

RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

Introduction

The story of Russian literature begins in 988 - a date of great importance in Russian political and cultural history, when the ruler of Kievan Rus officially accepted Christianity and made it the new faith of his realm. Prior to this date there was no written literature in Rus, but with his conversion Prince Vladimir laid the foundation for what is now known as medieval Russian literature, although it would not attain its true form — on the basis of the literature which survived the destruction of the Mongol invasions - for a number of years thereafter. But the eastern Slavs received an alphabet created by Cyril and Methodius, and also became heirs to the extensive Byzantine cultural heritage which had already been and would later be translated from the Greek.

In the Kievan period the foreign works which were translated in Russia primarily reflected the interests of the church: almost all were translated from Greek, and most related to the interests of the church. Produced in this period, *the Ostromirovo evangeliye* (The Ostromir Gospel) of 1056–1057 is the oldest dated Russian manuscript.

A famous work of Old Russian literature is Hilarion's *Slovo o zakone i blagodati* (Sermon on Law and Grace). Other important works were composed by Clement of Smolensk, metropolitan of Russia from 1147 to 1154, and by St. Cyril of Turov (1130–1182). The predominant genre of Old Russian literature is hagiography, and a number of interesting saints' lives date from the earliest period. Both a chronicle account and two hagiographies of the first Russian saints, Boris and Gleb, have survived to the present day.

From a purely literary perspective, the finest work of Old Russian literature is *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, a type of epic poem concerning Prince Igor's raid against the Polovtsy (Kipchak), a steppe people, his capture, and his escape. Written some time between 1185 and 1187, the Igor Tale, as it is generally known, was discovered in 1795 by Count Musin-Pushkin. This manuscript was destroyed in the Moscow fire of 1812, however, a copy made for Catherine II the Great has survived. Although the poem's authenticity has often been challenged, it is now generally accepted. Its major theme is the disastrous fratricidal disunity of the Russian princes.

In the period between Vladimir's conversion and the Mongol invasions in the early 13th century, Kiev was not only the cultural and political center of Rus, but also the capital, and the seat of the metropolitan of the new Russian church. It was not until the late 13th century that Kievan Rus was able to recover from the results of the Mongol invasion. Having been spared from the Tatar raids, the first areas to recover were Novgorod and Pskov. These city-states, with parliamentarian rule, developed a unique culture influenced to some degree by their western Baltic neighbors. Leadership in the north-eastern lands was transferred from the Principality of Vladimir to Moscow in the early 14th century, which would then fight for leadership against Tver for another century. Functioning as one of the border fortresses of north-eastern Russia, Moscow was a part of the Vladimir lands. By leaving Vladimir and settling in Moscow in 1324, Metropolitan Peter transferred the residence of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The late 14th century was marked by one of the most important events in Russian history - the first serious blow to the Golden Horde dealt by Dmitry Donskoy and his army in 1380.

Reflecting these political conditions, the chronicles and saints' lives served the interests of different local powers. A series of works in assorted genres, known collectively as the Kulikovo cycle, celebrated the first Russian victory over the Tatars in 1380 under the leadership of Grand Prince Dmitry Ivanovich Donskoy. A less-accomplished imitation of the Igor Tale, the Zadonshchina glorifies Dmitry Donskoy.

The most important hagiography of this period is the *Life of Saint Sergius of Radonezh* written by Epifany Premudry.

Mid -15th century Russia was characterized by bloody internal conflicts for the Moscow seat of the Grand Prince. Ivan III only managed to unite the Russian lands around the end of the 15th century, and ended Russia's subjugation to the Golden Horde after the Great standing on the Ugra River in 1480.

Following the Mongol period, Muscovy gradually became the predominant state and was able, through diplomacy and conquest, to establish its rule over European Russia. Ivan III (1462-1505) felt entitled to refer to his empire as "the Third Rome" and heir to the Byzantine tradition; a century later in 1613 the Romanov dynasty was established under Tsar Mikhail.

Concurrent with Moscow's increasing power, a number of writings appeared on the subject of "translation of empire", writings whose purpose was to legitimize Russia's imperial claims. They sought to do achieve this by creating elaborate genealogies and relating accounts of how imperial and ecclesiastical regalia were transferred to Russia. Among the most influential of these works was the monk Filofei's epistle to Vasily III (written between 1514 and 1521). In it he put forward the claim that in the wake of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (the second Rome), Moscow was the Third Rome of the only truly Christian state, Orthodox Russia. In essence, this proposition was an attempt to legitimize Russian ambitions.

