

LORD BYRON'S CRITIQUE OF DESPOTISM AND MILITARISM
IN THE RUSSIAN CANTOS OF *DON JUAN*

Irina Avkhimovich

Dr. Noah Heringman, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

In his mock-epic masterpiece *Don Juan* (1819-1824), Lord Byron dwells on the example of Russia in his discussion of the politics of European imperial powers and their military ambitions. In Cantos VII-VIII, the poem's hero, Juan, participates in storming of Turkish fortress Ismail by the Russian army. The poet draws on historical accounts of the Siege of Ismail (1792) for his background and satirizes them for their misrepresentations of war. In Byron's opinion, imperial war discredits all Russia's claims about its progress and cultural improvement. This critique of Russian imperialism amplifies Byron's critique of British imperialism and develops into a universal anti-war critique.

The Russian empress Catherine II is the central character in Cantos IX-X. Byron condemns the concept of enlightened despotism that Catherine was widely considered to represent, which leads him to a critique of the Enlightenment. Using imagery from political cartoons, Byron explores Catherine's gender identity in its interaction with her political power. In the context of contemporary travel narratives, Byron is among those who express a more negative attitude towards Russia. On the whole, those who write about Russia's foreign affairs and imperialism offer more critique than those who are concerned with witnessing the life inside the country. This paper argues that Byron's critique, though more superficial than the travel narratives, takes advantage of commonplace perceptions of Russia and Catherine to comment on the politics of post-Napoleonic Europe.