Through Curious and Foreign Eyes

Grigorii Machtet
Chronicles the Kansas Frontier, 1872–1873

by Norman E. Saul

One of the many newsworthy incidents during the settling of Kansas involved the death by gunshot of a Russian subject near the town of Seneca in November 1872. The event, like so many similar ones, might have passed quietly into oblivion except that the details were recorded by a companion at the scene. This man, Grigorii Machtet, on the way to becoming a well-known popular author in a great age of Russian literature, described what he saw during his year-long residence and travels in Kansas for an audience in Russia.

Machtet's writings covered a wide range of personal experiences abroad and at home, emphasizing his observations of people he met. Some were autobiographical and descriptive while others were novels, short stories, and morality lessons. After his death in 1901, they were noteworthy enough to be compiled in twelve volumes published in Kiev and, a few years later, in

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Grigorii Machtet

THROUGH CURIOUS AND FOREIGN EYES
American writers such as Washington Irving enjoyed enduring popularity in Russia during the 1870s.

a St. Petersburg edition. Most of volume two of these collections pertains to his adventures in Kansas.

Machtet was born in 1852 in Lutsk, a major city in the province of Volinia in Western Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire and formerly within the kingdom of Poland-Lithuania. Although he was the son of a schoolteacher who was of Ukrainian-Polish nobility, he wrote mostly in Russian and was properly included in the ranks of the Russian intelligentsia. Machtet entered the Nezhinski lyceum (high school) and then a provincial academy in Kamenetz-Podolski in the late 1860s during the height of liberal reforms in Russia, but he was soon expelled for radical activities. He was nonetheless able to take a special examination in Kiev and become a schoolteacher in Mogilevsk, 2

During this relatively free period in Russian history, the universities and schools, especially around Kiev, were hotbeds of student movements and radical thought. The socialist-populist ideas of Russian publicists such as Alexander Herzen, Vissarion Belinsky, Michael Bakunin, and Nicholas Chernyshevsky provided the inspiration for this revolutionary-minded generation. These students tended to identify with groups or circles that often would have a distinctive viewpoint.

At the high school, Machtet came under the influence of one of his teachers, Alexander Roman’ko-Romanovskii and his wife, Olga Razumovskaya, and he was introduced to the basic tenets of Russian populism that idealized the communal life of the Russian peasant village. He soon developed an attachment to the Kiev circle of the Debogorii-Mokrievich family (two brothers and a cousin), which was especially interested in opportunities for social experimentation abroad with a focus on the United States.

Information about America was quite plentiful in Russia at that time because of the liberal reform era of the reign of Alexander II and the enduring popularity of American writers such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose works were issued in numerous Russian-language editions. The United States also attracted Russian attention due to American friendship toward Russia during the Crimean War, the historical coincidence of slave and serf emancipations and the bitter struggle between North and South, and especially the sensational Russian naval visits to New York and San Francisco in 1863 that demonstrated Russian official support for the Union cause.

Several Russians, notably Aleksandr Lakier and Eduard Tsimmerman, had already written for the Russian public about their travels in America. Tsimmerman, a Moscow merchant, may have had the most important influence upon Russian perceptions of the American frontier because he traveled into Nebraska in 1857 and again in 1869, and emphasized

1. G.A. Machtet, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii G. A. Machtet (Complete Collection of the Works of G. A. Machtet), 12 vols. (Kiev: B.K. Fuku, 1902), and Machtet, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 12 vols. (St. Petersburg: Prosveschenie, 1911–1912); the American stories were also published separately as Po bytui svetu (ocherki amerikanskoj zhizni) (Around the Wide World: Sketches of American Life) (Moscow: Bunch-Bruевич, 1889), and are available at the University of Illinois library in Champaign-Urbana. For translations of about half of Machtet’s writings on Kansas, see Olga Peters Hasty and Susanne Fusso, eds. and trans., America Through Russian Eyes, 1874–1926 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 16–82. Alexander Nikolau, a Russian Discovery of America (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1996), 320–36, contains Machtet’s description of New York and the Russian community there, and provides an opportunity to compare his writings with those of other Russian observers of the United States.


the growth and development that had occurred. Additionally, a popular account of America by a British observer, William Hepworth Dixon, also appeared in Russian and was extensively reviewed in Russian periodicals. All this spurred a curiosity about the United States and particular attention to contemporary developments such as the outcome of the Civil War, the Homestead Act, land grants to railroads, the attempt to impeach a president, and the freedom and opportunity for immigration and settlement.

