Redefining the Russian Empire: The turn to liberal imperialism through the letters of Prince Nikolay A. Orlov at the height of the Great Reforms

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Abstract
Prince Nikolay Alexeyevich Orlov (1827–1885) was an aristocrat, a war hero and a prominent diplomat of the Russian Empire who enjoyed a prestigious position from a very young age. In his correspondence with Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich in the early 1860s, Prince Orlov expounded his views on Russian politics, putting forward his liberal outlook of what the empire ought to be. His most crucial proposals were (i) revising Russian foreign policy and redefining imperial borders (which included solving the ‘Polish Question’); (ii) adopting federalism with local representative institutions based on a notion of ‘legitimate power’; (iii) introducing bottom-up reforms; (iv) abolishing ‘backwards practices’ (in particular, corporal punishment) and (v) guaranteeing civil rights and equality before the law. Based on letters and other writings that remain vastly under-researched in Russia and practically unknown to English-speaking audiences, I analyse Prince Orlov’s correspondence as illustrative of a broader ideological turn to liberal imperialism and contextualise it from Russian and European perspectives. By positing that Russian liberalism was strongly impacted by the successes and shortcomings of the liberal imperialism of the 1860s, I invite the reader to rethink some ideological and chronological boundaries that are routinely taken for granted in discussions regarding liberalism, imperialism and their interconnectedness.

Keywords
Empire, Russia, liberalism, liberal imperialism, reforms

After the January Uprising, in 1863, the renowned anarchist Mikhail A. Bakunin (1814–1876) was concerned with alleviating the plight of the Polish revolutionaries who were exiled in Siberia. This moment coincided with the unprecedented reformist wave in Russia which had famously put in motion the serf emancipation. Despite an exceptional context of reforms from above, the meeting...
that was to take place was nothing short of extraordinary: Bakunin invited none other than Prince Nikolay Alexeyevich Orlov (1827–1885), a Russian aristocrat and diplomat, to discuss the situation of the Polish exiles in Siberia. Journalist E.M. Feoktistov (1828–1898) commented that, at the first signs of a rebellion, ‘all Orlov’s sympathies were on the side of the Poles’ (Oksman and Presniakov, 1929: 53–5). Furthermore, the commentator highlighted the peculiarity of the scene: Bakunin ‘calmly conversing with our envoy in Belgium’, Adjutant-General and close friend of the emperor, Prince Nikolay Orlov. But who was Prince Orlov? And what would ultimately lead to his conspicuous meeting with Bakunin?

Coming from a family which gained notoriety during the times of Catherine the Great, Nikolay was the only son of Alexey Fyodorovich Orlov (1786–1861), who was made a Prince of the Russian empire in 1856 thanks to his service at the Congress of Paris. Alexey had been one of the most important men surrounding emperor Nicholas I – a leading figure of what Herzen (1957) called the ‘black cabinet’: the conservative group composed of Nicholas’s strongmen that were favoured by Alexander II at the start of the reform debates. No less relevant had been Alexey’s position as head of the Third Section (the secret police) from 1844 to 1856, and his highly influential voice in the discussions of serf emancipation, which he vehemently opposed. In sum, Nikolay had quite a name to live up to. Nevertheless, he would steer away from the conservative path led by his father to become a notable liberal voice in the early 1860s.

Nikolay’s liberal values were inextricable from a particular conception of empire: a righteous empire whose dominance was justified by a ‘benevolent’, civilising mission. This formulation fits into a broader philosophical justification of empire and its ‘internal urge’ to liberalism (Mehta, 1999: 20). Discussions on 19th century British colonialism and the unwavering defence of empire by liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill have already contributed to disabuse us from the notion that liberalism, given its usual set of political values, had to be inherently anti-imperial (Kohn and O’Neill, 2006; Mantena, 2007; Tunick, 2006). On the contrary, the universalist ambitions common to many exemplars of 19th century liberalism were completely in tune with an inherently universalistic imperialist ideology. As Kumar (2017: 312) points out, ‘all empires aim at universality’ – and liberalism often provided a justification to imperial universalist claims by framing them within civilising goals.

Empire is, as argued by Stoler (2006: 55–6), more than a model ‘based on fixed, imperial cartographies’: empire is also ‘the gradated variations and degrees of sovereignty and disenfranchisement’ of a system – that is, all its ‘zones of ambiguity’. In other words, the empire operates within ambiguity – and herein lies its resilience as a model and a system. Ambiguity is at the core of what Burbank and Cooper (2011: 3) called ‘imperial repertoires’ characterised by a dialogue between improvisation and habit that kept empires flexible and, although constrained by geography and history, open to innovation. It is this ambiguity that allows bringing together the empire and reform – and, at times, even broader political change – without putting the whole imperial model into question. Hence, the empire is permeable to competing ideas such as modernity, progress, justice, good governance and even citizenship and equality before the law. Such redefinitions of empire allowed by its ‘zones of ambiguity’ were also observed in the Russian empire, and yet the Russian case has often been seen as an outlier of a broader European phenomenon – also in what concerns liberal ideology and, more specifically, liberal imperialism.

I examine how empire and imperialism became central to Russian liberal thinking during the Great Reforms, largely based on correspondence and other writings by Prince Nikolay A. Orlov at the height of the reform debates. Despite living abroad, Nikolay was by no means a marginal character in the political discussions taking place in Russia. By virtue of his privileged position within a group of ‘aristocratic magnates’ and as a close friend of the royal family who was deeply
engaged with the political discussions of his time, Nikolay actively pushed for the liberal policies he saw as beneficial to the fulfilment of the Russian destiny as a European power. I argue that, during the early 1860s, liberal imperialism gained a particular momentum that would be impossible to replicate in the following decades, as its programme was deeply influenced by the post-Crimean War international scene. Notwithstanding, I posit that Russian liberalism should be placed within a broader European liberalism and was strongly impacted by the successes and shortcomings of the liberal imperialist stance that Prince Orlov personifies.

