cooper's birth, another author considered how the frontier-making process affected the local environment and the nature of life on the edge of society. After enlisting in the Russian Imperial Army in the early 1850s, a young Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) served in the Caucasian Wars, stationed primarily in the North Caucasus (modern Chechnya). The Caucasian Wars lasted from 1817 to 1864 and occurred due to Russia's desire to expand into the Ottoman and Persian imperial territories south of Moscow. In the Caucasus, Tolstoy found a brutal military campaign aimed at subjugating and displacing an insurgent Muslim population. He

was tasked with the monotonous job of clear-cutting through dense forests to facilitate the movement of Russian troops and discourage ambushes by native insurgents.

During and after his service, Tolstoy wrote a series of short stories and two novels about the Caucasus, highlighting the realities of military life, deforestation, and frontiersmen. Through my

research I became particularly interested in Tolstoy's first novel, *The Cossacks*, which was published in 1863. In the novel, Olenin, a young Russian officer from Moscow high society, travels to Chechnya on deployment. There, he tries to incorporate himself into the frontier lifestyle of a Cossack village, believing that living with these "primitive creatures" would bring him the peace that he could not find in a debauchorous, urban lifestyle (Tolstoy, 1961, p. 20). The Cossacks are a non-Russian people originating from Ukraine who often served as border guards for the Russian Empire, similar to cowboys in the American Old West, or the hunter-trappers in Cooper's New York frontier. Because the Cossacks represent the Russian frontiersman archetype, I wondered if Tolstoy's depiction of them was influenced by Cooper's hero, Natty Bumppo.

## Did Tolstoy Read Cooper?

Like most literate Russians of his day, Tolstoy had read *The Leatherstocking Tales* (Thorp, 1954, p. 557). There is clear evidence of this in *The Cossacks*, in a scene where Olenin goes hunting with an old Cossack named Eroshka. While stalking through the forest, Eroshka points out a set of human tracks to Olenin. The narrator then describes how, "Involuntarily a thought of Cooper's *Pathfinder* and of abreks [Chechen resistance fighters] flashed through Olenin's mind..." (Tolstoy, 1961, p. 92).

However, not all of Tolstoy's references to Cooper were respectful. In his diary from the early 1850s, Tolstoy described reading "the silly novel *Precaution*," (Tolstoy, 1934, p. 169). *Precaution* (1820) was the first story Cooper ever wrote, but it failed critically and commercially. Tolstoy described the novel as "glupyy" (silly or stupid), indicating that he had actually read it. According to the footnotes in Tolstoy's collected writings, the Russian author would have read *Precaution* in French in the "Oeuvres complètes de F. Cooper, trad. Par Émile de la Bedolliere, en 3 vol. Paris, 1851," (Tolstoy, 1934, p. 233). I realized that Tolstoy read most, if not all, of Cooper's writings in this collection of his completed works published in French. Knowing this, I wanted to determine whether Tolstoy's consumption of Cooper's literature actually influenced the Russian author.

## The Sublime Landscape and the Forest

For both Cooper and Tolstoy, the forest is sublime and beautiful, but also under attack by humanity. Cooper opens *The Pathfinder* saying, "The sublimity connected with vastness is familiar to every eye," (Cooper, 1985, p. 9). Sublimity, as understood by Cooper and other nineteenth century Romantic authors, describes something of such excellence or scale as to be awe-inspiring and perhaps even dangerous (Blakemore, 1997, p. 28). Cooper compares the expansiveness of the sea with the American forest, "an ocean of leaves, glorious and rich in the varied and lively



LAKE OTSEGO FROM WITCHHAZEL POINT.  
An illustration of Otsego Lake, on which Cooperstown rests. *The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library (2018).*

verdure of a generous vegetation,” (Cooper, 1985, p. 10). This vastness would dwarf most men, but not Cooper’s hero, Natty Bumppo. Bumppo explains to his companions how he had tried to attend church-service in civilized towns, “but [this] could never raise within me the solemn feelings and true affection that I feel when alone with God in the forest,” (Cooper, 1985, p. 95). Bumppo is a man of the wilderness rather than a man of society, more comfortable in the forest than in a town. Leo Tolstoy expressed similar feelings in *The Cossacks*, but with a twist.