The members of the Debogorii-Mokrievich circle also undoubtedly were familiar with Chernyshovsky’s and Herzen’s sympathetic portraits of America and Bakunin’s journey through the country in 1860 on the way from Siberian exile to Western Europe. And they were certainly not alone in seeing the United States as a land of opportunity for an unrestricted political life and social and economic experimentation. Machet’s group was so much infatuated with the New World that its members dubbed themselves “Amerikantsy,” the Americans, and began to save money for a trip across the Atlantic. Another motivation for seeking refuge in America was the wide publicity in 1870 given to Sergei Nechaev’s plot to murder a member of his terrorist student circle in order to bond them closer together, a famous episode of Russian revolutionary history immortalized by Fedor Dostoevsky in The Possessed that had appeared in serial form in 1871. The Amerikantsy wanted to escape the demoralization produced by the Russian environment that, in their eyes, contributed to this deed and to the reaction and repression that was growing in Russia. According to Vladimir Debogorii-Mokrievich, they also sought the additional protection from arrest that American citizenship might give them upon returning to Russia.

Three members of the circle departed for America in the summer of 1872; the Debogorii-Mokrievich brothers also left: one had gone earlier to join the Oneida Community, one of the best-known utopian socialist settlements in America, while the other did not get beyond Zurich, a major center of dissident Russian exiles. Besides the twenty-year-old Machet, who took the name George Mansted upon arrival in America, were Roman’ko-Romanovskii and Ivan Rechtsikii, a former government clerk. They first spent several weeks in the rather turbulent Russian community in New York, which included socialists and Christians, Jews and gentiles, and Poles and Ukrainians as well as Russians. Then the Amerikantsy set off for the West, apparently having received financial support in New York, as they subsequently referred to themselves as the “Western Branch” of the New York Russian Circle for Mutual Aid.

Exactly why Machet and his associates chose Kansas as their destination is not known, but from the beginning they were intent on finding the best place to establish an agricultural commune, and most likely they were aware of the precedent set by Tsimmerman in investigating the Great Plains and by a fellow socialist of Russian-German nobility, Vladimir Geins (Heinz), who after departure from Russia adopted the name of Wilhelm Frey (Free), soon anglicized to William Frey. In January 1871, after corresponding with the Oneida Community and a short
participation in Alexander Longley’s Reunion Community in Jasper County, Missouri, near the Kansas border, Frey and his wife and an American socialist, Stephen Briggs, bought former Osage Indian land in southern Kansas for a communal farm four miles east of Cedar Vale. Frey’s activities were well known within the New York Russian community.

Another factor in Machtet’s selecting Kansas might have been the publicity surrounding Grand Duke Alexis’ journey to the West in quest of buffalo hunting thrills early in 1872. This excursion by the third son of the tsar and his party included a number of stops, for example in Topeka and Lawrence, on the way back. Or the party may have simply headed west and run out of money in St. Joseph, Missouri.

The new Russian visitors thus did not head directly to the Freys’ south Kansas commune—or to better-known Kansas towns—but came to the northeastern corner of the state. There, in early summer, they found employment at the Doniphan County Nursery at Brenner Station about three miles south of Troy on the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad. Probably the main factor determining their destination was that John Moshiskey [likely Ivan Moshinsky in Russian] had emigrated from Russia to America in 1866 and, after working two years as a nurseryman in Illinois, formed a partnership with the Doniphan County Nursery. How the connection was formed between the Russians is not clear since Machtet does not mention Moshiskey by name in any of his writings.

While working during the summer, Machtet—or Marsted—began taking notes for a series of impressionistic “travel pictures” describing the Kansas frontier scene. In the first, “Prairie and Pioneers,” he informed his Russian readers that the American Plains, at least northeast Kansas, did not at all resemble the Ukrainian steppe:

It has nothing in common with our silent, monotonous, flat, smooth, treeless steppe. It is all hills and valleys, crisscrossed by a multitude of streams and ravines that are often parched in the summer but noisy and full of water in the spring, when their banks are covered with oaks, white and black walnuts, sycamores, and prickly shrubs. . . . At sunset the streams and ravines are enveloped in a thick fog that dissolves in the morning into clouds across the vast blue sky. That is why the Indians—the sons of the Great Spirit of the wilderness, who roamed these places long before the coming of the paleface—called this land Kansas, that is, “smoking stream.”

He also outlined the violent history of the state, emphasizing the role of John Brown (and even translated one of the verses of the popular song into Russian), but he stressed that now all was tranquil and productive in Kansas. He was especially impressed

8. Ibid., 21–23; William Frey to Alexander Longley, April 19, 1871, William Frey Papers, box 1, file 3, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library; “Our Past,” Progressive Community 2 (February 1875). Frey also had written reports on America for the Russian public; see V. K. Geims, “Prezidentskaya kampaniya v Amerike: pozavlenie trei’et’si’ pariti’” (The Presidential Campaign in America: the Appearance of a Third Party), Otechestvenniia Zapiski (Fatherland Notes) 230 (February 1870): 415–53. This, perhaps the most widely read of the Russian “fat” journals, was the leader in exposing Russians to American life and society.