**Prince N.A. Orlov: A biographical sketch**

Prince Nikolay A. Orlov was well liked among his peers, being known for his gentle personality and his bravery during the Crimean War, which earned him military honours and a respectable eyepatch. Boris N. Chicherin (1828–1904) was confounded by Nikolay, whom he considered to be ‘one of the strangest personalities’ he had ever encountered. Nevertheless, Chicherin conceded Nikolay’s ‘irresistible desire for enlightenment with a brightly liberal mindset’ (Chicherin, 1929: 127). Others, such as Feoktistov, would corroborate this perception of Nikolay as an honest, bright man who, despite his noble status and wealth, had not ‘a hint of arrogance’ in his friendly manners (Oksman and Presniakov, 1929: 53).

From an early age, Nikolay had not been merely financially independent: he was, indeed, one of Russia’s richest men. This position was reaffirmed upon his marriage to the daughter and only heiress to the wealthy Prince N.I. Trubetskoy. His wife, Ekaterina (1840–1875), as reported by Nikolay himself, had an annual income of 60,000 roubles. Perhaps also due to his affluence, Nikolay enjoyed a remarkable degree of political independence, and he was undoubtedly open regarding his views, even when they challenged the official policy.

Despite his liberal views, Nikolay did not precisely fit into rigid categories – conservative, liberal or even radical. He rejected the policy of what he called ‘semi-reforms’, supported by anti-emancipation personalities such as S.G. Stroganov (1794–1882), and he criticised the slow transformations advocated by Chicherin. Nikolay also condemned concrete policies by liberal ‘statists’, as the one of ‘russification’ in Poland introduced by N.A. Milyutin (1818–1872). He was, moreover, an unwavering monarchist, with close personal ties to the royal family, as he studied, travelled and fought alongside Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich (1827–1892) and became a confidant and (unofficial) tutor and advisor to Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich (1843–1865), from the late 1850s until the Grand Duke’s untimely death.

However, for most of his life after the Crimean War, Prince Orlov observed Russia from the outside. From 1859 to 1869, he was the ambassador of Russia to Belgium. For a short period afterwards, he was the ambassador to Austria, and, in May 1870, he was transferred to Britain, where he remained as ambassador until 1871. From then until 1880, he was the ambassador to France and, in 1884, he became the ambassador to Germany for a brief period only, as due to his poor health he would move to Fontainebleau, where he died in March 1885.

**‘Order and freedom’: contextualising Prince Orlov’s experiences abroad and his Russian liberalism**

During his time as ambassador to Belgium, Nikolay exchanged numerous letters with the young Grand Duke Nicholas, in which he would provide some guidance – or ‘political lessons’ – while expanding on his own views. Prince Orlov was a perceptive reader of the contradictory internal situation in post-emancipation Russia, clearly expressing his views on various topics, from the ‘dire’
financial situation to foreign policy and the ongoing reform debate. Notwithstanding the relevance of his experiences abroad, Prince Orlov’s political thought had much in common with the Russian liberals he criticised and sometimes even antagonised. Most significantly, Nikolay found in the imperial state the agent of civilisation that would overcome the ambiguous location of Russia on the ‘Western’ scale of civilisational development while simultaneously keeping an eye on the problem of imperial diversity (Semyonov, 2012: 72).

In terms of foreign policy, Nikolay was vehemently against militaristic views with a preference for aggressive power, as those advanced by leading personalities with ‘pan-Slavic tendencies’, such as N.P. Ignatyev (1832–1908) and Generals Chernyayev (1828–1898) and Fadeyev (1824–1883), who opposed the post-Crimean War policy of retrenchment. Indeed, the Crimean War had taught Russian liberals that political power could not depend solely on military resources. In this sense, Prince Orlov was very much in line with his fellow Russian liberals, to whom emancipation of the serfs had been the central issue to address foreign policy concerns: internal reforms were key to restoring Russia’s might and glory, as well as its major role in European politics, after the military defeat in 1856.

One can say that Russian liberals broadly united under a sort of Hegelian spirit, according to which the rights belonged ‘not to nationality, but to the state’, which forms a ‘legal person that could encompass not one, but several nationalities’ (Chicherin, 1866: 402–3), that is, a strong and just state was the best guarantor of progress. Nikolay seems to echo the concern with a law-based policy rather than a nationally driven one, although he, unlike Chicherin or Granovsky, did not hint at the British empire as an ideal blueprint. As for most Russian liberals, also for Nikolay, Europeanness meant the neutrality of ‘the concept of the state, its elevated status above the discourse of nationality, […] its openness toward diversity and the potential to be a neutral site for negotiation between different nationalities of the empire’ (Semyonov, 2012: 74). Additionally, as a monarchist, Nikolay believed, like K.D. Kavelin, that the monarchy played a crucial role in building such a state, as the Tsar would stand above all estates, a supreme mediator of social interests.

Most liberals would concur with Chicherin that civil rights ought to be granted to modernise Russia. However, in their view, political rights were a more distant goal in the liberal balance between liberty and stability. Despite Nikolay’s assertion that a central parliament ‘would only do harm’ at the time of the Great Reforms, it does not seem that he agreed that the Russian people were not ready for democracy (Rabow-Edling, 2012) but rather that his notion of representative institutions was not that of a centralised parliament. Prince Orlov’s views on constitutionalism are clarified in a letter to Grand Duke Nicholas on 16 February 1865, in which he revealed the preference for a wider representative order. Whereas a central parliament would be hazardous at the time, Nikolay unequivocally argued for local representation:

A central Parliament would only do harm at the present time. On the contrary, it seems to me that the local parliaments (they could be called the highest zemstvo institutions) would bring significant benefits and […] prepare the terrain for the central Parliament, if such is ever needed [in the twentieth century] (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 31, L. 1).8

In a letter (unspecified date) to his friend Feoktistov, Nikolay would be more outspoken regarding his opinions on constitutional principles, which diverged from the mainstream liberal views on the introduction of a representative system based on self-government vis-à-vis federalism:

