The Japanese among Us (Who?): Kuprin’s Petersburg Tale of Problematic Identity, “Shtabs-kapitan Rybnikov”

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It is the national self-deﬁnitions of the disputing countries that have collided, and the dispute disappears if at least one of them agrees to retract, relinquish, or alter its own form of self-belief, its own form of self-extension.
—Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain

Fedor Dostoevsky’s The Idiot (1868) ends with the words of Mme. Epanchina: “And all of this, all of this abroad, too, and all this Europe of yours as well, it’s all just a fantasy, and all of us, while abroad, are just a fantasy....”¹ Nineteenth-century Russian culture was preoccupied with self-deﬁnition in regard to the West, and St. Petersburg—the St. Petersburg of Dostoevsky—was a privileged setting for staging that preoccupation. Russia at the turn of the twentieth century, by contrast, was looking east.² Interestingly enough, one of the outstanding works of fiction to emerge from the pivotal historical event of that eastward turn—the Russo-Japanese War—is also set in St. Petersburg. Aleksandr Kuprin’s story, “Staff-Captain Rybnikov” (“Shtabs-kapitan Rybnikov”),³ may even be said to invoke the “Petersburg text” of Dostoevsky; for example, it presents a central character who is a feuilletonist, and in it a deep, hidden truth that emerges in dialogue (of sorts) with a prostitute in a brothel. But the Dostoevskian motifs in this story

² For a recent account of that shift, see David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Toward the Rising Sun: Russian Ideologies of Empire and the Path to War with Japan (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001).
³ All citations of the story will be taken from A. I. Kuprin, Sobranie sochinenii v deviaty tomakh (henceforth: SS), ed. E. Rotshtein and P. Viacheslavov (Moscow: Ogonek, 1964), 4: 232–69; page numbers will be given in my text.

only seem to underscore how far Kuprin is from Dostoevsky in his handling of them.

The setting of Kuprin’s story, which was written during the war, never departs from the administrative center of the Russian empire; thus, unlike in the Dostoevsky novel, shakiness of Russian national identity is not associated with crossing borders or importing and imitating alien cultures. The gripping plot involves the flushing out of a Japanese spy. But in the process, the very notion of identity—so easily conceived with the help of binary oppositions whose delineation grows impossibly sharp during wartime—falls into question. That is to say, at a time when the popular press and official discourses on the war were purveying caricatures that reinforced stereotypical distinctions between Russians and their enemies, Kuprin treats identity as a very problematic category.

Kuprin was not alone in dismantling stereotypes in his fiction. To consider another example: in the war stories of Vikenty Veresaev, whose poetics, social and political sentiments, and literary reputation resembled Kuprin’s, plot most often turns on the recognition of common humanity between the enemy and oneself—a reversal of initial representations of the enemy as subhuman. Veresaev (Smidovich) was a leftist physician-author who wrote both a book-length, denunciatory memoir of his service in the war (Na voine, 1907–08) and realistic fiction in the nineteenth-century tradition about it.

Thus, in Veresaev’s short story “Enemies” (“Vragi”), the Japanese massing to attack a Russian position are characterized, quite typically, as smallish, harmless animals: they are “antlike figures,” one of them

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4 As writes Elaine Scarry, “The distinction between ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’—identified by Carl Schmitt as the fundamental distinction in politics, equivalent to good and evil in moral philosophy and beautiful and ugly in aesthetics—is in war converted to an absolute polarity, whether that polarity is registered in some version of the us–them idiom (what Henry Kissinger calls the ‘our side–your side formula’) or instead in the more neutral naming of pairs…”; Scarry, The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, chap. 2, “The Structure of War: The Juxtaposition of Injured Bodies and Unanchored Issues” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 88.

runs in a way that “strangely recalls a partridge.” A Russian officer, from whose point of view the narration is given, steps out to meet in single combat a Japanese soldier who has outrun his comrades and sat down right in front of the Russian lines. The Russian splits his skull with his sword; but then, while he contemplates keeping the blood on that sword so that he can show it to his daughter when he gets home, he is hit. Both return to consciousness after the battle has ended, amid horrifying carnage and uncanny quiet. They bandage one another, then kiss; the Japanese soldier dies, while the Russian survives, but is anguished. At close range, and with the two parties isolated from their respective units (both have stepped out beyond the boundaries of their units’ territories), the us-versus-them binary collapses and a common humanity is asserted.

