

# **ALEXANDER GRIBOEDOV**

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Griboedov, Alexander Sergeevich (1795-1829), a dramatist and diplomat, is best known as the author of Woe from Wit (*Gore ot uma*). The first Russian comedy of manners, the play was written in 1823, but not published until 1833 because of censorship.

Born in Moscow as the son of a military officer, Griboedov showed talent at an early age in a number of areas. He was admitted to Moscow University at the age of eleven. By the age of sixteen he had graduated in literature, law, mathematics, and natural sciences. He also had a gift for music. The Napoleonic invasion prevented him from pursuing a doctorate. He served in the military from 1812 to 1816. After the war he entered the civil service in the ministry of foreign affairs. In 1818 he was sent to Persia (Iran) as secretary to the Russian mission. There Griboedov added Arabic and Persian to the long list of foreign languages he had mastered (French, German, Italian, and English). In 1821 he transferred to service in the Caucasus, but took a leave of absence in St. Petersburg and Moscow from February 1823 to May 1825 to write Woe from Wit. Although Griboedov was back in the Caucasus by December of 1825, he was nevertheless summoned under arrest for his alleged

involvement in the abortive Decembrist uprising of that time. After extensive interrogations, however, he was cleared of suspicion and returned to his diplomatic post. Griboedov negotiated the peace treaty of 1828 that ended the Russo-Persian War. As a reward for his wits, he was appointed Russian minister in Tehran in 1828, where – in ironic mockery of his own play’s title -- he was murdered in January 1829 by religious fanatics who attacked the Russian embassy. The twentieth century novelist Yuri Tynianov wrote about Griboedov's death in Death and Diplomacy in Persia (1938)

Woe from Wit, composed in rhymed verse, is a seminal work in Russian culture. Many lines from the play have entered everyday Russian speech as quotations or aphorisms. Its hero, Chatsky, is the prototype of the so-called superfluous man, who criticizes social and political conditions in his country but does nothing to bring about a change. In addition to the gap between generations, the concept of “service” is a key theme. In a monolithic country with minimal private enterprise, a man’s career choices were either civil or military. Griboedov mocks as shallow and morally irresponsible the character Famusov, who says in the play: “For me, whether it is business matters or not, my custom is, once it’s signed, the burden is off my shoulders.” As for military service, the hero Chatsky prefers to serve the cause and not specific personalities. He says to Famusov: “I should be pleased to serve, but worming oneself into one’s favor is sickening” (*Sluzhit’ by rad, prisluzhivat’sia toshno*). Famusov rejects such serious loyalty to a higher cause, reminiscing fondly of his uncle who stumbled and hurt himself while in court. When Catherine the Great showed amusement, the uncle deliberately fell again as a way to

please her. Here Griboedov appears to counter the poet Derzhavin's ode to Catherine (*Felitsa*), written in 1789, in which Catherine is praised as someone who treats subordinates respectfully. The play contains an extensive gallery of satirical portraits that continue to hold relevance to contemporary audiences both in Russia and around the world.

## Bibliography

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