Note that the sovereign [Alexander II], in his conversation with Milyutin, did not deny the possibility of representative institutions and did not say, as was said ten years ago, that autocracy is the cornerstone on
which the Russian state is based […]. Reform should start at the bottom, and then it will be reliable. Self-
government of peasant societies is the foundation of everything. It already exists in all its might, and the
young peasant generation grows up in the consciousness of its own legitimate power; *zemstvo* institutions
will bring new people onto the scene and curb the arbitrariness of local authorities; jurors and lawyers
will be a threat to bureaucratic despots. There is one more important step: the establishment of
the highest *zemstvo* assemblies, or local parliaments. They will not represent the provinces, but entire
strips of Russia […]. Behind the local parliaments will stand *zemstvo* institutions, behind the latter – the
community, that is, the whole people. In this case, autocracy will no longer be despotism, and there will
no longer be arbitrariness in Russia. […] Of course, Russia will become a federal state […] with a
common parliament, the supreme power will weaken, and Russia will fall to pieces; with local rep-
resentation, Russia will be a federal state, and in all parts of the empire the needs of its inhabitants will be
legitimately satisfied (Transcribed in Feoktistov, 1991: 77–8).

The local parliaments would, according to this scheme, be released from the pressure of the
administrative authorities and ensure the genuine representation of the local populations and their
interests. The emphasis that Prince Orlov put on the ‘legitimate’ satisfaction of the people’s needs is
a crucial point in his liberal thought, which was often inspired by what he observed as a diplomat
abroad. On 11 February 1860, writing about his impressions of life in Belgium, Prince Orlov would
say to Grand Duke Nicholas: ‘The country is governed excellently. Freedom is complete in ev-
everything, and always and everywhere there is order. And with order and freedom, how can people
not be happy? God willing, someday the same can be said about us’ (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D.
26, L. 8 [my emphasis]).

In this critical aspect of the constitutional future of the Russian empire, Nikolay’s political ideas
borrowed surprising nuances from those of émigré radicals, such as Sergei M. Stepiak-
Kraychinskii (1851–1895) and Feliks V. Volkovskii (1846–1914). Like these radicals, to
whom other empires compared favourably to Russia (Green, 2020: 642), Nikolay ignored many
aspects of the Belgian empire in his writings. Russian otherness justified his prescriptions to
overcome Russian backwardness and ‘imperial misrule’ – and such prescriptions, much like those
of émigré radicals, emphasised local self-government and decentralisation. Although in different
ways, these radicals and Prince Orlov argued from the perspective of an existing ‘imperial misrule’
that ought to be corrected in order to make the Russian empire a ‘benevolent force’, thus justifying
the maintenance of the empire in the event of political change. Regrettably, Nikolay did not say
much on the question of nationality within the empire, but from his writing stems the belief that
liberalism – as a reformist programme concerned with civil liberties, the rule of law, and the
development of a civic spirit and a concern for the common good – was vital to Russia’s national
interest (or, in other words, to the survival of the imperial state). Hence, Prince Orlov, as a liberal,
could also be considered a patriot (Rabow-Edling, 2019: 97).

Therefore, a federal state was, according to Prince Orlov, the best way to guarantee ‘publicity’,
that is, the transparency of the actions of public authorities without which, according to Benjamin
Constant (1767–1830), the public good could not exist. ‘Publicity’ was, most liberals would agree,
the necessary precondition for the control of the conduct of government (Fontana, 1991: 81).
Nikolay argued that such transparency was to be obtained through a federation where the ‘whole
people’ (i.e. all estates and all nationalities) would be represented in political institutions. Although
he was more silent than his liberal counterparts on the issue of nationalism and more silent than
radicals on matters of cultural diversity, he clearly ascribed the civilising (‘benevolent’) mission of
the Russian empire to a patriotic and unifying goal: strengthening Russia internally so that it could
stand internationally as a European power.
Humanität, a concept developed by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), was central to Prince Orlov’s political thought. He, like most liberals, believed in putting the rule of law in the service of Humanität, the creative power and potentiality of human beings, which Prince Orlov linked to the importance of human dignity. His support of the emancipation project was rooted in the liberal idea of human dignity. However, the broader call for reform as a response to the civilisational needs raised by Humanität seems to be framed in imperial terms, as he perceived moral injustices as obstacles to the fulfilment of the Russian destiny as a European power. Similarly to the views of forefront liberals such as Granovsky, Nikolay believed that the laws and policies of the state should be based on moral principles, which acted as a unifying force within the empire. His moral principles, based on human evolution and religious notions of brotherhood and equality before the law, became visible in Nikolay’s activism for the abolition of corporal punishment in the early 1860s, which is discussed in a subsequent section. Yet, already in 1858, he had penned an article on the need for religious tolerance in the Russian empire, namely toward the Jewish population. In Nikolay’s eyes, the social impact of tolerance would be a positive force for the internal development of the empire. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the advancement of national unity underlying his political activism was directed at overcoming social differences and injustices more than ethnic or cultural ones.

Prince Orlov’s liberalism saw in the respect for basic human rights and fundamental freedoms a way to modernise the empire and put it at the same competitive – and civilisational – level as its Western counterparts. On both moral-humanistic and imperial grounds, Nikolay envisioned the liberation of serfs with full provision of land,10 regarding the Polish situation within the Russian empire, he proposed a complete revision of Russian foreign policy; and he passionately advocated the abolition of corporal punishment.

The Polish Question and Prince Orlov’s liberal lessons on ‘order’

The aforementioned meeting with someone as radical as Bakunin had already hinted at the contrast between Prince Orlov’s liberal position on the so-called ‘Polish Question’ and the official stance. This issue was given particular attention in the letters exchanged with Grand Duke Nicholas in February–March 1863, after a concerning ‘insurrection’ in Poland. In a first missive, dated 25 February, Nikolay broached the topic, pointing to the possibility of an all-European coalition against Russia. He feared that the Russian situation was ‘not looking good from the outside’:

We have forgotten that apart from internal reforms, a big power must have alliances that […] would give it the opportunity to improve its internal life in peace and quiet. We did the last part, forgetting about the first. It turned out that, at the first adversity, everyone is against us (GARF, 1865: F.665, Op.1, D. 29, L.7).