Another Veresaev story, “From Afar” (“Izdati”), operates with the same binary of distant-vs.-close knowledge with which “Enemies” begins, though with the values attached to these polar positions reversed. The action takes place during a Russian retreat, at a moment when the Russians are quite shaken by the enemy. When the dispirited Russian troops see a group of captured enemy up close, they are struck by how small and unthreatening the Japanese appear: if only they could get into hand-to-hand combat with them, they boast, and use their bayonets, there would be no contest. But when they hear the Japanese columns moving in the distance, hidden behind hills, or experience the power of their unseen artillery, they are terrified; and they imagine the enemy to be of invincible strength. At the start of the story one of the two soldiers on whom the narrative focuses talks about a song of Russian convicts facing exile, which goes: “Don’t cry, mother mine! They can’t force us to go farther than the sun, and Siberia belongs to our tsar!” The soldier remarks, “So it is with us. They can’t force us farther than the sun, and we’ve already been in Siberia… Before they frightened [us] with Siberia, but now we’ve already been there!” At the end of the story, having been passed by the retreating rear guard Cossack detachment, with nothing between them and a pursuing Japanese machine-gun unit, the two soldiers seem to be chased by the sun itself: “In the east it was becoming lighter and

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7 Ibid., 11.

8 Ibid., 6.
lighter.”9 There is no longer comfort to be had from the convict song, no solace in the notion—expressed in that song—that no matter how far east a Russian might be exiled, he will still be in Russia and ruled by the tsar. Now, suddenly, fleeing westward in this no-man’s land between Russian and Japanese forces, the two soldiers are utterly lost souls, with no topographic support for their Russian identities. They have in fact done what the song claimed one could not: they have exited Russia to the east, with the result that their very selves collapse. The best that can be said is that the two are also beyond fear.10

Veresaev’s approach to the war, like Kuprin’s, was an extension of the nineteenth-century critical realist tradition. Their fictional treatments might be contrasted with the writings of Russian modernists (decadents), who tended to assimilate both the war’s happenings and its actors into pre-fashion, apocalyptic and soteriological schemes endowing Russian national identity (as well as that of the Asiatics) with very special meaning.11 What makes Kuprin’s “Shtabs-kapitan Rybnikov” so fascinating, when compared with either tendency, is the way it undermines the very notions of national and individual identity, as well as attendant large-scale cultural associations.12 In Veresaev’s “From Afar,” the two laggards’ crisis would end were they to find their way back to Russian lines; in “Staff-Captain Rybnikov,” as we shall see, there is little comfort to be had at the very center of the empire.

Kuprin was at the height of his reputation when he wrote this story, and he considered it his best—an evaluation that critics since

9 Ibid., 16.
10 Compare also the influential position of the Asianist Esper Ukhtomsky, from his Travels in the East of His Imperial Majesty Czar Nicholas II of Russia, when Cesarewitch, 1890–1892: “Properly speaking, in Asia we [i.e., Russia] have not, nor can we have, any bounds, except the boundless sea breaking on her shores” (cited in Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, Toward the Rising Sun, 59).
have largely echoed.\textsuperscript{13} Kuprin was himself a case study in mobile individual identity: he had “Asiatic” (Tatar) heritage on his mother’s side, and he took pride in his wide variety of life and work experiences. Trained in military institutes, during which his writing career began, by the time he wrote this story he had served in the military and worked as estate manager, hunter, fisherman, day laborer, actor, forest surveyor, and journalist. Kuprin liked to boast that he had done everything in life except get pregnant.\textsuperscript{14} (Apparently, gender identity was not to be tinkered with; though in “Staff-Captain Rybnikov,” even that category becomes rather unstable.)

In the story, Rybnikov appears as an officer of the line back in St. Petersburg after, supposedly, sustaining a contusion to his head at Liaoyang and a wound to his leg at the battle of Mukden. The action takes place at the very time of the naval battle of Tsushima:\textsuperscript{15} Rybnikov is visiting various headquarters offices in Petersburg, ostensibly in a quest to get benefits and compensation owed him. Affecting an uncomprehending, alcoholic, naive, helpless, but good-natured persona, he hangs around the offices, bums cigarettes, and learns the latest about the war and the home-front reaction. His act is so successful that he is taken by pen-pushers of headquarters as typical of the officers in the field: “That’s Russian officers for you! Look at this type. Well, can it really not be clear why we’re losing battle after battle? Such dimwittedness and stupidity, a complete absence of the sense of personal dignity... Poor Russia!” (234). Rybnikov also frequents a circle of actors, journalists, and writers, one of whom, the successful feuilletonist Shchavinsky, almost immediately picks him out as a spy. Shchavinsky is fascinated by Rybnikov’s heroic feat, by the tremendous risk he is running; and rather than exposing the spy, he seeks to get close to him, to elicit a confession, to get the story. The writer fails to entice Rybnikov to open up, but he remains true to the promise he has made not to give Rybnikov away. In the end, Rybnikov’s cover is blown when, amidst the “strange, barbaric-sounding, mysterious words of an alien

\textsuperscript{13} Scherr, “The War in the Russian Literary Imagination,” 434. Gorky’s high opinion of the story is cited in the editors’ commentary to the story in Kuprin, \textit{SS} 4: 489.