A number of encyclopedic works, including the voluminous *Sermon on Law and Grace*, the *Code of Laws*, and other collections were indications of the consolidation of power in Moscow. One of the most well-known examples is the *Domostroy*, or rules for household management.

Some of the other well known works of the period include stories design to entertain; *Povest o Petre i Fevronii Muromskikh* (*The Tale of Peter and Fevroniya*) is one such example. A merchant, Afanasy Nikitin, describes his voyages to Persia and India between the years 1466-1472 in his *Khozhdenie za tri morya* (*Journey Beyond Three Seas*). However, one of the most significant aspects of this period is the fact that the Renaissance completely is bypassed Russia, a fact which only helped to increase the cultural differences between Russia and the West. Russia would not produce the secular literature found in the West.

During much of the Muscovite period the land of Rus' was a closed kingdom. Contact with outsiders from Europe was uncommon and strictly controlled. However, after the Time of Troubles and the founding of the Romanov dynasty in 1613, however, the country was relatively peaceful, wealthier and more open than it had been previously.

A great variety of books from Western Europe began to enter the Russian land from Western Europe, and by the middle of the 17th century many foreigners, Germans in particular, were in Russia. Foreigners were confined to designated sections of particular cities and their freedom to associate with the native population was still limited. In spite of

this, their numbers were growing, their restrictions on them were being reduced, and enforcement of these restrictions was lax. The foreigners who came to Russia were often educated people, and missed the literary and artistic culture of their native lands. They tried to recreate that culture in Russia by bringing books of poetry and establishing theaters in the "foreign quarter."

When Peter the Great came to the throne at the beginning of the 18th century it was his intent to bring Russia up to the level of the other European powers. However, he realized that this was possible through a process of Europeanizing his country. Although not very interested personally in literary culture, his overall policy allowed western models of literature to come into Russia and encouraged their adaptation to the conditions in Russia.

The authors who appeared in 18th century Russia were responsible to a large degree for the creation of a written language and literature. During Peter the Great's reign the written Russian language was greatly modified, with the result of facilitating translations from western European languages. In addition, education and the development of the printing industry in Russia were promoted by Peter the. The final result of all these efforts was the emergence of secular Russian literature.

While writers of this period imitated French patterns they were also searching for their own themes, language and style. Throughout the entire period writers attempted to give their literature a unique national character; for example, the satirist A.D. Kantemir combined European neoclassicism with depictions of Russian life. In addition to his panegyrics of Peter's reforms, he also initiated a long-running debate on proper syllabic versification in the Russian language. Only later would V.K. Trediakovsky and M.V. Lomonosov create the accepted theory of the proper patterns of Russian versification. Finally, the founder of Russian drama, A.V. Sumarokov, combined European forms and Russian themes in both his fables and in his plays.

In the literature produced during the reign of Catherine II the influence of the European Enlightenment is evident. In her own dramas Catherine combined both classical style and a satirical tone, as is seen in the journals of N. I. Novikov and G. R. Derzhavin's odes. Satire was combined with realistic motifs in Likewise, the plays of D. I. Fonvizin, and in the fables of I. I. Khemnitser combined classicism and satire. Towards the end of the century A. N. Radishchev merged political radicalism with Rousseauian sentimentalism. The development of sentimentality is also seen in the dramas of V.A. Ozerov, as well as in the prose of N. M. Karamzin, the pioneer of the Russian short story.

The reign of Catherine the Great is also noteworthy for the expansion and support given to secular literature. The debates over the function and form of literature in relation to the Russian language in the first half of the 18th century, influenced by Peter I's reforms, established the precedent for writers in the second half of the 18th century during Catherine the Great's reign. in the second half of the century. However, the themes and scopes of the works produced by the writers of this period were often more poignant, political and controversial than those of earlier writers.

The import of Western European culture was accompanied by the influx of western ideas, such as liberal democracy and freedom, which the Russian government found itself unable to halt. Such ideas were clearly contrary to the authoritarian tsarist system in place in Russia, and the results of this clash were entirely predictable: when the concepts of freedom and self-rule became associated with first the American, and then the French Revolution, the Russian government responded by attempting to stop the flow of foreign ideas into Russia.