According to Prince Orlov, the different interests of the European powers meant too many fronts to be fought, either through diplomacy or an actual conflict: Sweden had interests in Finland; the Poles wanted all the ‘old Poland’; Napoleon was ready to march against Russia; and Sweden, Turkey and Austria were ready to form a coalition with France. Only the British were ‘holding back’, in fear of French ambitions.11 It was in this context that Nikolay proposed a radical revision of foreign policy: in his view, Russia should try to form an alliance with England, in order to ‘preserve the common peace’. He also put forward a complete turn in the conduct of Polish affairs: ‘the only outcome [of the Polish uprising] is the separation of the Kingdom of Poland from Russia’. This solution was not merely due to personal sympathies regarding the revolutionaries’ pleas; it was
primarily inserted in an imperial rationale: ‘I know there is much to be said against the separation of Poland from Russia, but, nevertheless, it is better to separate a member than to allow a gangrene to spread throughout the body’. Although Prince Orlov saw the separation of Poland from Russia as a necessary measure to ensure the stability of a vast empire, he sought to preserve Russian influence. Under these terms, a separated Poland would be under the rule of the Russian Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich, whom Prince Orlov saw fit for the Polish Crown due to his recent experience with Polish affairs as viceroy (1862–1863).

Among Russian liberals, Prince Orlov was not alone in his reasoning for the separation of the Polish lands. Chicherin had also argued that the separation of Poland was the best strategy to address the ‘Polish Question’ – except for the Western region, where he believed, unlike Prince Orlov, that the policy of assimilation could be successfully implemented (Chicherin, 1866: 402–403). However, their views were similar at the core: neither Prince Orlov nor Chicherin meant for complete Polish independence but rather for political arrangements where loyalty to the Russian empire would be preserved.

Nevertheless, the separation of the Polish lands, even under Romanov rule, was utterly contrary to the official policy. A plan to introduce and strengthen the ‘Russian element’ in Lithuania and Ukraine, as well as to provide the Poles ‘with truly useful reforms’, was pursued instead. On 26 March 1863, Nikolay wrote that the plan was ‘worthy of all respect’, yet ‘insufficient’ and ‘unrealistic’, for it failed to address the foreign policy aspect (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 29, L.13–20). Indeed, whereas Chicherin had diagnosed the imperial nature of the challenge as the Russian hybrid form of the European multinational empire and a colonial empire, Nikolay emphasised foreign policy as a crucial element in the relations between Poland and Russia. After all, as Prince Orlov recalled, Russian Poland had been a polity resulting from the Congress of Vienna in 1815, an arrangement that could invite the intervention of other states in Russian-Polish affairs. To Nikolay, this point was the crux of the matter: if a ‘formidable coalition’ of European powers against Russia was to occur at the same time as a new Polish uprising, then war would be ‘inevitable’, and a catastrophic situation would ensue, not to Poland, but to the Russian empire. The only way to avoid this catastrophe was, Prince Orlov believed, ‘Russia’s voluntary renunciation’ of Poland. Moreover, he argued that this renunciation would not open any dangerous precedent: the European powers had no grounds for interfering in Lithuanian or Ukrainian affairs, as Poland was the only territory that had been given to Russia by a common European agreement.

Prince Orlov’s three-step proposal regarding the ‘Polish Question’ was thus clear: (i) renouncing Poland; (ii) putting a Romanov monarch on the Polish throne and (iii) making an alliance with an independent Poland. His plan is a good indication of what Prince Orlov thought of the internal situation, already weakened by the effects of the Crimean War: he recognised in the Russian obstinacy not only a shallow attempt at holding on to the Polish territories but also a threat to the empire.

[Perhaps] Poland will not separate from Russia, but Russian hearts will withdraw from the dynasty. They will ask themselves the question: why should Russia shed the blood of her sons and make enormous efforts to keep Poland in iron gloves? The answer will be: we are holding on in Poland not out of the state’s needs, but on a tsarist whim. Such a belief can have disastrous consequences when it spreads among the people, and you cannot imagine how quickly such concepts are spreading among the people and how difficult it is to eradicate them.

Being against the notion of relying solely on military intervention to deal with such a threat, Prince Orlov urged Grand Duke Nicholas to ‘remember the history of Russia from 1725 to 1762’: if
a rebellion were to go on in Poland, the Russian soldiers would return in poor health, and guerrilla actions would soon weaken discipline. ‘Internecine wars are fatal to the military spirit’, Nikolay declared, favouring “in the popular, military, and dynastic terms, the complete separation of the Kingdom of Poland from Russia.” It was clear to him that, should the government insist on keeping Poland, ‘the reigning house risks losing the Russian throne’.

The lengthy letter ends with Nikolay urging the Grand Duke to take the matter seriously, in a fashion that seems more fitting of a teacher than of a friend: ‘God has assigned you the difficult task of governing Russia […] You cannot look at it exclusively from the point of view of the Winter Palace or from a […] purely theoretical [view]’. Good governance was essential to keep ‘order’ in the empire, in a broader sense than the power and control over its territory and people. ‘Order’ was undoubtedly dependent on unity and stability, but also, as Nikolay suggested, on public opinion—which he defines as the beliefs that ‘spread among the people’. Thus, maintaining ‘order’ also meant keeping the people loyal to an impartial monarchy personified by a fatherly emperor.

The abolition of corporal punishment and Prince Orlov’s liberal lessons on ‘freedom’

The key concept of Humanitāt became even more salient for Russian liberals after the Crimean War, in the context of the reform programme. Prince Orlov believed that it was crucial to eliminate ‘barbaric tortures’, as by ‘ennobling punishment’ one was simultaneously elevating power and protecting individual rights. In terms of language, he went considerably further than other prominent Russian liberals by stressing the centrality of individual rights.13 In Prince Orlov’s view, freedom—and, more specifically, Humanitāt as respect for human dignity—also had to become part of a sort of social contract between the emperor and ‘the whole people’ in the context of reform.

