The power of the story: history, the literary imagination, and Tolstoy’s tales of Lincoln and Hadji Murád

Norman W. Provizer
Professor of Political Science and Director of the Golda Meir Center for Political Leadership, Metropolitan State University of Denver, CO, USA

Jennifer Provizer
Study Abroad Advisor and Program Assistant, Office of International Studies, Metropolitan State University of Denver, CO, USA

Stories play a critical role in what it means to be human. They provide, after all, a fundamental way through which we experience and understand the world. This article explores the interplay of history and the literary imagination relative to the power of the story in the context of two tales from Leo Tolstoy set against the backdrop of the Caucasus. The first is a newspaper article from 1909, still the subject of debate, that offers Tolstoy’s comments on Abraham Lincoln, holding him to be the ‘world’s greatest hero,’ published just before the centennial of the sixteenth president’s birth. The second is the Russian novelist’s slender book on Hadji Murád, who might be called Tolstoy’s ‘Muslim hero,’ published in 1912, two years after Tolstoy’s death. In exploring these works, emphasis is placed on how the potency of the historian’s truth often pales in comparison to ‘the power of the right story.’

Keywords: the role of stories, Leo Tolstoy, historical truth, Hadji Murád, stories and the brain, Abraham Lincoln

1 INTRODUCTION

We humans are, to borrow the title of a book by Jonathan Gottschall, ‘the storytelling animal.’ Unlike our cousins the Neandertals (frequently spelled Neanderthals) who used fire as ‘a practical tool for warmth and cooking,’ modern humans turned the hearth, according to archeological evidence, into something much more: ‘a focus of social activity’ (Wynn and Coolidge 2012, p. 116).

As anthropologist Wynn and psychologist Coolidge explain (ibid., p. 117):

Hearths had become a focus of social life. Long after the cooking was done, people sat around the fires and talked, recited myths, and performed rituals. This is a familiar use of fire in the twenty-first century, and has been for at least 25,000 years. It is this kind of fire use that has never been found with Neandertals. It marks an important social difference between Neandertals and us, and also a possible difference in the nature of mind and language.

In that sense, as a species, we homo sapiens appear to be ‘addicted to story,’ addicted to the Neverland of imagination (Gottschall 2012, p. xiv). An addiction, we might add, reinforced by our brain. As a growing body of neuroscience shows,
stories ‘stimulate the brain and even change how we act in life’ (Paul 2012, p. SR 6). Our brain, it would seem, ‘does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life; in each case, the same neurological regions are stimulated’ (ibid.). As Howard Gardner (1995, p. 42) has reminded us, ‘social scientists have come to appreciate what political, religious, and military figures have long known: that stories (narratives, myths, or fables) constitute a uniquely powerful currency in human relationships.’ In short, ‘the utilization, creation, telling, and remembering of stories are an essential part of what it means to be human’ (Paul Cohen 2014, p. 203). A point brain science has greatly strengthened in functional MRI fashion.

It is little wonder then that Gardner and others have looked to stories as a key factor in leadership. For Gardner, there are two ways through which leaders exercise influence. One is through the traits they embody and the other is through their stories. Stories offer a ‘vision of life’ as contained in the life and actions of a leader, along with communicating what Gardner calls a clear ‘propositional account’ of things (Gardner 1995, p. 42). On the story front, Robert Sternberg (2011, p. 161) adds in straightforward manner, ‘Stories are at the heart of leadership.’ And along similar lines, Evan Cornog, in The Power and the Story (2004, p. 3), writes that ‘[s]tories work and stories matter because they are fundamental to the way we understand the world,’ including the way we ‘remember what we learned.’

‘Through stories,’ to use the words of Paul Cohen (2014, p. 28), ‘we learn about human culture and psychology without the potentially staggering costs of having to gain this experience firsthand.’ Additionally, they can act as ‘a form of social glue that brings people together around common values’ (ibid.). We share stories to remind us of who we are and how we should behave – of what is and what might be (Sachs 2012, p. 4). In fact, as biologist Edward O. Wilson (2014, p. 51) notes, ‘Our minds consist of storytelling.’ We call upon ‘the stories of past events for context and meaning’ and fall back on them in inventing competing stories for the future (ibid.). Little wonder then that the cognitive and educational psychologist Jerome Bruner highlights the central role played by stories when it comes to fulfilling the human need for meaning (Popper 2012, p. 45).