Traditionally, Russian authors focused on the mountains of the Caucasus as the sublime landscape (Layton, 1986, p. 474). But in *The Cossacks*, the mountains take a backseat to the sublimity of the forest. When the Cossack Eroshka takes Olenin hunting, the young Russian officer finds himself stunned by the beauty and mystery of the forest:

*Nearly every tree was enveloped from top to bottom with wild grape vines, and dark bramble bushes covered the ground thickly . . . The vigour of the growth in this forest, untrampled by cattle, struck Olenin at every turn, for he had never seen anything like it. This forest, the danger, the old man and his mysterious whispering, Maryanka and her virile upright bearing, and the mountains—all this seemed to him like a dream.* (Tolstoy, 1961, p. 91)



Mikhail Lermontov’s painting of Tbilisi, Georgia. The two people in the foreground are dwarfed by the sublimity of the mountains and the raging river. *Painting by Mikhail Lermontov (1837).*

Just like Cooper, Tolstoy appreciated the sublimity of the forest. The fact that Tolstoy focused on the forest when all his predecessors (Karamzin, Pushkin, and Lermontov) focused on the mountains made me wonder where this inspiration came from. Drawing from my earlier research, Cooper’s influence seemed likely. Whereas Cooper compared the forest to the ocean, a familiar frontier for Americans, Tolstoy compared the forest to the mountains, the Russian frontier equivalent. However, Tolstoy did not merely copy Cooper’s views. After the first hunting trip with Eroshka, Olenin decides to go into the forest alone. Swarmed by bugs and surrounded by the wilderness, Olenin briefly achieves “being alone with God” expressed by Natty Bumppo in *The Pathfinder*:

*And it was clear to him that he was not a Russian nobleman . . . but just such a mosquito, or pheasant, or deer, as those that were now living all around him. Just as they, just as Uncle Eroshka, I shall live awhile and die, and as he says truly: “grass will grow and nothing more”* (Tolstoy, 1961, p. 95-96)

Olenin’s clarity does not last long. He becomes lost and terrified of the potential threats hiding in the darkness of the trees. For both Cooper and Tolstoy, the forest is sublime. However, the only colonizers who can live in the forest are the frontiersmen, caught between civilization and wilderness.

## The “Natural” Frontiersman Archetype

Both Natty Bumppo and Eroshka, the Cossack mentor of Olenin, are frontiersmen caught between Western civilization and the native wilderness of their respective frontiers. As suggested earlier, Bumppo does not worship in the traditional church system. Although he professes to believe in some sort of God, Bumppo’s deity exists outside of acceptable Western practice. Similarly, in *The Cossacks*, Eroshka and Olenin drink together, causing the old Cossack to share his opinion that what the preachers say is “all a fraud” (Tolstoy, 1961, p. 70). In the societies of eighteenth-century America and nineteenth-century Russia, to be without Christianity was to be without civilization. But even if these frontiersmen were not considered “civilized” westerners, they were not “uncivilized” natives either.

In *The Pathfinder*, Natty Bumppo explains the challenge of learning native practices while also establishing himself as separate and superior to his Indian allies:

*Every skin has its own natur’, and every natur’ has its own laws, as well as its own skin. It was many years before I could master all these higher branches of a forest education; for red-skin knowledge doesn’t come as easy to white-skin natur’, as what I suppose is intended to be white-skin knowledge; though I have but little of the latter, having passed most of my time in the wilderness.* (Cooper, 1985, p. 29)

By his own words, Natty Bumppo is somehow caught between “white-skin knowledge” and “red-skin knowledge.” The same point could be argued for Eroshka, an ostensibly European man who seems more at home with the native Chechens.

In *The Cossacks*, Tolstoy presents a scene where Olenin and Eroshka are drinking while the old Cossack reminisces. The hunter laments:

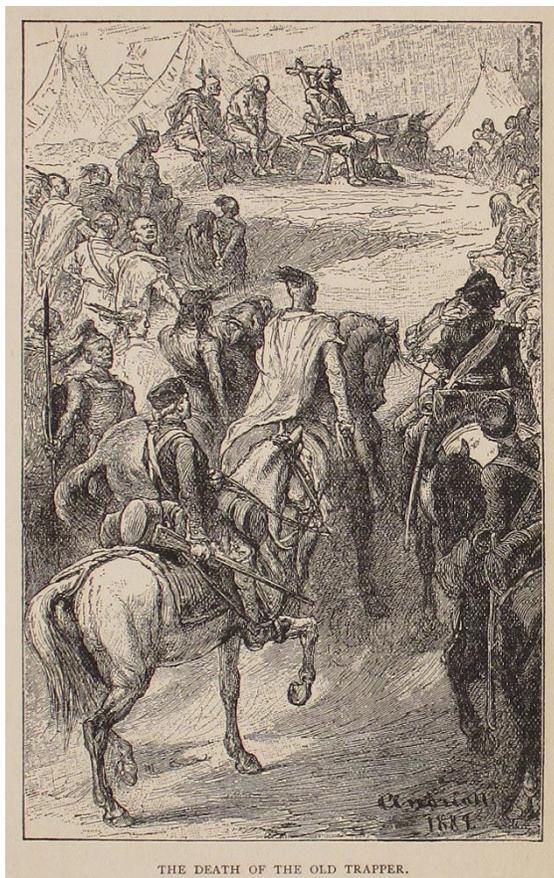
*I was Eroshka, the thief; they knew me not only in this village but up in the mountains. Tatar princes, my kunaks [friends], used to come to see me! I used to be everybody’s kunak. If he was a Tatar—with a Tatar; an Armenian—with an Armenian; a soldier—with a soldier; an officer—with an officer!* (Tolstoy, 1961, p. 70)