Serf emancipation was a central programmatic point of the early reforms, but the abolition of corporal punishment also garnered wide support, especially from intellectuals, soldiers and officers. Yet, despite the growing condemnation of corporal punishment, such punitive measures were retained and practiced between 1861 and 1863, having undergone but a few limitations. The emperor and his group of leading reformers concluded that the abolition of corporal punishment should be delayed. This position was vastly criticised, among others, by influential criminalists such as V.D. Spasovich (1829–1906) who condemned corporal punishment in an 1863 textbook on criminal law: ‘corporal punishment cannot long remain in use among educated people’ (Quoted in Adams, 2019: 22).

In the military sphere, Grand Duke Konstantin began a naval reform aimed at finding solutions to the shortcomings of the Russian military position, which he had experienced first-hand during his military career and his work at the Ministry of the Navy during the Crimean War. In this context, Grand Duke Konstantin actively promoted debates about possible reforms, including the abolition of corporal punishment, in order to increase discipline and morale among an underperforming army (Baryatinsky, 1889). Amendments to the established justice system and the discussion of corporal punishment were thus taking place at the same time as the debates about the emancipation of the serfs, even if the abolition of such punishments did not become part of the emancipation legislation after all. Ultimately, emancipation proved crucial to an openly liberal engagement in the politics of broader reforms and, more specifically, to adopting a ‘humanistic’, moral discourse in support of imperial reforms.

While the abolition of corporal punishment was not the only cause that Prince Orlov publicly advocated, his political action in this context seems to have been remarkably influential. As Adams (2019: 22) puts it, the note that Nikolay wrote to the emperor in March 1861 (less than a month after
the formalisation of serf emancipation) was ‘the opening shot in the final battle of this period to abolish corporal punishment’. Indeed, Prince Orlov’s note was the first formal request to the emperor concerning this matter in a broader context of reform, going through all the arguments for abolishing corporal punishment in the Russian empire. In this sense, Prince Orlov’s note was a veritable manifesto, exposing ideas and a rationale that were vastly shared by legislators.

There were three main arguments in the document that Prince Orlov produced. The first reflected Prince Orlov’s perception of a more developed West, as in the ‘majority of European countries’ corporal punishment was ‘completely abolished or only used in rare exceptions’ (Orlov, 1902: 549).

As Nikolay would say to State-Secretary Komovsky in a letter on 27 December 1861, Russia chose the ‘right path’ with emancipation, but there was still ‘a lot to be done’ in order to modernise the country according to European standards: ‘if Russia wants to become truly European, it has to […] [learn to] see the people’ (Transcribed in Komovsky, 1897: 676). In a quasi-Kavelinian view, Nikolay argued that Russia had to become more European in order to learn how to be Russian again: such a ‘barbaric’, ‘backwards’, ‘evil’ practice was incompatible with Russia because corporal punishment was not a native practice but rather a ‘vile memorial of Tatar domination’, foreign to Russian natural and historical customs.

The second argument, intertwined with the historical proposition of what was natural to Russia, was based on Christian principles. Such principles were congruent with Granovsky’s liberal belief that ‘the philosophical and religious principles of the rational, educated citizen coincided with the principles and aims of the state’ (Rabow-Edling, 2019: 66). Furthermore, Prince Orlov’s document attempted to solve the apparent contradictions between Orthodoxy and his plea for equality before the law by resorting to the argument of the ‘laws of mercy’ condemning all types of violence and, more broadly, through ideas of justice and brotherhood. The empire should ‘always defend the human body as created in the image and likeness of God’, as everyone should be treated equally according to Christian values:

[There is no equality or brotherhood] where two men may stand side by side in the same church, but for the very same transgression are punished differently: one with a light arrest and the other by a beating or whipping. In a Christian country, there can be no partiality, and justice [the law] must be similar to God’s justice, i.e. equal for all (Orlov, 1902: 549–50).

In the third argument, Nikolay presented a political proposition based on an idea of human evolution. According to the Prince, such an evolution was more moral – or even psychological – than strictly biological: corporal punishment was ‘immoral’ and thus ‘ineffective’. Hence, corporal punishment was not natural to Russia as it was not natural to Russians as individuals. Gentle behaviour was, in his view, a marker of social evolution and civilisation, whereas corporal punishment supported ‘rudeness of manners’ [grubost’ nravov], thus obstructing the ‘correct development of human personality’ and producing alarming ‘personality defects’. Prince Orlov hypothesised that an inclusive moral and scientific education would also bring about more empathy toward one’s fellows. And this ‘unavoidable’ consciousness of progress would ultimately bring shame to ‘barbaric’ practices. This third argument for abolishing corporal punishment was embraced by many in government. Its popularity may be due to a growing concern regarding peasant violence, as this perceived threat had the political elite especially concerned at the dawn of emancipation.

Corporal punishment was, according to Prince Orlov, more than an ‘evil’: after emancipation, it was ‘a great danger’ to the empire, as such punishments became more distinctively out-of-place. Prince Orlov believed that the maintenance of pre-emancipation laws, especially those regarding the
treatment of people, could lead to ‘opposition’ to the empire. Corporal punishment and other ‘injustices’ that were not coherent with the advent of reform would simply further antagonise those who suffered from them.

In the eighth section of his note to the emperor, Nikolay focused on the corporal punishments inflicted within the military sphere, arguing that their complete abolition was a natural consequence of the ‘ennoblement’ of the Russian soldier:

In the past, […] many men serving in the ranks of the Russian army […] had been sent as recruits as a punishment […] [and then] the use of the lash was understandable as a means of correction. Now that the title of soldier has been ennobled, and that a soldier wears the uniform not as a punishment but as an honour, it is possible to abolish all corporal punishment (Orlov, 1902: 553).