9. For an interesting tongue-in-cheek account of the grand duke’s reception in Topeka by D.R. Anthony, see the Leavenworth Daily Times, January 24, 1872.

10. “John Moshiskey,” Portrait and Biographical Album of Marshall County, Kansas (Chicago: Chapman Bros., 1889), 179. Moshiskey is described as “a Russian gentleman of superior education, [who] has been very successful in his present enterprise,” the Maryville Nursery, with more than one hundred thousand trees on 360 acres. In an advertisement for the “Doniphan County Nursery, Stapleton, Moshiskey & Co.,” the location is described as at Rock Creek schoolhouse, near Brenner Station. Doniphan County Republican (Troy), August 10, 1872. The most common variants in Russian are Moshinskii, Moshinskii, Mosheraikii, Moshinskii, and Moshchanskii. Morton Benson, comp. Dictionary of Russian Personal Names (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 86.

11. Machtet, “Proriiia i pionieria” (Prairie and Pioneers), Polone soobranie soctleniia (Kiev) 2: 5–11; this translation is from Hasty and Fusco, America Through Russian Eyes, 20 (quoted by permission of Yale University Press, which retains the copyright).
with the transformation of the prairie from its Indian culture to immigrant settlement and described in detail the breaking of soil for the first time. Curiously, he and his colleagues played a direct role in that transformation since their job at the nursery was planting hedgerows of Osage orange (Machtet complained about losing blood from the thorns).12

Keen to speak American English as well as learn about Kansas society, Machtet attended town and rural meetings and conversed with farmers around Troy. Interestingly, within Machtet’s Russian text, particular terms or idioms that struck him as unique were left in the original, phonetically spelled English, thus providing clues to 1870s Kansas speech patterns. He also was adept at sketching people. A leading character of his first stories was “Uncle Jack,” a bachelor farmer who regularly attended these town meetings, some of which were probably held at the Rock Creek schoolhouse near the Doniphan County Nursery. Uncle Jack’s persistence in speaking out in a booming voice and having a definite viewpoint on every issue, perhaps an early and persisting Kansas trait, impressed Machtet who faithfully recorded the debates he heard over “herd lowa [law]” versus “fence lowa” and over school bonds. He also emphasized Jack’s unselfish hospitality to friend and foe alike. As Machtet described:

When I lived in northern Kansas, I had an acquaintance there, or rather a sincere friend—a farmer, an excellent worker, whose real name I, like all his neighbors, never knew. Like everyone else, I called him “Uncle Jack,” and, when I spoke of him in the third person, I, as others, always added the epithet “fat.” Uncle Jack was not married and it seemed as if he did not even understand why people got married. He was already graying but fresh and sprightly, and he loved to joke and laugh; I never saw him sad. He adored his pony, Jenny, and he greatly loved his setter, Palmerston, but more than anything, even more than the “green prairie,” for which he “would lay down his soul,” Uncle Jack loved all kinds of meetings, debates, speeches, and so forth. Although an excellent husbandman, he was always short of cash, and no one ever knew for sure what Fat Uncle Jack did with those nice round sums that so often fell to him from the sale of this or that. They knew only that Uncle Jack was somehow inordinately interested in schools, that not a single schoolboy or school-miss passed by his farm without nibbling on something; that often out of nowhere boots and new trousers would appear on some John or Charlie and pretty new ribbons on some pretty Betsy, Rosie, or Kate. They also knew that when lightning burned a neighboring farmer’s house... and killed his ox, Uncle Jack talked with him about something for a long time, after which the farmer, a poor man with a large family, began to build a new house and bought another ox.

Not one meeting, not one gathering passed without him and his Palmerston, who always snoored during the heated debates and who sometimes, awakened from his dreams when people began to argue too hotly, would set up a furious barking, throwing Uncle Jack into considerable embarrassment and indignation. If a single meeting would take place without him, everyone would probably go to his farm to find out what was wrong with him.13

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12. The prickly Osage orange, introduced from Arkansas and Texas, became very popular for hedgerows and for producing durable fence posts at this time. See “The Osage Orange as a Timber Tree,” Kansas Daily Commonwealth (Topeka), November 16, 1872. The article, however, recommended cedar over Osage orange because it added beauty, thus promoting another characteristic feature to the eastern Kansas landscape.

13. Machtet, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (Kiev) 2: 29-37; quotation from Hasty and Fusso, America Through Russian Eyes, 35-36. "Fat Jack" cannot be positively identified from contemporary newspaper, plat map, and census sources; perhaps he most likely is John McDaniel who farmed near Rock Creek School in the 1870s and is listed in the 1870 census as single, eighty-one, and with higher than average real estate ($8,000). Historical Plat Book of Doniphan County, Kansas (Chicago: J.S. Bird: 1882); 1870 Census, Kansas, Doniphan County, Wayne Township.
One debate concerned whether travel or the study of science were the best means of education. After much animated discussion, the debaters reached the conclusion that both were equally important but that the study of science should ideally precede travel. Russian readers must have been impressed with the interest in and promotion of education among ordinary Kansas citizens.

