

Historical Sources for Thomas Pynchon's "Peter Pinguid Society"

Martin Paul Eve

Most close readings of the Peter Pinguid Society section in *The Crying of Lot 49* have hailed it as an example par excellence of Pynchon's aptitude for combining historical fact with fiction. However, many of these works have underestimated the precision of Pynchon's sourcing (J. K. Grant 60-61) while others, in extreme cases, have been deceived into the all-too-familiar uncanniness whereby Pynchon's extra-textual history appears too fantastical to be real (Pérez 40). In this note, I will present the cumulative textual evidence to support the view that Pynchon consulted a single work, F. A. Golder's "The Russian Fleet and the Civil War" to construct the historicity of this episode. I will also present an interesting historical connection to the date of significance to Pinguid's supposed followers, for 9 March 1864 was actually the date of Ulysses S. Grant's ascent to the rank of Lieutenant-General—a significant factor in the Union Civil War victory.

To briefly recap: The fictional Peter Pinguid Society was, according to Pynchon's text, founded to commemorate the eponymous captain of a Confederate man-of-war. En-route to launch an assault on San Francisco, Pinguid encountered a Russian vessel under the command of Rear Admiral Popov—sent to prevent Anglo-Franco assistance to the Confederacy—and, in what Brian McHale sees as a Faulknerian parody, the narrative remains unclear over whether they fired at one another (96). Much of the historical scenario could have been constructed from archival naval communications, particularly the Arkhiv Morskogo Ministerstva, Dielo Kantseliarii Morskogo Ministerstva, no. 91, pt. III. (102-03), which is the basis of Golder's work. However, it is far more likely that Pynchon did not visit the Russian archive and, instead, relied on this secondary source.

Such a conclusion is warranted by four direct textual correlations to Golder's article and the improbability of Pynchon arriving at an identical translation of the original Russian sources therein. First, Pynchon writes about a potential Confederate naval threat to San Francisco:

Rumors were abroad that winter that the Reb cruisers Alabama and Sumter were indeed on the point of attacking the city. (32)

which distinctly echoes Golder's account,

It was reported that the Confederate cruisers *Sumter* and *Alabama* were planning to attack the city. (809)

This is of particular note as current scholarship on this section has emphasized the likelihood of the *Alabama* and *Sumter* rumor being of Pynchon's own making. Indeed, Golder's article contains all the named ships, and more, employed by Pynchon in this section: "*Bogatir, Kalevala, Rinda, and Novik, the clippers Abrek and Gaidamak*" (Golder 808). Secondly, Golder writes that

In view of this possibility Popov took measures to prevent it. He gave orders to his officers that should such a corsair come into port, the ranking officer of the fleet should at once give the signal "to put on steam and clear for action." (809)

A direct portion of Golder's version appears in Pynchon's corresponding passage:

the Russian admiral had, on his own responsibility, issued his Pacific squadron standing orders to put on steam and clear for action should any such attempt develop. (32)

The direct repetition of the translated phrase "put on steam and clear for action" seems more than fortuitous.

Thirdly, Golder's article posits a diplomatic link between Russia and America in the emancipation of their respective slave populations: "Alexander had freed the serfs; Lincoln was emancipating the slaves" (805), which Pynchon uses inaccurately (as C. Nicholson and R. W. Stevenson have pointed out [30]), crediting Nicholas, rather than Alexander when describing what Mike Fallopian finds troublesome about Pinguid's response to the confrontation:

appalled at what had to be some military alliance between abolitionist Russia (Nicholas having freed the serfs in 1861) and a Union that paid lip service to abolition while it kept its own industrial labourers in a kind of wage-slavery, Peter Pinguid stayed in his cabin for weeks, brooding. (33)

Finally, Pynchon seriously plays up the significance of this initial military dalliance between the US and Russia, crediting the event with serious Cold War repercussions:

But that was the very first military confrontation between Russia and America. Attack, retaliation, both projectiles deep-sixed forever and the Pacific rolls on. But the ripples from those two splashes spread, and grew, and today engulf us all. (33)

Even without the fictitious firing incident, Golder comes to a similar conclusion

that this event was a truly remarkable point of international relations:

It was a most extraordinary situation: Russia had not in mind to help us but did render us distinct service; the United States was not conscious that it was contributing in any way to Russia's welfare and yet seems to have saved her from humiliation and perhaps war. There is probably nothing to compare with it in diplomatic history. (812)

As Golder describes it, however, the result is an accidental *détente* between two nations whose relations would evolve to the Cold War tensions of the 1960s when *Lot 49* is set.

Moving now to the second point of historical interest: the date chosen by Pynchon for the fictional hostilities between the Russians and Americans: “the 9th March, 1864, a day now held sacred by all Peter Pinguid Society members” (32). This date was actually marked in Civil War history as the day on which Ulysses S. Grant was appointed Lieutenant-General of the United States (U. S. Grant 116), a crucial legislative move in his progression towards becoming General-in-Chief; a position required in order to legally allow Grant to overrule his co-Generals (Catton 116-123). In reality, the date celebrated by the PPS turns out to be of significance for the Union, not the Confederacy. Such turbulence regarding the Society's allegiance, which disregards the dialectic of “[g]ood guys and bad guys” (*Lot 49* 33) in order to critique the entire project of industrialization, also cannot wholly rest upon support for slavery; Pynchon cannot have been unaware of the canonized historical rhetoric which regards Eli Whitney's cotton gin as the crucial industrial development that rendered slavery economically viable (Rhodes 25-27). I would suggest, although the troubling of political polarities was already evident, that this research should urge future scholarship to examine more rigorously the usually assumed label of “right-wing” that is applied to The Peter Pinguid Society.

—University of Sussex

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