In his view, corporal punishment was an ‘evil’ everywhere, and to society as a whole – ineffective, not only from a moral standpoint, but also as a coercive measure. Moreover, Prince Orlov believed that there were more reasonable yet ‘more frightening’ punishments, such as exile and forced labour. He proposed monetary fines as a punishment, although he would admit that this alternative required more careful planning and change was too urgent. Nikolay hoped the abolition of ‘all barbaric punishments’ would soon happen, reaffirming that more ‘humanitarian’ penalties should replace corporal punishment. Indeed, words like ‘humane’ or ‘humanitarian’ appear conspicuously often in a document of just about 1500 words.

The last paragraph of the note sheds light on how these issues were articulated within a broader imperial question: ‘Russia is reaching a 1000 years of existence. Serfdom has already been abolished. It remains to complete this salutary reformation through the abolition of corporal punishment in the Russian Empire and in the Kingdom of Poland’ (Orlov, 1902: 553). Prince Orlov framed the practice of corporal punishment as a valid issue in the broader question of the preservation of imperial power, justifying its abolition as part of a liberal ideology and as fundamental to the future of the Russian empire within a European context. Corporal punishment in the military and the branding of soldiers as a punitive practice were ultimately abolished, and this change was gradually implemented on a wider scale after 1864.

Adams (2019), in his analysis of Prince Orlov’s note to the emperor, insists that the document was far from being a political statement, arguing that its nature was essentially ‘non-political’, resulting in an overall ‘populist note’. Not only does this assessment grossly underplay the note’s contents and reception among state officials, but it is also evident that Nikolay himself saw this note as political activism, perhaps his most openly political intervention in domestic state affairs. His epistolary exchange with Komovsky is the most convincing evidence for his own perception. On 16 February 1862, when asking State-Secretary Komovsky ‘have you heard if something was done in the State Council about the abolition of corporal punishment?’, Prince Orlov added: ‘my first and, I think, my last business in the state arena’ (Transcribed in Komovsky, 1897: 677).

Nikolay’s participation in the debates about the abolition of corporal punishment exemplifies a trend of political engagement that is common to most liberals of the time. His humanitarian and moral concerns were clearly framed within the imperial context, which made Nikolay’s proposal for the abolition of corporal punishment particularly palatable to state officials and legislators. The note on the abolition of corporal punishment that Prince Orlov sent to the emperor is perhaps his most public – and openly liberal – political statement in the debates inaugurated by the Great Reforms. The principles of ‘order and freedom’ would, in his view, become increasingly crucial for the Russian empire. As internal reforms were launched to make Russia more competitive, they would also foster education, morality and empathy (or ‘humanity’, according to Nikolay’s word choice),
thus rendering certain practices intolerable. Prince Orlov believed that, if those practices persisted, the ‘shame’ Russians would feel would lead to discontent, and the building up of tensions caused by the unequal application of these practices would ultimately result in the outbreak of social unrest. This was also a liberal concern. The consequences of social unrest were undesirable to liberals, to whom the balance between progress and stability was vital: they could jeopardise the nation-making project necessary for the survival of the imperial state.

On the lasting impact of liberal imperialism

Prince Orlov’s correspondence and other writings denote a core preoccupation with questions of empire that are congruent with a pan-European liberal discussion of civilisational development – of progress – while acknowledging the problem of imperial diversity (Semyonov 2012). What is specific to the Russian case is the pathway offered by the Great Reforms for the identification of the state as the agent of civilisation.

Nikolay’s stance on the ‘Polish Question’ points to a broader liberal search ‘for the borderline between ideological values and the country’s interests’ and ‘between ensuring safety and achieving high international standing’, but mainly to a common concern: finding ‘a lever in foreign policy that could encourage the government to follow a liberal course’ (Arslanov et al., 2018: 934). Although his foreign policy attitude had unique features in the endorsement of an independent Poland, Nikolay focused on the imperial ambitions of the state, arguing for a political arrangement that justified the maintenance of spheres of influence, thus pertaining to the consolidation of the Russian position internally and abroad.

His liberal principles of Humanität were similarly argued according to an imperial logic: reforms based on moral principles were crucial for the civilisational development of the Russian empire to a European standard. Since Prince Orlov did not go into any detail about the formation of a modern nation-state, one can only conjecture a parallel between his ideas of human evolution and those by the liberal economist Walter Bagehot (1826–1877) of nation-making was the ‘essential content’ of 19th century social evolution. Yet, one thing is certain: Prince Orlov’s political thought was a product of a time when empires were actively involved in nation-making (Hobsbawm, 1993: 23), as they had to prepare themselves for an emerging world of nations competing for power and legitimacy far beyond the military battlefield. In this context, Nikolay’s vehement support of a different foreign policy course; of reform in the structure of government; and of the empire as a civilising, ‘benevolent’ force promoting ‘human evolution’ through notions of equality and justice, reveals that he, like most of his liberal counterparts in Russia and beyond, was engaging in conversations on empire-strengthening, state-building and nation-making. The idea of nation was indissociable from progress, as it was the most progressive form of state. That Prince Orlov did not expound a view specifically on the nation (as he did not use this term) in the context of immediate reforms – besides a preoccupation with the representation of ‘the whole people’ – seems to be a consequence of his opinion on Russian backwardness in the 1860s.

Prince Orlov often distinguished his strand of liberalism from the one propounded by Chicherin, as tranpired by depreciative comments made throughout his correspondence with Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich. However, in ideological terms, they had much in common. Ultimately, they shared the core principles that allowed liberalism to develop its most distinctive traits during the Great Reforms: the liberalism they professed was programmatic and not merely philosophical; their political position(s) clearly constituted a middle stance between conservatives and radicals, seeking to prevent despotism as well as popular and aristocratic rule; and they aimed at asserting
fundamental rights while proposing a balance between liberty and stability, as they chose to cooperate with the state instead of working against it (Rabow-Edling, 2019: 9–10).