\textsuperscript{14} Donald Rayfield, \textit{Anton Chekhov: A Life} (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 532.

\textsuperscript{15} The battle of Liaoyang took place during the end of August and beginning of September 1904; the battle of Mukden, in February–March 1905; the battle of Tsushima, toward the end of May 1905.
language” that he emits while asleep in the room of a Russian prostitute, he utters the one word she can recognize as Japanese: “Banzai” (263). The fact that she in turn does give him away seems largely due to coincidence: a police agent she and the other girls know well just happens to be in a room with her best friend in the house when this happens.

According to Richard Stites, “The irony in Kuprin’s perspective lies [in] the apparent blindness of his Russian characters to Japanese physical features at the very moment when graphic art was featuring Japanese monkey cartoons” (404). It is true that Shchavinsky has a hard time registering what is familiar to him about Rybnikov: “Where have I seen him... He resembles someone amazingly, but whom?” (236). Rather than recognizing his Japanese-ness, Shchavinsky experiences the sensation of déjà vu when looking at Rybnikov: it is as though he had seen him previously, “in a dream” (239). But in general, Rybnikov’s oriental features are very visible to the Russians with whom he cavorts; indeed, the truth comes to Shchavinsky in a flash when a drunken poet among his circle refers to Rybnikov’s “Japanese mug” (243), and raillery of this sort is echoed by others. The question is not so much why Russians with whom Rybnikov interacts fail to recognize his face as oriental, but why even those who take him to be Japanese do nothing about it. And to this question the narrative suggests at least three possible (and not mutually exclusive) answers. First, Shchavinsky and his milieu are clearly detached from the government and its imperial aspirations. Second, as a journalist Shchavinsky is far more interested in getting the story of this unique psychological type than he is in the military significance of the spy’s presence in Petersburg. And last, as Shchavinsky puts it to himself, “In the Urals and among Orenburg Cossacks there are many just such Mongol, saffron faces”

16 Stites, “Representations,” 404. Apparently the taste for such representations of the enemy had diminished considerably by the time of the Battle of Tsushima: according to Yulia Mikhailova, the publication of new lubki (popular prints) about the war “first became more serious, but then lapsed into silence” after the first six months or so of continuous Japanese victories (see her “Images of Enemy and Self: Russian ‘Popular Prints’ of the Russo-Japanese War,” in Acta Slavica japonica, vol. 16 [1998]: 33–34). I have no data regarding other venues for graphic representations, however, and in any case previously published lubki would have remained in circulation.
(246), so that facial features alone do not suffice to distinguish Russian from Japanese.¹⁷

It is, rather, certain aspects of Rybnikov’s speech and behavior that leave no doubt in the very observant Shchavinsky’s mind that he is a Japanese spy: Rybnikov turns down the offer of an alcoholic drink—how un-Russian could you be!—and when he does drink, sips slowly, cautiously, while affecting a perpetually drunken state. In general, he appears to be performing Russianness rather than exercising it in an unconscious and natural way: Rybnikov’s speech is over-saturated with proverbial expressions, to the use of which he always calls attention; moreover, he tends to utter the entire proverb rather than cite it elliptically, as would be common speech practice. Rybnikov goes too far, too, when he refers to a prayer by reciting it from beginning to end, “painsstakingly articulating every sound” (246). And Shchavinsky’s subtle ear catches Rybnikov in a number of unidiomatic language usages, word choices whose register is just not right for Rybnikov’s supposed rank and milieu.¹⁸

If this were an American World War II film in which Rybnikov was a Japanese spy, he would be demonstrating impossible, encyclopedic knowledge of baseball history in order to demonstrate his American-ness; instead, posing as a Russian Rybnikov flaunts a bookish knowledge of proverbs and other folksy expressions. He also repeatedly makes a show of his cultural competence by alluding to the writings of the (very Russian) Anton Chekhov. When Rybnikov cites a line from one of Chekhov’s early stories that had become “winged words,”¹⁹ Shchavinsky asks: so, you know Chekhov? Rybnikov takes the question as applying to Chekhov’s person, and he claims, buffoonishly, to have been a drinking buddy of the author in the Far East (presumably, during Chekhov’s 1890 voyage to Sakhalin). In the process Rybnikov gives Chekhov’s patronymic as “Petrovich” rather than

¹⁷ The first two motivations for not exposing the spy are discussed by A. Volkov, who further asserts that Shchavinsky’s agnostic attitude toward the spy also “expressed the attitude of Kuprin himself to the criminal war.” See A. Volkov, Tvorchestvo A. I. Kuprina (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1962), 215.