As an example, the depictions of socio-economic conditions, the condition and treatment of the serfs, and local governmental corruption in "A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow" by A. N. Radishchev, shocked the Russian public. Catherine the Great was displeased by his depictions of the situation in her realm and had Radishchev arrested. He was originally sentenced to death, but his sentence was later commuted to exile in Siberia.

It was only during the reign of Alexander II that Russian writers were able, for the first time, to experience the satisfaction of independent, creative work which was national in both its spirit and its style. Poetry above all was regarded as a spiritual exploit and a worthy vocation.

Traditionally the 19th century is regarded as the "Golden Era" of Russian literature. Poetic talent in particular flourished in the Romantic movement; two of the most prominent poets in this period were. A. Zhukovsky and his protégé A. S. Pushkin.

It was V. A. Zhukovsky who first brought European romantic idealism into Russian poetry. The fables of I. A. Krylov show a growing interest in national characteristics, and the wars against Napoleon I only furthered this trend. A. S. Pushkin, often regarded as the greatest Russian poet, developed a realistic, nationally conscious modern Russian style, influenced to a degree by romanticism and European poetry in the 1820s. Following Pushkin, the poetry of M. Y. Lermontov was able to maintain such stylistic excellence for a while.

It was in the 1830s that a cultural divide between Slavophiles and Westernizers became apparent. V. G. Belinsky, the main proponent of the Westernizers, emphasized the importance of the link between literature and national life, and advanced the development of Russian literary realism. Likewise, N.V. Gogol, the main initiator of realistic prose, also demonstrated qualities of romantic and morbid fantasy in his satirical and humanitarian tales. In the mid-19th century, I. A. Goncharov developed a harsh realism, tinged with humor; A. N. Ostrovsky, the first depict the merchant world in Russian literary works, wrote numerous plays, although most of them are no longer performed. F. I. Tyutchev's poetry endowed everyday events with philosophic significance, and N. A. Nekrasov penned verses with social purpose.

The prose works of Russia's literary golden age were written in the context of a strong tsarist autocracy. While generally composed within a realist framework, the masterpieces of this period are also characterized by mysticism, brooding introspection, and melodrama. I. S. Turgenev became internationally renowned for his complex novels which were also extremely critical of Russian society. The moral and religious idealism found in F. M. Dostoyevsky's works earned him both critical and popular acclaim, as did the novels of L. N. Tolstoy. These two writers remain even today among the giants of world literature. A. P. Chekhov closed the golden age with his sensitive plays and stories, and the following period is better known for its poetic works.

Symbolism, most popular between the 1890s and 1910, emerged as a reaction against realism and can be seen in the works of F. Sologub, V. K. Brynssov, I. F. Annensky, A. Bely, A. A. Blok, K. D. Balmont, and A. M. Remizov. The religious and philosophical works of V. S. Solovyev and the historical novels of D. S. Merezhkovsky also show the influence of symbolism.

A new movement, the Acmeist school led by N. S. Gumilev and S. M. Gorodetsky, in 1912 promoted a return to more concrete poetic imagery. Among the followers of this movement were O. E. Mandelstam and A. A. Akhmatova. Among the major figures in the field of fiction were V. M. Garshin and V. G. Korolenko. In the years before the 1917 revolution M. Gorky

was the dominant figure in fictional literature. Gorky's realistic style was also seen in the stories and dramas of his admirer Leonid Andreyev. Another member of Gorky's literary circle, Ivan Bunin, likewise wrote in a realistic style, but more conservatively.

Following the Bolsheviks' victory in the Russian Revolution (1917), many writers emigrated and continued writing abroad, among them Bunin, Kuprin, Merezhkovsky, Aldanov, and Nabokov. Others stayed in Russia but no longer published, some became Communists, while others found a niche for themselves in the new system, writing but remaining above its official doctrines. Initially, literature in the Bolshevik regime was little different from that current in Western Europe. Up until 1921 poetry continued to thrive, the major writers being the symbolist Blok, the imagist S. A. Yesenin, and the iconoclast V. V. Mayakovsky. Boris Pilnyak, an older novelist, documented the new society, and Isaac Babel wrote vivid short stories. Between 1922-1928, the era of the New Economic Policy, literary dictatorship was the subject of great debate; one group, known as "On Guard" supported it and the group around Mayakovsky was against it. Another group that included K. A. Fedin, M. M. Zoshchenko, V.V. Ivanov, V. A. Kaverin, Y.I. Zamyatin, and L.N. Lunts, and known as The Serapion Brothers voiced their support for artistic independence, while the formalists stressed poetic structure over poetic content. The novel was once again a major literary form, as seen in Ilya Ilf and Y. P. Petrov's satirical works, and in L. M. Leonov, Y.K. Olesha, and Kaverin's psychological and romantic novels. M. A. Sholokhov wrote epic novels on the subject of the revolution and Gorky a large audience in 1928.