The disastrous outcomes of the Crimean War made it urgent to redefine the Russian empire. The defeat in the war had brought a sense of national crisis that resulted extraordinarily productive – and politically profitable – to liberals, albeit for a short time. In addition, for a moment, it seemed that the civic sort of empire-strengthening policies implemented by Alexander II was to become the chosen direction to address the issues raised by imperial diversity. Liberalism was then perceived as a way to save the empire by purging it from a multitude of evils through extensive reforms aimed at its modernisation, with the promise of making the empire more Russian by moving toward a Western-inspired concept of progress. Like many liberals, Prince Orlov both criticised and justified imperialism as a way to improve the lives of the people living under Russian rule while furthering imperial interests. Imperialism was central to his liberal view as the only path to progress, even if the empire had to undergo considerable reforms to fulfil its ultimate civilising mission of nation-making. Thus, his view of the Russian empire amalgamated several apparent paradoxes – the Russian position as a European power despite its delayed civilisational development; a federal, representative imperial state under a strong, fatherly Tsar; the striving for national unity without addressing crucial issues raised by nationalities and nationalism. According to Nikolay, such paradoxes could become compatible if imperial ‘misrule’ was overcome through extensive reform and if the Russian empire was made into a ‘benevolent’, civilising force. While ‘zones of ambiguity’ made empires more permeable to reform, significant contradictions were left either unresolved or as a matter of disagreement among Russian liberals precisely when the Great Reforms presented the most propitious time for their reconciliation. Hence, it is no coincidence that Prince Orlov voiced his liberal imperial views in this period, only to become less active in such discussions in the following decades, when politics became more polarised.

Prince Orlov’s liberal imperialism highlights the key points of the political discussions of the time: reform as a means to modernisation; the delimitations of an expansionist empire toward a nation-state (although most liberals across Europe would continue to argue practices of colonialism through moral justifications of the empire); the civilising nature of the empire toward progress and the European balance of power after the Crimean War. The implication of his imperial views was the consolidation of Russia as a European power in the international scene as a matter of the state’s national interest. Nikolay’s liberal views pointed to how to go about that: through an extensive reform programme that would grant civil as well as political rights, modernising Russia from within and unifying ‘the whole people’ of the empire. Prince Orlov’s views are relevant to those interested in Russian imperial politics precisely because they were formulated at a critical juncture for the modern Russian empire. The liberal debates in which Prince Orlov took part irreversibly changed Russia. Their vocabulary and constellation of ideas would have a lasting impact on how change was perceived and discussed in the Russian empire well into the 20th century.

Moreover, Nikolay’s liberal imperialist stance also draws attention to more nuanced discussions regarding the imperial state apparatus, which are often neglected in favour of taken-for-granted premises of a strong, centralised state to rule ‘above all national sympathies’. On the contrary, Prince Orlov’s insistence on a federal solution reveals that both the timing and the best way to achieve a constitutional regime with representative institutions were far from agreed-upon matters among liberals. Furthermore, discussions on centralism versus federalism in the Russian context certainly deserve more attention: scholars of other ‘land empires’, such as the Habsburg empire, have suggested that distinctions between centralists and federalists might at times be even more relevant than those between liberals and conservatives (Judson, 2016; Kwan, 2013).
I started this paper with the striking meeting between a liberal, Prince Orlov, and a radical, Bakunin. It seems fitting to evoke the same event at the end, not on a hopeful note but as the exception it was. Regrettably, political cleavages would only deepen afterwards. The ‘russification’ of imperial territories procured after the Polish uprising of 1863 – which had occasioned the meeting – greatly diverged from the solutions advanced by Prince Orlov and Bakunin. Such a course of action would prompt a shift from the liberal programme addressing imperial diversity to a ‘nation-centred paradigm’ (Semyonov, 2012: 76). Moreover, the ‘russifying’ policies would alienate a diverse group that had been extremely active in the discussions surrounding the Great Reforms, ultimately contributing to the radicalisation of the liberal movement itself. However, the idea of building a great, modern Russia through liberal imperialism would be long-lasting, with the First World War reinforcing an increasingly nationalist tendency. And, even though liberalism – be it liberal imperialism or liberal nationalism – was to be defeated by Bolshevism in 1917, the issues raised by liberal imperialists such as Prince Orlov did not wholly disappear from the political agenda: progress, modernisation, justice, coloniality, state consciousness and the integrity of the imperial state. Despite several (re)formulations throughout time, these continued to be broader questions of ‘order and freedom’ within different models of a Russian empire aimed at strengthening its position as a world power through ideas of a righteous path and the fulfilment of a national destiny. An inherently expansionist, civilising empire continued to be central to Soviet Russia – and arguably still dominates Russian politics.

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Notes
1. ‘Eto tchernyy kabinet sostavlen iz poslednikh mogikan zlopolut'shogo i tratsnogo tsarstvovaniya Nikolaya. Vy naydete tam, v pervom ryadu, potomka tsareubiytse, Alekseya Orlova – druga pokoynogo [...]’ (Herzen, 1957: 306).
2. John Stuart Mill is perhaps the most well-researched personality in the context of a liberal defence of empire. His thought exemplifies the ‘internal tensions of liberalism’ as he expanded on arguments regarding the ‘normative legitimacy of imperial rule’ (Mantena, 2007).
3. Whereas I do not make a systematic distinction between the ‘imperial’ and the ‘colonial’, I take into consideration the expansionist character of the empire as defined by Calhoun et al. (2006: 3): ‘a political unit that is large and expansionist (or with memories of an expansionist past) reproducing differentiation and inequity among people it incorporates’ and usually having a ruling centre and a dominated periphery. Another possible term to describe some of these territories/colonies may be ‘annexes’, ‘since failure to
incorporate is characteristic of empires’ (Pitts, 2010: 213). To Muldoon (1999: 139, 149), ‘empire’ also suggests ‘a great territorial expanse, inhabited by a wide variety of people’, noting that it was only in the 19th century that the word ‘came into official use in Western Europe’. I particularly concur with the eloquent distinction provided by Kumar (2017: 19), ‘empire, imperialism, and colonialism make up a family of concepts with varied but overlapping uses. […] Empire is rule over a multitude of peoples. Imperialism and colonialism are the attitudes and practices that relate to empire’.

4. This expression was coined by Dominic Lieven (1992: xiii–xv) to distinguish between a few high-born aristocrats from the gentry, as their characteristics, functions and strategies greatly differed from one another.