Eroshka moved seamlessly between the Russian sphere and the native sphere, yet he never found a home in either. For both Cooper and Tolstoy, the frontiersman was a noble figure more civilized than the non-Christian natives, but more in touch with nature than the stifled citizens of polite Western society. Existing within this amorphous category, the frontiersman could argue against the environmental damage wrought by colonization.

## The Distrust of Environmental Change on the Frontier

Cooper had grown up watching the natural abundance of Cooperstown disappear, but Tolstoy took an active role in the deforestation of the Caucasus. At the beginning of *The Cossacks*, Tolstoy describes how, “From village to village runs a road cut through the forest as a cannon-shot might fly,” (1961, p. 23). With this phrasing, Tolstoy connects the deforestation campaigns of the Imperial

Russian Army with the violence of warfare. Tolstoy used a similar comparison in his short story, “The Raid” (1853). Here, Tolstoy describes a battle scene between native insurgents and the Russian army. Desensitized to the “impressiveness” of war, the narrator says the battle, “made me think of a man violently swinging an ax and hitting nothing but air,” (Tolstoy, 1961, p. 144). By linking battle and bloodshed with deforestation, Tolstoy condemned the negative environmental effects being inflicted on the frontier by Russian colonization.



Natty Bumppo dies surrounded by Native Americans in this illustration from *The Prairie* (1827), rejecting European culture to the very end. Illustration by Michał Elwiro Andrioli (1897).

Cooper expressed a more explicit concern with deforestation, especially in *The Pioneers* (1823), the first book of *The Leatherstocking Tales*. Early in the story, Judge Templeton (an analog to Cooper’s own father, William), berates some townsfolk for taking advantage of the forest’s natural abundance:

*Really, it behooves the owner of woods so extensive as mine, to be cautious what example he sets his people, who are already felling the forests as if no end could be found to their treasures, nor any limits to their extent. If we go on in this way, twenty years hence we shall want fuel!* (Cooper, 1985, p. 104)

On the American frontier, the military were not responsible for the destruction of the forest. Instead, it was the greed and short-sightedness of Anglo-American townsfolk who exploited the seemingly infinite well of resources found on the frontier. As civilization expanded, the sublimity of the forest and the livelihood of frontiersmen like Natty Bumppo and Eroska would fade from existence, only to be found in the pages of books.

Cooper’s literature gave Tolstoy a model for how a Western author could criticize the frontier-making process, a process that seemed universal enough to appeal to readers from the United States all the way to Moscow.

## The Final Frontier

After a summer of research, I can now confidently argue that Cooper’s environmental critique and interest in the conflicted frontiersman touched a nerve in Tolstoy, as evidenced by the similarities between *The Leatherstocking Tales* and *The Cossacks*. My research continued in my honors thesis, examining how Cooper and Tolstoy differed in their portrayal of women on the frontier.

My SURF experience was undoubtedly one of the most valuable aspects of my undergraduate career. During the 2018-2019 school year, I will be interning as a student-teacher in social studies at a local high school. My research during the summer of 2017 allowed me to practice skills I had learned from all of my history and social studies education. The skills I developed during my SURF go beyond my research, my thesis, or even this *Inquiry* article. This research has benefited me both as a student, and as a future educator. I am excited to share with students my passion for history and to demonstrate how the skills we all learn in social studies—drawing comparisons, analyzing information, and creating arguments—are important for being an informed citizen.