Between 1929 and 1932 the various literary groups were dissolved, and the political mobilization of writers became a noticeable trend. Stalin's purges of the intelligentsia during the 1930s only accelerated this, and socialist realism became the guiding principle of all literary output. As an art form supported by the state and widely used as a means of propaganda, drama after the revolution was associated with a number of eminent figures, among them Y. L. Schvartz, N. R. Erdman, M. A. Bulgakov, S. M. Tretyakov, V. P. Katayev, V. M. Kirshon, A. N. Afinogenov, and A. N. Arbuzov. The prominent poets of this period were B. L. Pasternak and N. S. Tikhonov, while N. A. Ostrovsky, A. N. Tolstoy, and I. G. Ehrenburg were among the most widely read novelists. V. B. Shklovski became a very influential critic.

Stalin's death in 1953 ushered in a new period for a number of writers; some who had previously been publicly disgraced, returned to official favor; other living writers were once again allowed to publish. *Thaw*, a famous novel by Ehrenburg, described the desperation of writers who had no choice but to write according to the party line. Extraordinarily, cultural exchange with foreign countries was encouraged and, in contrast to official party propaganda, literature which criticized aspects of Soviet society was permitted, at least for a while. The nonconformist poetry of A. A. Voznesensky and Y. A. Yevtushenko was immensely popular. Voznesensky's innovative form and use of language was singled out for particular praise

However, this period of relative literary tolerance came to an end in 1963 when both the government and the Union of Soviet Writers severely reprimanded these and other dissident writers. *Doctor Zhivago*, published outside the Soviet Union and widely praised throughout the West, was not allowed to be published in the USSR, and state pressure compelled Pasternak to decline the Nobel Prize for literature.

The effort to free Soviet writing from official control increased after Khrushchev was removed from power in 1964. Public calls for an end to political censorship came from well-known writers such as Voznesensky and A. I. Solzhenitsyn. For publishing works outside the USSR which criticized the Soviet regime under pseudonyms A. D. Sinyavsky and

Y. M. Daniel served prison sentences. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the first novel written by Solzhenitsyn, described prison-camp life; when published in 1962 its anti-Stalinist tone was politically acceptable. Solzhenitsyn's later works resulted in his 1974 exile from Russia.

In the 1980s the stories of T. N. Tolstaya were one example of the religious, even mystical, trends in literature. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn returned from exile in 1994, twenty years after he had left.

Reading Assignments:

Lewit, The Obviousness of the Truth in Eighteenth Century Russian Thought, <http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~levitt/publications/documents/obviousness.pdf>

Dictionary of Literary Biography. Volume 150: "Early Modern Russian Writers, Late Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." Edited by Marcus C. Levitt. Detroit: Gale Research, 1995.

Leatherbarrow, W., & Offord, D., A History of Russian Thought, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Ch. 3, p. 47-51.

Leatherbarrow, W., & Offord, D., A History of Russian Thought, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Ch. 3, p. 51-56.

Leatherbarrow, W., & Offord, D., A History of Russian Thought, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Ch.4, p. 73-94.

Leatherbarrow, W., & Offord, D., A History of Russian Thought, Cambridge University Press, 2010, Ch. 5. 95-115.

Questions

Discuss Europeanization and the role of the Russian intelligentsia.

How did the Enlightenment influence Russian literature?

Discuss about the Age of Revolutions and discuss how the Russians were affected.

Discuss about Utopian Socialism and Utilitarianism. How was it spread among the Russian intelligentsia? Who were the leading figures of this thought in Russia?

What connection did Dostoevsky have with Utopian socialists? Which of his novels gets into polemics with the novel *What is to be done?* by Chernyshevsky? Why?