5. B.N. Chicherin was a protégé of Timofei Granovsky (1813–1855), one of the foremost proponents of liberal ideas under Nicholas I. Alongside Konstantin Kavelin (1818–1885), Chicherin is one of the leading liberal figures to construe the defeat in the Crimean War and the ascension of Alexander II to the throne in the terms that would ultimately set in motion ‘the transition from intellectual to political liberalism in Russia’ (Leontovitsch, 2012: 191; Poole, 2015: 169).

6. Prince Orlov’s political views and behaviour raised a few eyebrows even among fellow liberals. In his memoirs, Chicherin recalls with some irritation when, in 1864, Nikolay, in the presence of Grand Duke Nicholas, allegedly said: ‘Goodbye, I hope [to see you] in the Russian parliament [v russkom parlamente], although you and I, in all likelihood, will sit on different benches, for I – I will sit to the left’. Chicherin was displeased at the remark, as he could not understand ‘why he [Prince Orlov] should have doomed himself in advance to an oppositional role, when the convocation of the Russian parliament obviously presupposed a direction in the government that was supposed to find the sympathy and support of all liberal people’ (Chicherin, 1929: 129). The core values of what Shneider (2012: 48–49, 112–113) identifies as Chicherin’s ‘conservative liberalism’ [okhranitel’nyi liberalizm] were freedom of conscience; emancipation of the serfs and emancipation from oppression and various forms of abuse of authority; freedom of speech; freedom of the press; academic freedom; more transparency regarding all state activities and public legal proceedings (Chicherin, 1998).

7. Already in the 1850s, pan-Slavism had become a more or less coherent political ideology that supported ‘the superiority of Slavs over other nations and Russia’s calling as a hegemon in the Slavic world’ (Tuminez, 2000: 58).

8. ‘Tsentral’nyy parlament prines by tol’ko vred v nasoyashcheye vremya. Naprotiv togo, mne kazhetsya, chto mestnyye Parlamentsy (ikh mozhno by nazvat’ vysshimi zemskimi uchrezhdennyami) prinesli by sushchestvennymu pol’zu i dlya dvadsatogoto stoletiya podgotovili by elementy k Tsentral’noumu parlamentu, yesli takovoy neobkhodimo budet nuzhen’ (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 31, L. 1).

9. However, unlike the émigré radicals, Prince Orlov recommended the rule of law and not violence as a way to overcome ‘imperial misrule’.

10. Prince Orlov considered the abolition of serfdom urgent and saw it necessary to replace such a social structure with a ‘legal order’. However, he believed that the reforms of the time had to go beyond what had been envisioned by the most influential reformers, such as Chicherin, whom he believed would ‘probably not want to take all the land from the landlords’ (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 26, L. 8 [Letter to Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich, 11 February 1860]).

11. ‘Angliya uderzhala, boyas’, chto Frantsiya zakhochet ovладet’ Belgiyeyu i utverdit’sya na Reyne’ (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 29, L. 7).

12. ‘Bud’te uvereny, chto Yevropeyskaya voyna vozvadet neizbezha i ne Polsha, a nashe neschastnoye otechestvo budet postavleno v gruzhnoye polozhenie: “to be, or not to be”’ (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 29, L. 13–14).

13. On 16 April 1862, Prince Orlov wrote to Grand Duke Nicholas Alexandrovich: ‘[…] v to vremya kak my stremlimy k unichtozheniyu istyazaniy varvarskikh i, oblagorazhivaya nakazaniya, vozyshayem vlast’i
ograzhdayet lichnost’ cheloveka’ (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 28, L. 12–3). This view went slightly off the liberal script propounded by B.N. Chicherin, who granted exclusively social, integral character to individual freedoms (Chebankova, 2009: 326).

14. About the reforms of Peter, the Great, Kavelin had commented that ‘Russians became more European while remaining as Russian as before’ (Kavelin, 1897).

15. Prince Orlov was also opposed to cutting and scarring in this and other contexts. When arguing that exile was preferable to this practice, Nikolay added: ‘the guilty person can still repent and find redemption for his crime by presenting a model behaviour. For him, life is not entirely over. But someone scarred by whips and disfigured by branding has nothing more left in this world. He is forever an outcast!’ (Orlov, 1902: 551).

16. For example, the letter of 18 April 1864 reveals Prince Orlov’s anxiety regarding Chicherin’s possible influence over the Grand Duke: ‘O politike ya s Vami govorit’ ne budu. Govoryat, v techeniye 1863 g. Vy priobreli rezkiye politicheskuye mneniya, zaimstvovannuye u Chicherina. S etimi mneniyami ya nikogda ne mogu byt’ soglasen i potomu umolkayu i prosto pozdravlyayu Vas s prazdnikom’. Upon the Grand Duke’s denial, Nikolay would, on 3 May, manifest relief that he had not shifted to the side of the ‘frenzied Chicherinists’ after all: ‘Dushevno blagodaryu Vas za nego, moy dobryy drug. Po pravde skazat’, ya byl uveren v samostoyatel’nosti Vashikh mneniy; no slukh o Vashem mnimom perekhode v stan issuplennyykh Katkovistov i Chicherinistov tak ogorchil menya, chto ya sam popal v kraynost’ pisavii k Vam!’ (GARF, 1865: F. 665, Op. 1, D. 30, L. 2, 3).

17. Contrary to what was suggested by Miliukov (1962 [1905]: 169) – that ‘Russian liberalism was not bourgeois, but intellectual’ – and later echoed by Raeff (1994: 36), the liberalism of the 1860s reformers went beyond a purely intellectual movement to integrate a concrete political programme that was consubstantiated with the Great Reforms and their surrounding debates. More recently, Berest (2011) added a nuance to the question of a programmatic liberalism versus a philosophical one. This author argued that the philosophical outlook of early Russian liberalism does not diminish its significance, as many educated Russians embraced liberalism, and their critical attitude would have practical consequences, ultimately weakening the autocracy’s power.

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