2 A TALE FROM THE CAUCASUS

During a November 11, 2013 appearance on the Charlie Rose show on PBS, Doris Kearns Goodwin commented, ‘What I think history is about is stories. You tell a series of connected stories.’ In her 2005, best-selling volume Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln, Goodwin well illustrated that power of the story on several levels. First, of course, there is the very title of the book, indicating Lincoln’s ‘unprecedented decision to incorporate his eminent rivals into his political family, the cabinet’ and by so doing, providing ample ‘evidence of a profound self confidence and a first indication of what would prove to others a most unexpected greatness’ (Goodwin 2005, p. xvi). In telling that tale, she turned the ‘team of rivals’ title into a household phrase.

Second, in a very brief section of the book, Goodwin provides a compelling portrait of Lincoln’s actions to secure the necessary votes in Congress that sent the proposed Thirteenth Amendment, ending slavery, to the states for ratification (ibid., pp. 686–690). Goodwin’s discussion was neither the first nor the most comprehensive examination of this episode. But it was her telling of the story that most influenced playwright
Tony Kushner and his screenplay for the 2012 Steven Spielberg film *Lincoln* that credits Goodwin’s study (Kushner 2013, p. viii).

Third, and most directly relevant for this article, Goodwin begins her study with three quotes on Lincoln, one of which is from Leo Tolstoy in which the Russian novelist writes that Lincoln ‘will live as long as the world lives’ (Goodwin 2005, p. ix). Goodwin returns to Tolstoy’s comments in the book’s concluding pages where she relates a story from the Caucasus that indicates just how large the scope of Lincoln’s universal legacy had become by the start of the twentieth century (ibid., pp. 747–748).

That tale first appeared in a New York newspaper in 1909 and Goodwin would be neither the first nor the last Lincoln scholar to mine its content. In his edited volume for the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth in 2009, for example, Harold Holzer introduces the 1909 story by writing, ‘There may be no stronger evidence that Lincoln’s fame had spread worldwide than the interview with the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) that appeared in the *New York World* shortly before the Lincoln Centennial’ (Holzer 2009, p. 386). Fifty-seven years earlier, in his book on *Lincoln and the Russians*, Albert Woldman put things this way: of the many Lincoln tributes coming from Russia, none ‘was more eloquent and sincere than the one voiced by Count Leo Tolstoi’ (Woldman 1952, p. 271).

Tolstoy’s tale emerged on the front page of *The World*, under the byline of one Count S. Stakelberg. According the article’s opening paragraph, Stakelberg visited Tolstoy at the novelist’s Yasnaya Polyana estate and asked him to write an article about Lincoln for the centennial of the sixteenth president’s birth. Due to his poor health, Tolstoy (who would die the following year) declined, but he did offer to provide his ‘opinion’ on Lincoln to Stakelberg. The article’s remaining 21 paragraphs that are entirely in quotes report what it was that Tolstoy told the Count (Stakelberg 1909, p. 1).

In the article, Tolstoy tells of a time in the Caucasus when, as a guest of a Circassian tribal chief, the novelist was asked to tell some tales of great figures in history. Tolstoy talks of the Czars and of Napoleon, but the tribal chief says ‘you have not told us a syllable about the greatest general and the greatest ruler of the world. We want to know something about him … His name was Lincoln and the country in which he lived is called America … Tell us of that man’ (Stakelberg 1909, pp. 1–2).

Tolstoy complies with the request and, in doing so, asks ‘why was Lincoln so great that he overshadows all other national heroes?’ His answer is that Lincoln’s ‘supremacy expresses itself altogether in his particular moral power and in the greatness of his character.’ He was nothing short of ‘a Christ in miniature, a saint of humanity.’ And when Tolstoy later provides a picture of Lincoln to the tribesmen, he is rewarded with a gift of a fine Arabian horse. For the famed Russian novelist, ‘This little incident proves how largely the name of Lincoln is worshipped throughout the world and how legendary his personality has become’ (Stakelberg 1909, pp. 1–2).