Uncle Jack took Machtet to another meeting in Troy that made a special impression on him. The Methodist and Presbyterian churches had been quarreling about religion; so they held an all-day meeting at the school auditorium. Two respective preachers were invited from St. Joseph to lead the debate. Machtet observed:

The preachers came in with their books, notes, pencils, and so forth, and the debates began. But what debates! I was expecting something serious, authoritative. And suddenly a whole slew of mutual gibes of the most venomous, malicious, and caustic sort. What things they said! The words "my dear brother" were always on their lips; but then there flowed such comparisons, such inferences, such analogies, that finally it got very hot for both of them, and sweat streamed from them. They argued for a long time; they even argued a second day. Finally they became hoarse, and both decided that each of them was right in their descriptions of the other. They did not try to refute one another's positions, but each sought to represent the other to the public in the most possible ludicrous, stupid, and unattractive light. And the public had a field day—they simply "split their sides laughing." The public listened and they laughed, and in the end each preacher remained convinced that he was the one who was right. There were no new converts after the debate.  

Fat Uncle Jack, who was at first miffed that the crowd had not allowed Palmerston into the meeting, laughed until he cried—until, as he said to Machtet, his sides split.

In another story, "Spirits and Souls," which does not have a specific locale in Kansas but was probably in either Doniphan or Marshall County, Machtet describes religious and mystical life on the prairie in wonderfully piquant Russian. He meets Farmer Wilson, a stout, kind-hearted soul, in a beer saloon, and the two proceed to argue about whether there are spirits, a conversation inspired by the arrival in town of an attractive, blonde medium. Machtet is then invited to join a wagonload of young single people for a gay ride across the prairie at night to a seance at Farmer Davis'. The farmhouse, guests, and the surprising effects of the "happening" are reported in dramatic detail, but the atheistic Russian was still not convinced of the existence of mystical beings.

Another colorful picture that Machtet provided was of fighting an autumn prairie fire. His Russian readers would have appreciated the community spirit and organization featured in this event. Also of interest is his lengthy narrative, in somewhat gory detail, of the murder of a farm family of German origin. He described the alarm of the citizenry, the spread of rumor and exaggeration, the mobilization of a posse, and the capture of an alleged villain who, until the crowd finally became convinced of his innocence, was threatened with hanging. The assembled people

15. Machtet, "Spirity i dukhii" (Spirits and Souls) Nededia (The Week) 8 (January 6, 1879): 15-22. Although Wilson and Davis are common names, both appear on the plat map of Doniphan County in 1882 as farmers near Troy. Machtet also recounted with disdain an encounter with a spiritualist in New York. Nikoliukin, A Russian Discovery of America, 333-34.
then atoned for their mistake by taking home the falsely accused, lighting his fire, and cooking his supper. Machtet seemed overly convinced of the effectiveness of this form of frontier justice. 16

As the wintry winds began to blow across the Plains by November 1872, hedgerow planting was necessarily suspended. Mosishkey and his partner took pity on their temporary Russian workers, who had been joined by this time by Ivan Linev, a trained agronomist, and gave them a winter job clearing and improving land about 120 miles west, near Marysville, for another nursery. 17 Preceded by Mosishkey and provided with a wagon, team of horses, and tools, the four Russians set off westward in mid-November. Machtet reflected on the people they met: “Farmers of the West are very good [soft] - souled but brave and decisive people.” 18 He then recorded the sad event that occurred on their journey.

After passing through Seneca, the Russians stopped along Wild Cat Creek for dinner. While there, Rechitskii pulled out an old revolver that he had recently purchased and attempted to shoot a bird across the stream. The weapon failed to discharge. He then, with obvious carelessness, tried to unload it, but it went off, the bullet striking his companion, Roman’ko-Romanovskii, or “Room” as he was called in Kansas, in the rib section. Machtet, Linev, and the distraught Rechitskii tried to care for their companion, who they thought at first was not seriously wounded. Once the severity of his condition became clear, Machtet had to restrain Rechitskii from also shooting himself. With the help of nearby woodcutters, who had heard their cries of distress, they bundled the now unconscious Russian onto the wagon and raced off to Seneca. He was dead by the time they reached town. 19