¹⁸ Discussed in ibid., 211.

¹⁹ The allusion is to the last line of Chekhov’s 1884 humorous sketch, “The Complaint Book” (“Zhalobnaia kniga”): “…и вышел он, как у Чехова: ‘Хоть ты, говорит,— Иванов седьмой, а все-таки дурак!’”; “Мы, брат, бывало, с Антон Петровичем [sic] … Хоть ты и седьмой, а…”; “Хоть ты Иванов 7-й, а дурак!..” (238, 238, 253).
Pavlovich—an ambiguous slip that might be read, on the one hand, as
giving the spy away (like not knowing who competed in the 1941
World Series), or, on the other hand, as a bold and brilliant move in
the spy’s game, which involves mimicking a poorly educated, alco-
holic, and slightly Khlestakovian officer of the line.20

The Chekhov motif also partakes of the self-reflexive facet of a
story featuring characters who are writers or otherwise occupied with
the arts. Kuprin’s depiction of the feuilletonist Shchavinsky, “by virtue
of his profession and by his natural tendencies a gatherer of human
documents, a collector of rare and strange manifestations of the human
spirit” (244), as well as that of the “writing brotherhood” (236) to
which Shchavinsky belongs, opens possibilities for a metaliterary in-
terpretation of the story. In fact, “Staff-Captain Rybnikov” was written
and its action set at a time shortly after Chekhov’s death, when the
Russian community of authors was engaged in producing memoirs
about Chekhov and staking claims to closeness to him. There is a hint
of self-parody on Kuprin’s part in Rybnikov’s boast of palling around
with Chekhov: Kuprin had been a guest and protégé of Chekhov’s.
Like others, Kuprin wrote memoirs (among the best) after Chekhov’s
death. The most significant literary work Kuprin had written prior to
this story, which had just been published—in fact, exactly when the
fictional action of “Staff-Captain Rybnikov” takes place, during the
time of the Tsushima naval catastrophe—had been intended for a vol-
ume dedicated to Chekhov’s memory, and had alluded to Chekhov,
including in its title (“The Duel”).21 In short, while the plot function of
Rybnikov’s allusions to Chekhov has to do with displaying the cul-
tural knowledge that might let him pass as a Russian, at another,
metafictional level Kuprin gently mocks the very processes by which
he and other Russian authors make Russian literary culture, by which
they make Russianness itself.

20 Thus Heldt argues, “The Japanese Rybnikov plays the Russian stereotype
with consummate skill. His exaggerated portrayal of a drunken Russian
dupes the Russians themeselves, who are convinced that they really are like
that” (175).

21 However, the Russian for the title of Kuprin’s tale was “Poedinok,” where-
as Chekhov’s story of a decade earlier had been “Duel.” “Poedinok” grew too
long and was not finished in time for publication in Znanie, no. 3, dedicated to
Chekhov, but came out in no. 6 instead; see the discussion of the writing and
publication history of Kuprin’s “Poedinok” in the editors’ commentary (SS, 4:
480–87).
Returning, however, to the story’s overt plot: far from not seeing Rybnikov’s Japanese exterior, Shchavinsky sees other, weightier evidence of his identity, and deduces that he must be at least a colonel in the Japanese army (244). In addition to parsing Rybnikov’s speech he repeatedly reads deep hatred in the enemy’s eyes: “in his red, savage eyes the feuilletonist saw the flame of an irreconcilable, inhuman hatred” (242). In another of the story’s ironies, however, this hatred only makes Shchavinsky crave intimacy with the enemy. The milieu in which Rybnikov is circulating during the middle (and longest) part of the story—writers, actors, gamblers, bons vivants all—simply does not care if he is a spy. What is more, these citizens scarcely appear to consider the conflict with the Japanese as the most pressing current problem for Russia. Instead, they are focused on the unraveling of the Russian social and political fabric. In Rybnikov’s presence they traffic in rumors of mutinies, of sailors tying up their officers and naval squadrons giving up without a fight, of officers afraid to encounter their sailors ashore, of reserve troops in the rear refusing to obey officers and even shooting at them with the officers’ own revolvers (241–42). And they do this while engaging in drunken dinners and visits to the race-track and brothels.