Of course, it is not surprising that this newspaper story, and the tale it tells, has resonated with Lincoln scholars over the decades. From Carl Sandburg to Merrill Peterson, Michael Burlingame, Holzer, and Goodwin (to name just a noted few), Lincoln biographers have been understandably drawn to Tolstoy’s tale from the Caucasus. Though, interestingly enough, according to Sandburg’s version, found in *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* first published in 1939 (Sandburg 2007), it was journalist James Creelman to whom Tolstoy told his Lincoln tale (Sandburg 2007, p. 434). The Canadian-born Creelman came to New York in 1872 when he was 13 years old and emerged as a famed investigative reporter in the era of ‘yellow journalism,’ first with the *New York Herald*, followed by time at Joseph Pulitzer’s *The World* (the newspaper in which Tolstoy’s Lincoln story was published) and William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*. 

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While working for the Herald in Paris, we know that Creelman actually did interview Tolstoy (as well as Pope Leo VIII and others). That interview, titled ‘A Visit to Tolstoy,’ appeared in an issue of Harper’s Weekly in 1892, but contained no reference to Lincoln (Sekirin 2006, pp. 51–54). In 1909, Creelman also published a slender volume called Why We Love Lincoln and it too makes no mention of Tolstoy’s tale from the Caucasus on the subject of America’s sixteenth president (Creelman 1909 [2010]).

Still, when William Jennings Bryan wanted to meet with Tolstoy, he asked Creelman, who was ‘acquainted with Tolstoy,’ to arrange for a meeting that occurred in December 1903 (Walsh 1976). Exactly where, if anywhere, Creelman, the journalist who gained fame for his reporting on the Japanese slaughter of Chinese civilians in Port Arthur and who put the words ‘I’ll provide the war’ into the mouth of William Randolph Hearst, comes into the Lincoln picture is a question that begs for further archival examination.

3 A QUESTION OF HISTORY AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION

Beginning in 2007, one of the authors of the present article (N. Provizer, who is not the historian) published several essays transporting Tolstoy’s tale from the field of Lincoln studies into the world of leadership (N. Provizer 2007, 2008, and 2011). After all, in leadership studies, it is Tolstoy who represents the counter to Thomas Carlyle’s ‘Great Man Theory’ (N. Provizer 2008, pp. 453–458). In the surfer terms used by Warren Bennis (1997, p. 22), while Carlyle’s leaders make the waves they ride on, Tolstoy’s simply ride the waves that other forces, including fortune, create. Except, it would seem, in the case of Tolstoy’s Lincoln who was anything but, in the words used by Simon Bolivar, a ‘weak toy of fortune’ (Paige 1977, p. 66).

While the story of Tolstoy’s Lincoln is widespread, there have been those who have used the tale to also raise questions about it. For example, it has been pointed out that ‘there is no evidence in the Russian author’s diaries and letters, or in biographies written about him, that he made any conscious effort to study Lincoln in any depth’ nor is there any record in Tolstoy’s diaries of any meeting and discussion with a Count Stakelberg (who remains largely below the radar even in the age of Google) on Lincoln or any other matter, though it must be said that Tolstoy’s diary entries shrank considerably from what they had previously been as age and illness advanced (N. Provizer 2011, p. 28). Earlier, it was also noted that the Stakelberg interview was absent from the publication of Tolstoy’s complete works (Boritt 1978, pp. 294 and 361).

In 2011, Richard Carwardine and Jay Sexton edited the volume titled The Global Lincoln that pushed such questions even further. Drawing on the work of Norman Saul and Thomas Schwartz in a paper ‘Abraham Lincoln, the Russian Empire, and the American Civil War’ that was part of the exploration of Lincoln’s international legacy held at Oxford University for the bicentennial of Lincoln’s birth but not included in the edited book, Carwardine and Sexton discuss the ‘murky provenance’ of many examples of Lincoln’s global reach, including the Tolstoy commentary. As they note, Tolstoy had not visited the Caucasus in many years and his visits had occurred ‘mostly before the Civil War’ (Carwardine and Sexton 2011, pp. 5–6). After all, the three years Tolstoy spent in the Caucasus, including his time as a member of the Russian Army, was during the first half of the 1850s. That was well before Lincoln’s rise to prominence. And when Tolstoy did travel outside of Russia in the late 1850s into the 1860s, it was to European nations.

