

Irina Avkhimovich, University of Illinois

The Time of Troubles and Conservative National Ideology in the Early 19th Century
Russian Drama

In the works of Russian playwrights of the 1800-30s, The Time of Troubles became a very popular and politically charged setting. Not coincidentally, such classical works as Pushkin's Boris Godunov and Glinka's opera Ivan Susanin also take place in that historical setting. They grew from the largely overlooked context of mass historical dramaturgy. I am going to focus on the two more obscure plays that were quite well-known in their own time: Pozharsky (1806) by Kriuchkovsky, and The Hand of God Saved the Fatherland (1834) by Kukol'nik.

I argue that both plays, while having little artistic value and being mostly pseudo-historical, help us greatly to understand the formation of the conservative nationalist ideology and the role of theatre as a cultural medium in that. A part of this new nationalist ideology was based on the arbitrary and tendentious interpretations of the historical events. In the discussed dramas, The Time of Troubles becomes the historical precedent where the Russian nation successfully preserved its authenticity by defeating the Polish intervention that threatened its sovereignty and the Orthodox Christian faith. Pozharsky and Minin's militia came to symbolize the idealized unity between the noble classes and the common people, during the hard times brought by the absence of the legitimate tsar. This narrative of the defensive war was actualized by the wars with France and later cultivated by Nicholas I and his officials. The election of Mikhail Romanov in 1613, that ended the civil unrest, was officially promoted by Nicholas I and his "court dramatist" Kukol'nik as the evidence for the nation's natural predisposition to monarchy that alone can guarantee its peace and stability.

Kriuchkovskii's play was welcomed as the timely expression of the patriotic fervor during the first unsuccessful war with Napoleon, whereas Kukol'nik's play was criticized as too artificial and extreme in its glorification of the loyalty to the state and the religious piety. Still, such propaganda from stage was aimed beyond the noble classes and did work as the reinforcement of conservative thinking among the provincial gentry and the urban classes.