For Machtet, however, this was only the beginning of another, quite moving and personal Kansas story. He and his companions were temporarily arrested, and the Russians naturally began to ponder an indefinite Siberian-like imprisonment in the American West. But justice moved fast and in this case honorably. A coroner’s inquest was held that day before a quickly assembled jury who, mainly from the testimony of Machtet, exonerated Rechitskii of any crime. The townspeople then extended their sympathy and friendship to the Russians, took up a collection for a handsome coffin for the deceased, attended the funeral in mass the next day, and insisted on serving them meals. As the Seneca Weekly Courier boasted, Room “received the decent attention due from a civilized community.” 20

Whether these displaced Russian socialists eventually would have turned the new nursery near Marysville into a Russian commune, will never be known. Perhaps the state of this land with its primitive dugout shelter was too discouraging. Rechitskii,

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17. Mosishkey’s Blue Valley Nursery is advertised as located on Frank Schmidt’s farm on the south edge of Marysville. Marshall County News (Marysville), October 26, 1872. The first issue of this newspaper, October 5, 1872, also included a nursery listing for Mosishkey.
18. Machtet, “Pred Americanskim sudev” (Before an American Court), Nedelia 8 (June 1, 1879): 721–23. This is not yet available in English translation.
19. Ibid., 724–29; “Sad Incident,” Seneca Weekly Courier, November 13, 1872. According to the Kansas Daily Commonwealth, November 17, 1872, Room [sic] was attempting to take the revolver away from Rechitskii. This version of the incident apparently originated around Troy as it was recounted there many years later in a chronology of events. Illustrated Doniphan County (Troy: Weekly Kansas Chief, 1916), 380.
20. Seneca Weekly Courier, November 15, 1872. This is the only mention of the event in the local newspaper, and a search of town records (which are minimal for this period) failed to turn up any notice of burial place or court proceedings.
saddened by the accident and feeling duty bound to return his poor friend’s effects (more than three hundred dollars, a fine watch, and a gold ring) to his widow in Ukraine, left for home soon after reaching Marysville. There, ironically, he immediately was arrested in a crackdown on radical populists and, perhaps still affected by his Kansas experience, committed suicide while in transit to a labor prison in Siberia. Linev, the other Russian, wandered on to another part of the United States, but he also returned to Russia to face arrest and a long term of Siberian exile.

Machtet, however, stayed on with Moshiskey in Marysville, where he seems to have forsaken his original work assignment for the winter. He took up residence in a boardinghouse, and in his stories he recounted conversations he had with townspeople, such as David Wolff, a “Russian” storekeeper who Machtet quickly noted was really Jewish (and born in Poland); Harry Sullivan, the Irish keeper of the boardinghouse where he stayed; Bluepoint, postmaster and newspaper editor; Frank Schmidt, local banker and prominent state politician; circuit court judge A.S. Wilson; and schoolteachers Mr. and Mrs. Williams. 

In his articles about life in Marysville, Machtet emphasized the high educational and cultural levels of frontier society, stressing to his Russian readers his surprise at finding ample sophistication on the American Great Plains. With Bluepoint, who was educated at an eastern university and had campaigned for Abraham Lincoln in Missouri (“getting shot at five times”), he carried on discussions in Latin, debating about the correct pronunciation of the words. With others he discussed Goethe, Hugo, Bentham, and Spencer. Machtet claimed that he became well acquainted with the whole town, especially through the friendships of Williams and his wife who had recently arrived from New York, and by attending a three-day church meeting in Blue Valley:

Now the valley teemed with people, wagons, and horses. The white tops of the wagons made it look so much like a military camp dotted with tents that if your eyes weren’t dazzled by the plethora of multi-colored bows, ribbons, and plumes pinned on the misses and missuses and if the squalling and laughter of the children weren’t resounding in the distance, you would hardly venture to enter here without first checking your constant companion—your revolver—or without making sure that this was not the enemy camp.

To learn English he attended an evening school that Williams taught, and he stressed the role of public education in American life: “Schools, schools, schools’ is the slogan of America.” Machtet also painted in vivid color and with sharp detail the struggle between cattlemen and farmers, the dis-

21. Machtet, “Gorozhane priemy” (Townpeople of the Prairie), Polone sobranie sochinnik (Kiev) 2: 69–87. Some of the names—Wolff, Schmidt, Wilson, and Williams—can be collaborated from references in the Marshall County News. For example, “Professor Williams, principal of our city schools, informs us that he has a large number of pupils in attendance, and that he is succeeding admirably,” Ibid., October 5, 1872. “D. Wolff” advertises dry goods, groceries, liquor, and tobacco for sale in the 1870 census he is listed as a saloonkeeper. Bluepoint has not been identified; while Machtet writes that two newspapers were published in Marysville, the only surviving one of the period, the Marshall County News, was edited by Thomas Hughes. “Wolf” (from Poland) and Schmidt are listed in the 1870 and 1880 censuses. By 1889 Moshiskey was a prominent businessman in the community. He had married in 1882 and had three children, Emma, Peter, and Vera. Portrait and Biographical Album of Marshall County, 179.