Also, while Carwardine and Sexton (2011, p. 6) write that ‘[m]any authors rely on Carl Sandburg, yet he himself gave no citation for the episode,’ they fail to note Sandburg’s
statement, in the body of his book, that Tolstoy told his story to Creelman. In any case, they continue: ‘This is not evidence that the newspaper article was a hoax, but its author was not Tolstoy himself’ (ibid., p. 6). But beyond that, there might well be more to the story of Tolstoy’s Lincoln than immediately meets the eye of the reader. As the noted documentary filmmaker and commentator on photography Errol Morris notes, in passing, in the third part of his 2013 New York Times online series on ‘The Interminable, Everlasting Lincolns,’ the ‘Circassian chief as quoted by Stackelberg [sic] sounds more like Tolstoy than how I imagine a Circassian chief might sound’ (Morris 2013a).

More important, for our purpose, is a comment Morris makes in the first part of his series on Lincoln photographs concerning the difference between the collector and the storyteller when it comes to the famed February 5, 1865 photograph of the sixteenth president. ‘For the collector,’ he writes, ‘the image with the crack is a damaged piece of goods – the crack potentially undermining the value of the photograph as an artifact, a link to the past. The storyteller doesn’t care about the photograph’s condition, or its provenance, but about its thematic connections with events. To the storyteller, the crack is the beginning of a legend of a death foretold’ (Morris 2003b). Tolstoy’s Lincoln might have a ‘murky provenance.’ But from the storytelling perspective, that matters less than its ‘thematic connections with events’ – connections that continue to resonate.

Returning to Carwardine and Sexton’s The Global Lincoln for a moment, following the book’s introductory chapter by the editors that calls into question the exact facts surrounding the often repeated words of Tolstoy on Lincoln, there are three chapters by authors writing on the global Lincoln in Latin America, Germany, and India that all refer to the 1909 newspaper article containing Tolstoy’s portrait of Lincoln, particularly the idea that he was a ‘humanitarian as broad as the world’ (Miller 2011, p. 213; Nagler 2011, p. 242; and Lal 2011, p. 176). So much, it would seem, for the idea that questions of history simply trump the literary imagination, the power of the story. As Paul Cohen (2014, p. xiv) writes in his study of the use of stories in five countries, ‘the power of the historian’s truth often has a difficult time competing with the power of the right story … ’

In this sense, it is worth keeping in mind Jerome Bruner’s proposition that there are two types of reality. The first involves nature and is subject to scientific, logical thinking. The second concerns people and the core of that world is the narrative, the story (Popper 2012, p. 45). ‘The story,’ in the words of Micha Popper, ‘may be entirely true, or partly true, but in the end it acquires a life of its own and becomes what French sociologist Emile Durkheim called a “social fact”’ (ibid., p. 11).

That continued resonance reflects the power of consonance in storytelling, the congruence existing between the imagery of the tale told and the images held by those receiving it. As Carwardine and Sexton (2011, p. 11) write, ‘If Tolstoy did call him [Lincoln] “a Christ in miniature” in 1909, he was only echoing what men and women had been saying for nearly half a century since the torrent of eulogies and lamentation that followed his death’. A torrent that was compiled, in part, in a collection of condolences sent from across the globe after his death, including one from the Sicilian village of Acireale proclaiming that ‘Abraham Lincoln was not yours only – he was also ours’ (United States Department of State 1866, p. 434).

For his part, the story Lincoln told was frequently expressed through the imagery projected by photography. While he used his self-deprecating humor to jest about his looks and the unfathomable interest people seemed to have in his likeness, he ‘well understood and utilized the power of image’ (J. Provizer 2010, p. 3). In short, he ‘realized exactly why photographs mattered’ (ibid.). Early in his political career, he used photographs to project a casual image as ‘a true man of the people’ (Sandler 2008, p. 6). Before his Cooper Union address, Mathew Brady photographed him a
different way, in an ‘attractive, confident, statesman-like pose’ – a pose that would lead Lincoln to say that he owed his election to Brady as well as the Cooper Union speech he delivered (Sullivan 2000, pp. 29 and 30–31).