Nevertheless, Kuprin’s representation of a disaffected, debauched, and unpatriotic Petersburg intelligentsia is not the chief indictment in the story, although it is universally pointed out as such in the secondary literature. However shocking the loose lips, the detached, cynical attitude of the “writing brotherhood” in the midst of a war that is traumatizing the Russian empire, there is a larger and deeper facet to Kuprin’s critique: at every step of the story, again and again, Kuprin places the very notion of identity—personal, professional, national, even gender—into question. And in doing so, he undermines or even deconstructs the most fundamental conceptual categories of virtually all discourses on the war; for not a one of them, whether popular, official, right-wing, or leftist, can function without “us-versus-them.”

Kuprin does this chiefly by elaborating a ubiquitous motif of false, lost, or unstable personal identity. Thus, Rybnikov is introduced to Shchavinsky by a colleague “whose last name had been erased by time, like one side of a bad coin, and all that was left was the current nickname ‘Matania,’ by which all of Petersburg knew him” (237). The spy operating under a false name is introduced by a man who, though known to all, himself has no name, and may therefore be said to have lost a fundamental part of his own identity. Shchavinsky’s journalistic
work makes him a virtual double of the spy, a gambler with his self-
hood, willing to risk loss of his own identity so as to acquire difficult
knowledge of an other: the methodology by which he gets his stories
involves “thinking and feeling with the mind of the other person [the
person under study by him], even speaking with his language and
characteristic expressions to such an extent” that “it often seemed to
him that he was completely losing his ‘I’…” (245). When Rybnikov,
having been taken to a brothel by Shchavinsky, goes upstairs with one
of the girls, she first tells him her name is Clothilde, but then admits
that this is a false name: her real name is Nastya (260). And Rybnikov,
overwhelmed by memories and half asleep, mis-recognizes Nastya as
a woman from his past and goes so far as to declare love: “[Her face]
had already grown unlike its former face, simple and beautiful, a
round, Russian, grey-eyed face—now it had become, as it were, thin-
ner, and minute-by-minute and strangely changing its expression,
seemed tender, kind, puzzling, and reminded Rybnikov of someone’s
infinitely familiar, long beloved, enchanting, fine face [...] ‘I love you
... it’s you I love’” (260). The undercover policeman who captures
Rybnikov—a favorite patron of the brothel who happens to be in a
neighboring room—is himself a master of disguise, particularly good
at penetrating student revolutionary groups; and he regales the wom-
en with a story of how he has caught out an infamous criminal who
was circulating under a false identity, with a false passport (265–66).

In sum, far from extraordinary, the pretense and masquerading
that Rybnikov practices as a spy seem utterly the norm in the Peters-
burg environment on which he is spying.

The theme of shifty identity goes so far as to embrace gender.
Shchavinsky’s attempts at intimacy with the Japanese spy amount to a
campaign of seduction: time and again he puts his arm around the
other man’s waist, draws him close, and whispers tempting words into
his ear. He flatters, he cajoles, he offers to “give in” (“Я сдаюсь,”
256)—evoking both military and sexual surrender—if that will get him
the words he wishes to hear. His gestures fail, however; unlike what
occurs in the Veresaev tale with which we started, no mutual under-
standing is ever reached between these two combatants: the enemy’s
hateful contempt for the Russian remains firm—and, in Shchavinsky’s
view, very readable in Rybnikov’s eyes.
Shchavinsky vanishes from the brothel and the narrative after Rybnikov goes off with Clothilde;\(^22\) it is as though the prostitute has taken the feuilletonist’s place. Certainly this is the case as regards the tale’s linear development or plot structure: the girl finishes what the journalist had begun, she elicits the truth of the spy’s identity. Her convincing discovery of the truth is even preceded by a light version of the provocation and taunting by means of which Shchavinsky had tempted Rybnikov to reveal himself: when Rybnikov tells her that his name and patronymic are Vasily Aleksandrovich, she jokingly sings the couplet: “Vasya, Vasya, Vasenka / You’re telling fibs” (“Вася, Вася, Васенька, / Говоришь ты басенку”; 259), in effect restating the accusation that Shchavinsky has been making over and again. And the sexual culmination of the tale makes literal, that is to say, realizes with the help of a slight displacement that assuages problematic gender ambiguities, the campaign of seduction that the journalistic whore Shchavinsky had been waging.

The ending of the story, with its resolution of the plot in a Petersburg brothel, provokes ready associations with the Petersburg narrative tradition, and especially with Dostoevsky’s “Notes from the Underground”: the underground man, like Rybnikov, is an outsider regarded rather contemptuously by male companions, before whom he tries to prove himself as “one of the guys” by visiting a brothel with them. But it also plays on Russian—and for that matter, European—stereotypes regarding Japanese culture and customs, as exemplified in such manifestations of “Japonisme” as the sensationally popular light opera “The Geisha,” which had premiered in London in 1896 but soon achieved international success, including in Russia. (First staged in Moscow in 1897, the opera was famously referred to in Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Dog,” 1899.\(^23\) In that musical comedy, the tea

\(^{22}\) This is a feature of the text that Kuprin introduced when editing it for republication. Originally, the tale had ended with Shchavinsky telling his wife about Rybnikov, and opening the brief written message from Rybnikov that Shchavinsky had put him up to writing—hoping for a confession—with the promise that he would not look at it until much later. See the editors’ commentary in 55, 4: 488–89.