22. Machtet, Polone sobranie sochinnik (Kiev) 2: 80–81
placement of Indians and their culture, the general reverence for land ("land is the best savings bank"), rivalry between towns for business and designation as county seat, and routine life of both town and country.

After spending less than three months in and around Marysville, Machtet set off in early February to visit Frey's commune to the south. Although the route cannot be precisely determined, it certainly took him through the Flint Hills:

The farther south we went, the more deserted the area became and the fewer farms and hamlets we encountered along the road; the waves of the hilly prairie spread like an endless yellow-green carpet (it was the beginning of February) merging far in the distance with the clear-blue sky on which there was not a single blemish, not a single little cloud, only the bright but as yet weakly warming sun. A light haze of fog, betraying the presence of playful gurgling prairie streams, billowed around the base of the hills. ... Wild herds wandered about the virgin meadows and valleys; at the approach of the train the animals lifted their tails and scattered in all directions, bellowing loudly; the prairie rabbit sprang like a rubber ball thrown by a strong arm and large flocks of prairie fowl flew hither and thither, loudly flapping their heavy wings. Evening stole up quietly, imperceptibly, tingling the railroad cars and the prairie and sky with a bright-pink light; the sun, so bright and blinding earlier but now safe for the eyes, hung on the horizon like an enormous red-hot disc, slowly receding and yielding its place to the pale moon and the diamond-like stars.²⁵

On the long train ride across the state, Machtet obviously was impressed by the scenery, comfort of the ride, the absence of classes and compartments, and that the train would slow to pick up passengers along the tracks. At one point the train stopped, and the conductor announced that the bridge ahead was weakened by rains and advised passengers to get off and walk across—but none did. The food in the dining car was good and cheap, which Machtet thought was fortunate since none was available at the small town depots:

Stations do not even exist here, unless you would give that name to the small telegraph booths, plastered with advertisements and signs of all possible colors and contents such as the following: "Wives! Unless you wish to see your husbands emaciated, you should buy them the 'Famous Anti-Leanness Elixir' from my inventor husband, a druggist in Chicago! A precious gift for wives!" Then there follows a signature and an address. Or the following: "Grant's Socks! All Republicans truly loyal to the Union will surely want to acquire the very same kind of socks that President Grant wears. Inexpensive and comfortable!"²⁶

This "handbill America" conjures up a different picture from the neat and tidy scenes usually depicted in Hollywood westerns.

²⁵ Hasty and Fusso, America Through Russian Eyes, 61–62. Most of this north-south journey would have taken place aboard the Missouri, Kansas & Texas (KATY) or the Leavenworth, Lawrence & Galveston railroads; the KATY reached Chetopa in 1870 and the LLG reached Coffeyville in 1871. Since we know that Machtet left the train at Independence, and it is just off the LLG's main line, he most likely traveled this route south.

²⁶ "Obshchina Freia" (Frey's Commune), Polzne sobranie sochinenii (Kiev) 2: 130–54; and in Nadezhd 8 (August 4, 1875). Translation from Hasty and Fusso, America Through Russian Eyes, 63.
In the articles Machtet wrote to his Russian homeland about life in America, he stressed the role of public education and emphasized the high educational levels of frontier society. Pictured above is a rural school in Montgomery County.

By early February Machtet reached Independence where he stayed for a few days at the Caldwell House. He thus had an opportunity to witness and describe the local agitation over the Pomeroy scandal. Samuel C. Pomeroy, the senior United States senator from Kansas, seemed to be on his way to securing reelection by the Kansas legislature when the state senator from Wilson County (Independence), Colonel A.M. York, exposed Pomeroy’s attempt to buy his vote for seven thousand dollars. Independence was especially shaken by the uproar that ensued around both men, and Machtet thus found himself in the middle of one of Kansas’s most celebrated political events. He caught the excitement in his article:

Newspapers were greedily devoured by readers. A whole horde of people massed at the railroad station, awaiting the train that was to bring letters and newspapers from Tupika [Topeka]. Little groups of people were everywhere . . . gestures, shouts, among which the most distinctly and frequently uttered words were Goddamn; seven thousand; Mr. York; Mr. Pomeroy; Mr. Ingalls, bribe; and hang him. The news was so astounding and spread so rapidly that in a few hours a great number of farmers’ wagons were already crowding along the streets of the town. The farmers, strapping and silent, with their inevitable pipes and energetic “goddamns,” darted around, listening and asking questions in the stores and hotels.27

One wonders if a Russian audience could understand then how a local turmoil could be created by Topeka politics, although it would be more easily understood by Kansans—as well as by Russians—today.