During the war, Lincoln made sure that in photographs with his generals, it was the President who stood at the center drawing the viewer’s eye while reinforcing his authority by wearing his stovepipe hat that added even more inches to his 6’ 4’’ frame. Lincoln continually ‘showed he was no stranger to the power of image’ (J. Provizer 2010, p. 5).

Yet, here too, consonance is an important, if never a completely determinative factor. If Lincoln were not a man of the people, a picture of him in casual dress and messy hair would not have resonated for long. If Lincoln were not a statesman, no pose would have sustained that image beyond a brief moment. If Lincoln were not a military thinker of enough substance for Eliot Cohen to call him ‘the greatest of American war presidents,’ no attempt to display his authority in that area would have mattered over time (E. Cohen 2003, p. 51). And if he had been a man who stood five feet tall, no stovepipe hat would have made a difference in terms of his presence. Authentic representation is not without its value.

This brings us back to Tolstoy and his words on Lincoln. Clearly, the imagery in Tolstoy’s story is reinforced by the images held by those receiving it. But is Tolstoy’s Lincoln tale consonant with the Tolstoy we know outside of the 1909 article? On the surface at least, it might be tempting to say no. As earlier noted, Tolstoy represents the view that leaders are ‘history’s Slaves’ not its master and that events controlled leaders rather than leaders controlling events (Burns 2003, pp. 14–15). ‘The life of nations,’ Tolstoy (2002, p. 1360) writes in his extended epilogue to War and Peace, ‘is not contained in the life of a few men … ’ But isn’t that exactly the opposite of the message delivered by Tolstoy’s Lincoln in the 1909 newspaper account?

Before there is any rush to judgment here, we also have to consider what Tolstoy noted in his diary the same year his Lincoln story appeared in The World. According to the novelist, mankind progresses ‘because people of advanced views change the environment little by little, pointing the way to an eternally remote state of perfection’ (Tolstoy 1985, p. 599). As Dmitri Akhsharumov and N.I. Kareev add, Tolstoy’s characters (his theory aside) ‘are real and not mere pawns in the hands of unintelligible destiny … individual wills may not be all-powerful, but neither are they totally impotent, and some are more effective than others’ (Berlin 1993, pp. 33 and 35). Further, Donna Tussing Orwin (2002, p. 235) argues that Tolstoy in his own search to become ‘an example of upright conduct’ expressed the belief that ‘individuals rather than institutions introduce transcendent truths into the world and nourish them.’

In this sense, instead of representing an overstated counterweight to Carlyle, Tolstoy was actually an admirer of Carlyle’s and may well have modeled his own activity, in part, on the English essayist’s ‘notion of the hero’ (Orwin 2002, p. 235 and Orwin 1996, pp. 63–70). As Tolstoy noted in an essay reprinted on the editorial page of The World on the same day as the interview with Stakelberg appeared on the front page of the newspaper, he worshipped the only reality that existed: ‘the soul of man’ (Tolstoy 1909, editorial section, p. 1). Seen in this light, Tolstoy’s tale of Lincoln is much less surprising – and much less perplexing – than it first appears.

4 THE COUNT AND THE CHIEFTAIN

A final piece in the puzzle of Tolstoy’s Lincoln, like the newspaper article itself, is a story that also emerges from the Caucasus. That piece is Tolstoy’s novel Hadji Murád
(also spelled Murat) that was finally published in 1912, two years after Tolstoy’s death (Tolstoy 2005). Tolstoy’s connection to the Avar chieftain around whom the novel revolves went back to 1851 when the Russian storyteller served in the Russian Army fighting in the Caucasus. Tolstoy began work on the novel, based on the real-life figure of Murád, in 1896. It was completed nine years later, after 11 drafts of more than 2,000 pages. Though the final story is told in a slender novel one-tenth the size of War and Peace, noted critic Harold Bloom (1994, p. 336) calls it the ‘best story in the world, or at lest the best I have ever read.’