\(^{23}\) The first translation of “The Geisha” into Russian took place in 1897 for the Russian premiere in Moscow; at least three more translations followed in very short order, and music publishers in Petersburg, Moscow, and Riga also offered many “excerpts, arrangements, fantasies and potpourris adapted from The Geisha for several instruments” (Jana Polianovskaia, “English Operetta
house where a British sailor falls in love with a geisha becomes the site of masquerading and a happily ending comedy of errors. To a reader with the slightest sensitivity to gender and post-colonial thematics, Kuprin’s reversal of the conventional configuration, in which the European male visits a Japanese geisha, must be striking: Kuprin’s story places the Russians—not just the prostitute Chlotilde, but the writer Shchavinsky too—in the position of the feminine and colonized. The master, here, is Rybnikov; until, that is, he is taken by the policeman Lenya, to which we’ll return.

Another comic opera deriving from late nineteenth-century European “Japonisme” may also be alluded to toward the end of “Staff-Captain Rybnikov.” Before the “banzai” slip that seals Rybnikov’s fate, Clothilde asks him why his comrade call him a Japanese general; he responds, “They’re just joking. You know the verse: it’s no sin to laugh at that which seems funny…” (259).24 The logic of the idiomatic expression Rybnikov employs here amounts to an acknowledgment of his Japanese features, if not his identity. Clothilde follows up, a few moments later, with the remark: “You know, my god, but you look like a Jap. And you know like who? Like the Mikado. We have a portrait. Too bad, it’s late now, or else I’d show you. Well, as alike as two drops of water” (259). Let us go out a bit on a limb, and suggest—admitting the lack of textual evidence to back this up—that the “portrait” hanging in the Petersburg brothel during the Russo-Japanese War is most likely not a portrait of the current Japanese emperor, but rather something along the lines of a poster advertising the Gilbert and Sullivan opera “The Mikado” (which had been multiply translated and pro-

24 Borrowed, perhaps, from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet: “That is no slander, sir, which is a truth” (Act IV, scene 1).
duced in both capitals, including, for example, by Stanislavsky in 1887, in his amateur period in Moscow25).

In “The Mikado” we have a comic opera involving masquerading and altered identities; what is more, its central theme and plot device has a series of characters facing execution—precisely the situation of Kuprin’s bold Japanese spy in Petersburg, and the aspect of Rybnikov that most captivates Shchavinsky. Both refer to this death motif periodically when they enter the brothel:

“Let’s ascend the scaffold, captain!”

“I’m not afraid,” the other said lazily. “I go just this way toward death every day.”

Rybnikov weakly waived his hand and gave a constrained smile. This smile suddenly made his face tired, somehow grey and aged.

Shchavinsky looked at him silently, with surprise. He became ashamed of his teasing. But Rybnikov immediately wriggled out of it.

“Yes, to death. A soldier must always be prepared for that. What can you do? Death is but a small inconvenience in our profession.” (257)

A peculiar and remarkable attitude toward death, which has long captured the imagination of Westerners fascinated with Japan, is a central theme of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, where it is addressed in a genre-appropriate, comic mode. At this moment in Kuprin’s story, too, where entering a brothel is associated with capital punishment, the motif finds—for the time being, at least—a comic inflection. But facing death with equanimity is also invoked with serious admiration in Shchavinsky’s references to samurai culture and awesome Japanese exploits during the war (249); it is further replicated—in “upstairs/downstairs” mode, as it were—in the tales with which Lenya the undercover policeman regales the women in the brothel: “‘Lenechka,

my dear! It’s frightening even to listen! How is it that you’re not afraid of anything?” He smugly lifted up his left mustache and said casually: ‘What’s to be afraid of? You can die only once. And besides, I get money’ ” (266).