After observing the commotion in Independence, Machtet walked the remaining forty miles to Cedar Vale, leaving his baggage behind at the hotel to be picked up later. He painted a vivid “prayerth” picture of the rolling hills and valleys, the buffalo tracks he crossed, and the people he met. At a farmhouse set off the road, the Russian was invited in to lunch and plied for the latest political news from Independence and his views on railroad monopolies, farmers’ clubs, and the prices of farmland up north. Dinner consisted of pork, dried buffalo meat, beans, potatoes, fried eggs, and tea. Machtet offered fifty cents, but the farmer objected to payment; they finally settled on thirty cents.

Frey’s Cedar Vale commune, which formally was named “the Progressive Community” by its first constitution and later known as “Progressive Communist Community” (and in late 1875 Frey formed a separate “Investigating Community”), had been in existence for two years when Machtet arrived. Although small and isolated, it managed to secure some success and public attention thanks to money from the Geins family in Russia and Frey’s active correspondence.28 Frey actually shared the founding role with an American, Dr. Stephen S. Briggs, who Machtet describes as a tall, impressive, handsome man, a dilettante who advocated vegetarianism as well as communialism.29 By 1873 Frey also had become a health food addict, and the community was becoming known as much for its dietary code (no

27. Hasty and Russo, America Through Russian Eyes, 64; verified by the South Kansas Tribune (Independence), February 5, 12, 1873. "Tupika" apparently is a play on Russian words at Kansas’ expense. Tupik in Russian means “dead end.”

28. Yarmolinsky, A Russian’s American Dream, 21; Allen, Russia Looks at America, 46–57. While drawing upon Machtet’s account of the Cedar Vale commune from the Pol’zhe sobranie sochinenii, Yarmolinsky, A Russian’s American Dream, 40, questioned its accuracy due to its publication many years after the events. It had, in fact, appeared in print in 1875, just two years after the visit.

meat or white flour) as for its social ideas. Adding to the peculiarity and individualism of this little society was J.G. Truman, a lapsed seminarian from Wisconsin who, according to Machtet, described himself as "a crank, a spiritualist, and a nudist." The latter, although probably not practiced during the Kansas winter, would have made him an even greater problem to the community since Machtet depicts him as portly, ugly, pockmarked, and cantankerous.30

Strange personalities, extremist views, and the mixture of Russian and American backgrounds led to constant squabbling within the commune, even a verbal battle and estrangement (later reconciled) between Frey and his wife, which Machtet witnessed. Frey's papers, however, indicate that the cause of the argument was his wife's love affair with Machtet. This may explain why Machtet, highly critical of this particular socialist experiment, stayed eight months before setting off on his return journey to Russia. His romantic bias also may be reflected in his character descriptions. Mary Frey is "a woman of quite exceptional intellect ... oppressed by this sort of community [and] ... endured it against her will, behaving with unusual tact," while her husband is depicted as stubborn, obstinate, and having a mind lacking "creativity and power of analysis."31

Retrospectively, Machtet's criticism of the little Kansas-Russian community grew. After Frey's death in 1889, Machtet observed that many such groups in America were made up of "benign egoists for whom people, society, and homeland are nothing and personal happiness, peace, their own tastes, habits, and views are everything."32 This may, however, reflect more the change of political climate in Russia and his own position vis-à-vis Russian authority.

The commune itself lasted several more years, into 1879, reaching the zenith of its broader visibility in 1875 with the publication of the Progressive Communist, a monthly newsletter that recorded its daily activities and inventoried its contents. The commune consisted of only a handful of people: Mary Frey was president, Truman secretary; William Frey treasurer, Briggs manager of fruit raising and gardening; William Frey agriculture; Mary Frey housekeeper. They owned 320 acres clear, but only forty were fenced and twenty-four plowed; the property included a one-acre vineyard and a three-acre orchard, a one-story box house with a one-and-a-half story addition, two old horses, one yoke of oxen, two cows, three young cattle, one wagon, and a printing press with type.33 Not mentioned was a substantial book collection that included Hume, Macauley, Gibbons, Josephus, Abbott, Mill, and Spencer that Frey later donated to the Cedar Vale library.44 It is not known if any local people read them, and they appear not to have survived.