*This process would not have been possible without my vast support network. First, I would like to thank the Hamel Center and the donors to my SURF research: Mr. Dana Hamel, the Donald James Wilcox Endowed Fellowship Fund and Dr. Kenneth Manning, and Mrs. Elizabeth Lunt Knowles. Without their generosity, none of this would have been possible. I also want to thank my mentor on this project, Professor Cathy Frierson, for her constant support and assistance over my past four years here at UNH. Going into college, I never expected to study Russian history almost exclusively, but thanks to her amazing teaching, I am here today. On that note, I must also thank to the UNH Russian department: Professor Arna Bronstein, Professor Ekaterina Burvikova, and Professor Emeritus Ron Leblanc. From language, to literature, to culture, my experience in the department was an invaluable opportunity that I would not have received if Professor Bronstein had not been my orientation leader during freshman weekend four years ago. Finally, I would like to thank my mother, father, brothers, and my personal editor/sounding board, Candace French. Thanks for listening, even if what I was saying didn't always make sense.*

## References

- Andriolli, Michel Elwiro. (1897). "The Death of the Old Trapper." Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:American\\_Pioneer\\_Life\\_pg\\_283\\_The\\_death\\_of\\_the\\_old\\_trapper.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:American_Pioneer_Life_pg_283_The_death_of_the_old_trapper.png)
- Benbennick, D. (2006). "Map of New York Highlighting Otsego County." Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_New\\_York\\_highlighting\\_Otsego\\_County.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_New_York_highlighting_Otsego_County.svg)
- Blakemore, S. (1997). "Without a Cross": The Cultural Significance of the Sublime and Beautiful in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 52(1), 27-57. doi: 10.2307/2934028.
- Cooper, J. F. (1985). *The Leatherstocking Tales* (Vols. 1-2). Blake Nevius (Ed.). New York, NY: The Library of America.
- Cooper, W. (1897). *A Guide to the Wilderness: Or the History of the First Settlements in the Western Counties of New York with Useful Instructions to Future Settlers*. Introduction by J. F. Cooper. Dublin: Gilbert and Hodges.

Kbh3rd. (2005). "Chechnya and Caucuses." Wikimedia Commons.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=53725>

Layton, S. (1986). The Creation of an Imaginative Caucasian Geography. *Slavic Review*, 45(3), 470-485. doi: 10.2307/2499052.

Layton, S. (1994). *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lermentov, Mikhail. (1837). "Tiflis." Wikimedia Commons.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lermontov\\_TiflisGLM.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lermontov_TiflisGLM.jpg)

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. (accessed 2018). "Lake Otsego from Witch Hazel Point" The New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-2f24-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

Thorp, W. (1954). Cooper Beyond America. *New York History*, 35(4), 522-539. Available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24470853>

Tolstoy, L. N. (1934). *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Vols. 1-90). Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo hudozhestvennoj literatury. [Tolstoy's "Complete Collected Works," compiled during the Soviet era by the State Publishing House of Fiction (ГИХЛ). Translation in this article by author.]

Tolstoy, L. N. (1961). *The Cossacks and The Raid*. (A. R. MacAndrew, Trans.). New York, NY: New American Library. (Original work published in 1853 ("The Raid") and 1863 (*The Cossacks*).)

## Author and Mentor Bios

**Christian Gum** was born and raised in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. During his junior year at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), he developed the research topic for his Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) based on a suggestion from his mentor, Dr. Cathy Frierson. As a history major with a Russian minor, Christian was inspired to combine his interests in Russian literature and the history of the expansion of the Russian empire to investigate how American authors were perceived in Russia. A "happy accident" partway through his research brought Christian to examine the connections between James Fenimore Cooper and Leo Tolstoy. His SURF experience helped Christian appreciate how adaptable researchers must be. Christian found satisfaction in the unexpected nature of his research path and in the connections he discovered. An aspiring high school social studies teacher, Christian hopes to communicate the social studies skills he learned during this experience with future students. He completed the Honors in Major program and will graduate with a bachelor of arts degree in history in spring 2018. In fall 2018 he will intern as a student teacher at a local high school, completing his master's degree in education in spring 2019.

**Cathy A. Frierson**, professor of history, has taught, conducted research, and mentored students at the University of New Hampshire since 1991. In that time, she has devoted countless hours to working with undergraduates through programs like the International Research Opportunities Program (IROP), Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF), and the McNair Scholars Program. Christian Gum was an exceptional student in one of Professor Frierson's Russian history classes. She told him about the opportunities available through the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, and then mentored him through the SURF application and summer research. Professor Frierson finds it rewarding to work with bright, hardworking, and curious undergraduates through a mentoring relationship. "Their research interests broaden my store of knowledge," she points out. "Mentoring the research process requires me to stay up-to-date on Russian scholarship and ways to access it." She has enjoyed mentoring several *Inquiry* authors through the writing process as well. Professor Frierson considers dissemination of knowledge the culmination of research.

Copyright 2018, Christian Gum