Tolstoy may be best known for his masterpieces War and Peace and Anna Karenina, but the great German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein preferred Hadji Murád over anything else Tolstoy wrote. And Tolstoy himself appears to have thought of this tale from the Caucasus as his favorite story (Richter 2004, p. 184). As for Tolstoy’s wife, she wrote in her diary the year before her husband died, ‘I have done nothing but copy out Hadji Murad. It’s so good! I simply couldn’t tear myself away from it’ (Tóibín 2003).

Like Tolstoy’s Lincoln, Murád ‘lives and dies as the archaic epic hero,’ representing ‘the best there is in his universe – whether Caucasian or Russian – at every attribute that matters: daring, horsemanship, resourcefulness, leadership, vision of reality’ (Bloom 1994, p. 349). In facing death, he displays the kind of courage that leaves him with ‘his identity not only unimpaired but enhanced’ (ibid., p. 344). Like Tolstoy’s Lincoln, Murád, in his struggle against Russian occupation, expresses ‘the readiness for self-sacrifice in a great cause’ so attractive to the novelist (Tolstoy 2005, p. xxvi). In contrast to Tolstoy’s portrait of Tsar Nicholas I in the novel, the tribal chieftain from the Caucasus is a man of courage, loyalty, and honor, a man who is not a captive of some false sense of greatness. Murád is ‘Tolstoy’s Muslim Hero,’ to use the title of a column by William Amelia that appeared in the Wall Street Journal in 2008. And as such, Bloom (1994, pp. 337–338) notes that there is no other central character in all of Tolstoy’s writings who receives so loving and full account as does Murád. While there are claims that Tolstoy ‘hardly explores the character of Hadji Murád,’ the novelist’s correspondence with those who knew Murád, in which he asked a wide-range of detailed questions, is more in line with Bloom’s assessment (Stewart 2007; Tolstoy 1978, p. 495).

Of course, Tolstoy was aware of his own internal conflicts when it came to this tale from the Caucasus, telling his daughter that he was writing ‘on the quiet,’ ashamed of the very act of creating it as it ran counter to his expressed beliefs (Christian 1969, p. 240). But write it he did. And, in the process, Tolstoy provides an added context that directly reinforces the nature and meaning of the Lincoln portrait published four years after he completed his tale of Hadji Murád. In short, the great Russian novelist left ample evidence that he revered the ‘heroes’ in practice whose very existence he denied in theory.

Perhaps the best way to understand this apparent contradiction is to recognize that Tolstoy himself was a contradiction, promoting a kind of ‘lethal nihilism’ in theory while possessing ‘a passionate longing to discover a single unitary truth’ in his life. As Aileen Kelly writes about Tolstoy in the introduction to a collection of essays by Isaiah Berlin on Russian thinkers, ‘He was thus constantly in contradiction with himself …’ (Berlin 2008, p. xxxi). In Berlin’s terms, ‘Tolstoy was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog’ (ibid., p. 26).

5 CONCLUSION

Certainly, none of this resolves the nagging, factual questions of history that surround the ‘murky provenance’ of Tolstoy’s Lincoln, nor does it directly address the
overarching problems created by what Nassim Taleb calls the narrative fallacy – a fallacy based on the storytelling animal’s preference for ‘compact stories over raw truths,’ a hard-wired predilection that we have which significantly ‘distorts our mental representation of the world’ (Taleb 2010, p. 63).

Yet, even with such very real issues in mind, the power of the story remains. ‘Good stories,’ as Daniel Kahneman reminds us in Thinking, Fast and Slow (2011, p. 199), ‘provide a simple and coherent account of people’s actions and intentions.’ Whatever their flaws, good stories resonate with our brain and our literary imagination. It is imagination, after all, that ‘allows you to go beyond the data you have at hand’ (Gazzaniga 2011, p. 187).

After Democratic candidate John Kerry lost the presidential election of 2004, an exasperated James Carville complained that during the campaign the Republicans produced a narrative, a story, while the Democrats offered only a litany, a laundry list of things they would do (Sachs 2012, p. 47). And having a story matters. In leadership, like in jazz, a great solo tells a tale, a narrative that transcends the string of individual notes played. And isn’t that exactly what Tolstoy’s Lincoln does?

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