If the story’s lines of association with “The Geisha” and “The Mikado” seem tenuous, bear in mind that comic opera is repeatedly introduced as a frame of reference in Kuprin’s story: one member of Shchavinsky’s circle and Shchavinsky’s wife are both actors in comic opera. Moreover, the wife is utterly absent from the narrative—all we learn about her is her profession and the fact that she is out of town—so that mention of her seems to have little function other than introducing, once again, the opera motif. This operatic motif continues, in “upstairs/downstairs” mode, in the brothel, when Clothilde sings her accusatory couplet: “Vasya, Vasya, Vasenka / You’re telling fibs” (Вася, Вася, Васенька, / Говоришь ты базенки, 259). These lines, which sound like a citation from a popular entertainment, most likely repeat or adapt some chastushka such as the following: “Vasya, Vasya, Vasichek, / Have a look, what’s the hour? / – Sweet Anyutochka, / It’s the first minute” (Вася, Вася, Васичек, / Взгляни, какой часичек? / – Миляя Анюточка, / Первая минуточка); or “Vanya, Vanya, Vanushá, / Your unfaithful soul, / You sit with one, another you love; / In what way am I not fine?” (Ваня, Ваня, Вануша, / С одной сидишь, другую любишь; / Чем же я не хороша?). Clothilde’s brief burst into song is an operatic moment that has been cast in a lower-class, folk-culture idiom. Most likely Clothilde does not merely repeat some well-known chastushka verbatim, but composes her own based on the widely used pattern indicated by the chastushki cited above. If so, this further links Clothilde with the writer-figure Shchavinsky; in this sense, too, she comes to substitute for Shchavinsky in the story’s plot structure.

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26 In first published variants of the story, this was not so: the wife appeared at the story’s end. Kuprin presumably felt he was improving the story by absenting her. See n. 22 above.

27 Chastushka, preface V. F. Bokov, ed., intro., and notes V. S. Bakhtin (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1966), 153, 139; for other “Vanya, Vanya, Vanyechka” chastushki, see also 127 and 279.

28 Further, given that most chastushki are four-line, and that all the chastushki of the type Clothilde is performing here that I have found do indeed have four lines, it is worth noting the elliptical, incomplete manner in which she
The winding up of “Staff-Captain Rybnikov” with Clothilde in a Petersburg brothel thus involves a multi-levelled parody of operatic orientalizing. Most saliently, it applies plot devices and settings that had defined “Japanese” for decades in European culture to, instead, native Russians, who are made other to themselves in the process. If the journalist Shchavinsky risked the loss of his “I” in how he practiced his profession, this story also suggests that something analogous is taking place as well on a larger, cultural scale, for Russia.

But it is not quite accurate to say that this narrative winds up in the brothel: Rybnikov leaps out of the room’s window, and the story’s action finishes with him under Lenya on the pavement below:

In spite of the fact that Lenya had a buzzing in his head from the fall, and in spite of the terrible pain that he felt in his belly and his heels, he didn’t lose his wits and in a flash pounced on the staff-captain, heavily, with his whole body.


The staff-captain put up no opposition. His eyes burned with an irreconcilable hatred, but he was deathly pale, and pink foam bubbled on the edges of his lips.

“Don’t crush me [Не давите меня],” he said in a whisper, “I’ve broken my leg.” (269)

The story’s dramatic ending thus returns the category of masculinity to Russian hands, even if those hands belong to an unsavory police spy whose home base is a brothel.

But there is more to it. The ending ironically echoes Rybnikov’s persistent earlier offers, when introducing himself and telling of his battle service, to roll up his pants and show his unhealed and festering wound: “‘Here, have a look yourself.’ And he would put his bad leg on a chair and with some eagerness start to roll up his pants, but every time they would stop him with a modesty deriving from both squeamishness and compassion” (233). The scene is repeated with Shchavinsky (243). The last lines of the story return our attention to Rybnikov’s leg, to his wound and the offer to show it, as well as to his Russian interlocutors’ refusal to view it. And it reminds us that there has been

recites the ditty, which contrasts Rybnikov’s oddly complete performances of popular culture (proverbs, prayers).
no mention of the leg or any sort of injury during the physical intimacy between Rybnikov and Clothilde.

Kuprin’s tale, set far from the battlefield, illustrates well some of the most striking insights about war from Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*. There she writes about “the extreme literalness with which the nation inscribes itself on the body,” “the literalness with which the human body opens itself and allows ‘the nation’ to be registered there in the wound.” At the same time, injury is at best a highly ambiguous sign of winner or loser, or in the case of this story, of the veracity of the nationhood to which the putatively injured spy lays claim. We affirm her notion of the “referential instability of the hurt body” in pointing out that, even had Rybnikov actually suffered the injuries he claimed, and even had he shown them in the flurry of demonstrativeness calculated to prove he was who he claimed to be (a Russian officer of the line), it would really have proven nothing: although the exposure of his damaged body (or even the offer to expose it) functions as the weightiest possible substantiation of his Russianness, there is no reason he could not have gotten the same wounds on the other side of the battle lines.

