

Like other Islamists, Yassine rejects the nation-state as “our prison,” seeing the nation-states of the Muslim world as the creations of imperialism to divide and conquer; without national sovereignty, they were not, in fact, nation-states. Why is it that the same advocates of secular democracy whom Yassine opposes, are on the warpath to pull down all nation-states?

“My intention in this book,” Imam Yassine writes in his epilogue, “is to play upon all registers of human understanding, including sometimes the jostling of direct challenge, in the hope of awakening the heedless and honing a blunted will.” He succeeds. In a remarkable way, this poet shifts from pungent polemic, to reasoned argument, to olive branch, and back again.

### A Badge of Honor

Yassine has clearly earned the “Does Not Exist” badge of honor. And it did not first come in the form of being lied about by Bernard Lewis. Yassine was put under house arrest in December 1989 by a Moroccan government that found its identity in appeasing the Anglo-American powers through Westernization. He remained so confined until his release—without any concession on his part—at the age of 72, in May 2000. His non-violent association, al-’Adl wa’l-Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality), is the most powerful Islamist organization in Morocco, and especially strong in the universities. Although still officially banned, it is now tolerated to a certain degree. Information about its publications and conferences in the Western world is available at [www.JSpublishing.net](http://www.JSpublishing.net).

Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of the Ennahda movement in Tunisia, with an outlook broadly similar to that of Yassine, has suffered imprisonment and exile at the hands of a government of similar identity to that of Morocco.

The treatment of the two leaders makes it easier to understand why similarly oriented American Muslim institutions of national and international importance, based in northern Virginia—such as the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences and the International Institute of Islamic Thought—were recently raided at the direction of the Department of Justice, with staff herded together and held at gunpoint for hours. According to an American specialist in Islam, Muslim institutions that actually might have come under suspicion of ties to terrorism, were not raided.

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# Russia at the Launch Of the Great Game

by Mary Burdman

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### **Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran: Alexander Griboyedov and Imperial Russia’s Mission to the Shah of Persia**

by Laurence Kelly

London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002

314 pages, hardbound, £25; paperbound £14.95

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For 150 years from the early 19th Century, two empires—the Russian on the one side, and the British, and later Anglo-American, on the other—vied for power and influence over vast areas of the Eurasian land-mass. This imperial opposition is known in the West as the “Great Game”—a phrase first used in 1841, by Britain’s Capt. Arthur Conolly (famous for his death at the hands of the Emir of Bukhara, now in Uzbekistan). While the two empires actually never engaged in all-out war, there was plenty of conflict, in the British conquest of the Indian Subcontinent, and the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, the ancient Khanates of Central Asia, and Siberia, up against the borders of China.

The strategic conflicts in Eurasia have not ended. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has been striving to assert economic and military influence in West and Central Asia, as the ongoing—increasingly disastrous—foray into Afghanistan shows. Now, the George W. Bush Administration is increasing its threats against Iraq and Iran.

*Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran*, the first full biography in English of the Russian playwright and diplomat Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov, is an account of critical events at the time when Russia was launching its full-scale imperial expansion into the regions Washington is eyeing today. It is also an account of a remarkable generation of Russians, led by the great national poet Alexander Pushkin, who created a revolution in language, literature, and history—although their efforts for republican political revolution were cut short.

### ‘Woe From Wit’

The book starts with a poignant event in Russian political and cultural history. In the Spring of 1829, Alexander Pushkin was travelling in the Caucasus, when he met an oxcart and drovers, who were bringing the corpse of his fellow poet,

Griboyedov, back from Tehran. Griboyedov, author of the play *Gore ot Uma*, translated by author Laurence Kelly as *The Misfortune of Being Clever*, or *Woe From Wit*, had become Tsar Nicholas I's Minister Plenipotentiary to the Shah of Persia (now Iran). Because of his knowledge of Persian language and culture, Griboyedov had risen rapidly in the Russian foreign service, and was one of the authors of the harsh Treaty of Turkmanchai which concluded the Russian victory in the second Russian-Persian war of 1826-27.

During his mission to Tehran to ensure compliance with the treaty (mostly extraction of the final payments of the enormously heavy indemnity of 20 million silver rubles, the equivalent of at least \$250 million today), on Jan. 29, 1829, a Persian mob had invaded the Russian Embassy, and murdered Griboyedov and all but one of the Russian delegation. Griboyedov had just turned 34 when he died.

Pushkin, who had known Griboyedov from St. Petersburg since 1817, would himself die eight years later, murdered at 38 in a duel.

Both Griboyedov and Pushkin were part of the Russian "generation of 1812," which had rallied to the national fight against the invasion by Napoleon Bonaparte. Some of the young veterans of 1812 became the leaders of the failed "Decembrist" uprising of Dec. 14, 1825 against the new Tsar Nicholas I, which was in protest against the system of aristocratic absolutism and serfdom that ruled Russia. They were also a generation which produced great literature, and transformed the Russian language.

Griboyedov was exemplary of that generation. He was born into an impoverished minor noble family and all the problems of that social class. He was very well educated, especially in music, and all his life played the music of Beethoven, Weber, and Haydn, as well as composing his own. All the same, his mother became notorious for engaging in a brutal real estate speculation, in which she used soldiers to extract exorbitant taxes from serfs on an estate she had purchased.

Griboyedov began writing plays in St. Petersburg, the Russian imperial capital, in 1816. He was, like Pushkin and other members of the 1812 generation, inspired by determination to develop the vernacular Russian language—in a country where the aristocracy spoke French—and to study the history of Russia. In such groups as the Green Lamp Society, founded by the later Decembrist Alexander Vsevolozhsky, the members, mostly young military officers, discussed, in secret, the problems of autocracy and serfdom.