Despite Machtet's negative views, the Kansas commune continued to attract a number of visitors and short-term members, most notably Nikolai Chaikovskii, later a well-known Russian socialist and a leader of the anti-Bolshevik Socialist Revolutionary Party during the 1917 revolution and the civil war that followed; Aleksandr Malikov, a "God-man" (Christian pacifist) who became a disciple of Leo Tolstoy; Fedor Kamensky, a noted sculptor; and eleven others from 1875 to 1877.39 In general, these Russian

30. Ibid.; J.G. Truman to Frey, August 28, 1872, Frey Papers, box 1, file 5.
31. Hasty and Fusso, America Through Russian Eyes, 69–70.
32. Ibid., 71. Initially published as "Russkaya sem'ia v Kanzase" (A Russian Family in Kansas) in Novlette 8 (August 4, 1875), the account was revised and republished in a more critical version in 1889; the latter was included in the 1902 collected works. Hasty and Fusso, America Through Russian Eyes, 59.
34. Chautauqua County Times (Sedan), January 10, 31, 1879.
the mainly Jewish New Odessa colony in Oregon and elsewhere. Increasingly he came under the influence of Auguste Comte’s positivism and carried on a lengthy and widely publicized correspondence with Tolstoy in the 1880s, earning the famous author’s respect. Vladimir Gein, alias Frey, died in London in 1889, ten years after his departure from Kansas, while his wife lived on for several more years in New York.

The comparatively young Machtet, still not cured of his “Amerikanizm,” returned to Russia and settled in St. Petersburg. There he was able to publish his articles about America in the progressive periodical Nadetia (The Week) and in major newspapers during the still relatively free political atmosphere of the mid-1870s. His colorful and descriptive stories about his travels are reminiscent of Mark Twain’s brief notes about his trip to Russia in 1867 (The Innocents Abroad), and they are lighter and certainly more colloquial and interesting than most Russian publications of that period. But Machtet, perhaps as a result of these writings, soon was arrested in the repression that followed the 1874 “to-the-people” movement to stir the peasants to revolt. After a year of severe hardship in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, he was first confined to the Arkhangelsk region in the far north and then spent several more years in Siberian exile. There he married Elena Medvedeva, who soon died of tuberculosis.

During his years of exile, Machtet continued to write—two popular novels, more autobiographical stories, and a sharp critique of Russian and Ukrainian anti-Semitism. George Kennan, of The Siberian Exile System fame, met Machtet during his (Kennan’s) ten-month investigation of political prisoners in 1885-1886 and considered him “one of the rising novelists of Russia.” In 1889 Machtet was allowed

37. Yarmolsky, A Russian’s American Dream, 87, has the Kansas Russian commune collapsing in the spring of 1879, but the last days can be dated more precisely from the Chartist Journal (Sedan), September 18, 1879 “Progressive Community is about dissolved. They have sold out, and are in a squabble among themselves, and there is no telling how it will end.” Briggs, who moved to Jacksonville, Florida, was still discussing taxes owed in Kansas with Frey in 1881. Stephen S. Briggs to Frey, February 11, 1881, Frey Papers, box 1, file I.

38. Yarmolsky, A Russian’s American Dream, 126-35; Allen, Russia Looks at America, 55-58. Frey returned to Russia specifically to visit Tolstoy at his summer home on his Yasnaya Poliana estate in 1886 and tried to convert him to vegetarianism. Faresov, “Odin iz Semidestiatnikov”, 243.

to return to Moscow and then to Ukraine where he worked as a government clerk. He was finally able to return to St. Petersburg in 1900, but a year later he died at age forty-nine while convalescing at Yalta. Anton Chekhov was among the illustrious fellow writers attending his funeral.40

As a very young man, Machtet tended to romanticize his portrait of Kansas but was hardly superficial. He was, nevertheless, critical of some aspects of this frontier society, especially its superficiality, violence, spirituality, and contradictions. Unlike most other foreign observers of America, but typical of other Russians of this period, he studied rural life and the development of small communities, working and living alongside the local people. He developed a rapport and sympathetic understanding toward his subject which would have interested his readers at home. He was impressed especially by friendliness, curiosity, openness, optimism, and quest for education. Machtet thus responded to and nourished the Russians' favorable opinion about America that prevailed in the nineteenth century and persisted through periods of hostility and confrontation to the present.

Above all Machtet nurtured the contemporary Russian interest in all aspects of American life with informative and positive stories and colorful character sketches, and he especially catered to their fascination with the West, which included serious attention to the writings of Twain and Bret Harte and the pictorial renditions of George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Remington, whose works were well-known in Russia.41

Machtet's writings remained virtually unknown to Americans, but they certainly deserve attention as a source of information about life on the prairie in the 1870s. They provide additional insights into Kansas frontier issues, the nature and values of rural society, state political history—such as the Pomeroy affair—and especially how Kansas and its people were perceived through sympathetic and curious foreign eyes.


41. The Russian "Bret Harte craze" began about 1873 with the translation into Russian of "The Outcasts of Poker Flats" and continued well into the twentieth century, but Twain was not popular in Russia until the 1880s. Valentina Libman, Amerikanskia literatura v Rossiiskikh prevodakh i kritike: bibliografia 1776–1975 (American Literature in Russian Translations and Reviews: A Bibliography, 1776–1975) (Moscow: Ninika, 1977), 77–83, 244.