But nobody in Petersburg wishes to see Rybnikov’s wounds in any case. And for both the military-bureaucratic and hedonistic-journalistic milieus described in the story, the war itself remains a curiously disembodied and detached affair. It takes a real expert in bodies—the prostitute, an unsqueamish individual for whom Rybnikov becomes most thoroughly enfleshed, for whom he becomes, as it were, his body—to catch him out as a spy. In this sense, the body in the brothel twins the body at war—just as Rybnikov’s joke about going to his death in the brothel has it. What is more, that piece of injured flesh, in which national identity is supposedly inscribed, becomes doubled in the story’s symbolics as well: the flesh of battle is twinned with the flesh of physical intimacy. The squeamish refusal to look on the part of Shchavinsky and others, which derives from “modesty” (*stydlivost’*, 233), already hints that this leg may be not just a leg, but symbolically associated with parts of the body it might indeed be shameful to look at: the male organ, around which there is a rich discursive tradition of racial, ethnic, and religious differentiation. One cannot help recalling the Pushkin lyric, “Christ Is Arisen,” in which the lyric hero offers to

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30 Ibid., 121.
put in the hands of “my Rebecca” “that by which a genuine Hebrew may be distinguished from an Orthodox Russian.”

If this lyric is indeed the least bit relevant to what is occurring in Kuprin’s story, however, then what we have is a rather knee-jerk and mistaken projection of culturally entrenched notions of bodily markers of difference and identity associated with the southern and western boundaries of the Russian empire onto a relatively newly significant and frightening other in the east, the Japanese. And any such projection ultimately collapses, or at best leads to further ambiguity: this is not what gives Rybnikov away.

Instead, the bodily organ that betrays Rybnikov is his tongue, his language (in Russian the single word iazyk). Or not! For even language, on its own, can raise issues of unanchored meaning: Shchavinsky’s trained ear notwithstanding, the linguistic evidence of Rybnikov’s slightly skewed Russian does not qualify as decisive proof of Rybnikov’s non-Russian identity; otherwise, why would Shchavinsky so doggedly pursue a confession and quit the field when he failed to elicit one? And yet, Clothilde—who cannot even recognize Japanese when she hears it—becomes utterly sure that Rybnikov is a Japanese when she hears the one Japanese word she does know: “Banzai!” That she recognizes the exclamation tells us that it was widely known and had captured the Russian popular imagination (as it would in the United States during and after World War II). But for precisely this reason, could it not have emerged in the sleeping babble of a Russian, too, especially one who had been terrified when hearing it exclaimed in battle? And what is the likelihood that Clothilde, or any American

31 “Христос воскрес, моя Ревекка! / Сегодня следуя душой / Закону богачеловека, / С тобой целуюсь, ангел мой. / А завтра к вере Моисея / За поцелуй я не робей / Готов, еврейка, приступить — / И даже то тебе вручить, / Чем можно верного еврея / От православных отличить” (Christ is arisen, my Rebecca! / Today, my soul obeying / The law of the man-god, / I kiss you, my angel. / And tomorrow, without fear of the faith of Moses / For that kiss / I am ready, Jewess, / To even put into your hands / That by which a faithful Jew / Is distinguished from Russian Orthodox). A. S. Pushkin, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v desiaty tomakh, vol. 2 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), 71.

32 The work of Sander Gilman is fundamental to any discussion of circumcision and other bodily markers of Jewishness in Central Europe of the period; see especially his The Jew’s Body (London: Routledge, 1991). Circumcision has not been a traditional Japanese practice; I am grateful to Prof. Robert Tierney for this point of information.
viewer of a World War II film for that matter, understands the meaning and varied contexts for the usage of that expression. Rather, human language is reduced to an indexical sign of Japanese-ness in a war situation, that is, in a sharply polarized “us-vs.-them” cultural context. What we have here may be a structurally analogous inversion of the relationship between bodies and verbiage in Scarry: “Banzai,” as heard by Clothilde, is a kind of “language in pain.” Only thus can the fundamentally ambiguous utterance resolve the crisis of meaning and definitively substantiate Rybnikov’s body as embodying Japanese identity.

Does this mean that, in the end, Kuprin’s resistant spy narrative suppresses its own deconstructive tendencies and aligns itself with the discourse of the day? As Lenya the policeman pins Rybnikov to the pavement he exclaims: “A-a! You li-ar [Ве-оишь]” (269), as though (verbal) duplicity were the fundamental issue, the reason for arrest, rather than the probability that his prey might actually be a dangerous enemy spy. The logic of Kuprin’s story is such that this accusation will be always true, no matter at whom it might be directed.

33 The literal meaning of this expression, appropriate when starting any endeavor, is “ten thousand years,” in the sense, “may this go on,” or “may you live” ten thousand years (Elizabeth Oyler, personal communication).