In 1823, Griboyedov completed his play, *Woe From Wit*, a sharply ironic presentation of the condition of the Russian aristocracy, written in verse. It was immediately banned by the Tsarist censors, but despite this, the play had what Pushkin called an "indescribable effect" on Russian cultural life. By 1830, after Griboyedov's death, despite the censors, an estimated 40,000 hand-written copies of *Woe From Wit* were circulating, and the play was being read at gatherings in cities and towns all over Russia.



*This sketch of Griboyedov was one of several drawn by his friend and fellow poet, Alexander Pushkin, and appeared on one of Pushkin's drafts for his play Eugene Onegin.*

Its verses entered the Russian language, and, as Pushkin himself said, when he first read it, many of its couplets have become proverbs. *Woe From Wit*, author Kelly writes, is perhaps the most-quoted single work of literature in Russian. Its influence on the Russian language, is like that of the works of Shakespeare on English, where so many of the poet's lines have entered everyday speech, that you are often startled to rediscover them in the original works.

### **The Lost Potential of 1812**

The early death of Griboyedov, and the death or exile of so many of his compatriots, stemmed directly from the failure in Russia to realize the true potential of the 1812 "great patriotic war to liberate the motherland" from the Napoleonic invasion. Russia was not liberated from her autocracy. Russia entered a phase of extremely rapid expansion to the south and east, with the first Russian-Persian War 1804-13, and a prolonged attempt to bring the Caucasus—including Chechnya—under its control. From the 16th to 19th Centuries, the Russian Empire expanded at a rate of some 30,000 square kilometers a year. Many Russians upheld the "civilizing mission" of its conquests in West and Central Asia, but the battle for the Caucasus was aimed also at controlling the Black and Caspian Seas.

Griboyedov, "exiled" to Georgia in 1817 as the result of a duel, joined the staff of the Russian military commander Gen. Alexis Petrovich Yermolov, who was striving to subdue

the Caucasus. Griboyedov was rapidly drawn into Russian “forward policy,” as an envoy to the ruling Qajar dynasty of Persia. In the Persian diplomatic capital, Tabriz, he encountered the British mission, from which London had trained and, to some extent, subsidized, the Persian army during the first Russian-Persian war. However, during the course of the Napoleonic wars, British military support to Persia had dwindled, reduced mainly to political and financial operations. London considered Persia important to defending its growing empire in India, but was unable to take on Russian military power there.

Historians of the Soviet Union, Kelly writes, tried to portray the murder of Griboyedov, during his last mission to Persia in 1828, as the result of British intrigues. This, however—Kelly supplies much documentation—is a simplistic interpretation of what happened. The Treaty of Turkmanchai ended British efforts to keep Persia as an effective “buffer” between Russia and India, but there is no indication, in the British or Russian archives, implicating London in the massacre. This was a shaky period—the East India Company was going bankrupt fast, and London had not yet decided to step in and take over. Britain did not want to provoke any Russian operations against Persia, especially anything that might risk direct Russian military operations against British interests.

There were also deep divisions within the British establishment, between the “forward school” hawks, and the much more cautious “close borders” group; their political clashes were to continue for the next 150 years. The Russian consolidation of the Caucasus propelled the British side to define new “forward positions.” This meant consolidating control of Punjab, as well as three (disastrous) forward moves into Afghanistan.

## Religious War

Griboyedov spent the last years of his life between St. Petersburg and the Caucasus, where he repeatedly encountered the internal contradictions of Russia. In the Georgian capital Tiflis (Tbilisi), he befriended the also-exiled intellectual Wilhelm Küchelbecker, a co-student with Pushkin at the famous Lycée at Tsarskoye Selo. The two young men read the works of Shakespeare together, in, as Griboyedov insisted, the original English, and Griboyedov began *Woe From Wit*. Küchelbecker was one of several future Decembrists on Yermolov’s staff in Georgia; he died at the end of 20 years of exile in Siberia.

In Russia in 1823, Griboyedov finished his play amidst intellectual ferment and political turbulence. He did not join the Decembrist movement, being doubtful about the ability of “100 second lieutenants” to transform the Russian government, but his thinking was changing, according to Kelly. Returning to the Caucasus in 1825, he witnessed what was becoming a religious war between the Chechens and the occupying Russians. While supporting the policy to secure Russia’s expanding borders, Griboyedov was beginning to



*The Persian Fath Ali Shah receiving homage from his son, Abbas Mirza. Griboyedov was the Minister of the Russian Tsar to Fath Ali Shah; Abbas Mirza launched the second Russian-Persian war which ended in Russian victory and the harsh Treaty of Turmachai.*

see the effects of Russian policies; this was reflected in his last poems.

Meanwhile, the Qajars had launched war on Russia, which ended in Russian victory. As a result, Russia became the leading power of influence in Persia, and was in position to fight the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey), and conquer Central Asia. Griboyedov, a diplomatic hero, returned to St. Petersburg, where he began writing another play, and looking for financing for another project: launching a government-backed Russo-Transcaucasian Trading Company to expand trade to Georgia, Transcaucasia, and Persia. He never completed either.

Russia’s 1812 generation, led by Pushkin, launched a great renaissance, but their lives were cut far too short. Griboyedov’s epitaph, written by his young widow, reads: “Your spirit and your works remain eternally in the memory of Russians; why did my love for thee outlive thee?”

Kelly’s biography should be circulated in George W. Bush’s Washington, to any who may be shocked enough by the current global crisis, to be ready to learn the lessons.

The book is beautifully illustrated with reproductions of portraits and paintings of many events and places important to Griboyedov’s life, and has useful maps.