

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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**Overview** Literature constitutes one base of society, in that it reflects the history, politics, economic systems, and structure of a society, its people, religion and culture. Literature gives us a detailed view of the human experiences of a country. Russian literature is intimately connected with the life of Russian society; it reflects the collectivity, spirituality, hopes and sorrows of common Russians. In Russia, the history of literature dates back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century starting with translations of homiletic works from Greek after Christianization, and early literature was dominated by religious themes. Literary production in Russia continued with a wide array of genres, but it was not until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that secular genres such as novels and satires began to appear in Russia under Western influence. With Peter's westernization and secularization and Catherine II's Enlightenment processes, Russian literature came under the strong influence of the ideologies and attitudes of European thinkers and writers. In the following centuries, Russian writers began to show increasing interest in a more realistic approach to social issues in their works by depicting the ordinary life of Russian people under the strict censorship of the Empire and the intensive pressure, control and politicization introduced by the Soviet state and by battling against state restrictions on artistic expression.

### POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

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.

**Religious literature:** 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. Written in 1056-1057, *The Ostromir Gospel* (Ostromirovo evangeliye) is the oldest Russian manuscript which can be securely dated. Hilarion's *Sermon on Law and Grace* (*Slovo o zakone i blagodati Iariona*) is another notable religious story of Old Russian literature.

**Hagiography (biography of the saints):** Hagiography was the most common genre of Old Russian literature, with a number of works from the earliest period. Among these surviving works are a chronicle and two hagiographies of Boris and Gleb, the first Russian saints. The most important hagiography of this period is the *Life of Saint Sergius of Radonezh* (Zhitie Sergia Radonezhskogo) written by Epifany Premudry.

**Epics and historical works:** The most important secular work written in the period between the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century is the *Primary Chronicle* (Povest' vremennyh let) written by Nestor in the Pecherskiy Monastery in Kiev some time in the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and covers the history of Russia between the years 1040-1118. The *Chronicle* begins with the genealogy of the Slavs. Other important works from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century are the *Testament of Vladimir Monomakh* (Pouchenie Vladimira Monomakha) and *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* (Slovo o polku Igoreve), a type of epic poem concerning Prince Igor's raid against the Polovtsy (Kipchak), a steppe people, his capture, and his escape.

### EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**15<sup>th</sup> Century** 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.

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.

Some of the other well-known works of the period include stories designed to entertain; the *Tale of Peter and Fevroniya of Murom* (Povest o Petre i Fevronii Muromskikh) is one such example. A merchant, Afanasy Nikitin, describes his voyages to Persia and India between the years 1466–1472 in his *Journey Beyond Three Seas* (Khozheniye za tri morya). However, one of the most significant aspects of this period is the fact that the Renaissance completely 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.

The themes of almost all works composed in the 14<sup>th</sup> century are the establishment of the centralized Russian state, the unity of Russian territory, the struggles to re-establish the independence of the lands invaded by the Tatars, and the crushing defeat inflicted on the leader of the Golden Horde, Mamai Khan, at the Battle of Kulikovo in the late 14<sup>th</sup> – early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The most important literary works of this century are the *Story About the Bloody Battle of Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich with Mamai* (Povest' o poboishche velikogo knyazya Dmitriya Ivanovicha na Donu s Mamaem), *Story About the Bloody Battle of Mamai* (Skazanie o Mamaevom poboishche), *The Life of the Metropolitan Peter* (Zhitie metropolita Petra), and *The Story About Timur Aksak* (Povest' o Temir Aksake).

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century patriotic consciousness reached its peak, reflections of this consciousness are clearly seen in the works of writers such as Epifaniy Premudriy, Maksim Grek and Andrey Rublev. Biographies maintained their place in the literature of this period. Important works from the 15<sup>th</sup> century include *The Life of Stephen Permsky* (Zhitie Stefana Permskogo), *The Life of Sergiy Radonezhsky* (Zhitie Sergiya Radonezhskogo), *Nestor Iskander's Tale on the Taking of Tsargrad* (Povest' Nestora Iskandera o vzyatii Tsar'grada), Afanasy Nikitin's *Journey across Three Seas* (Khozhenie za tri morya Afanasiya Nikitina).

**16<sup>th</sup> Century : Popular literature:** The 16<sup>th</sup> century literature consists of popular literature on socio-political subjects. Writers both within and outside of the church dealt with the most important state and societal issues in their works. The most important works of 16<sup>th</sup> century literature are *The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir* (Skazanie o knyazyakh Vladimirskikh), *Legend of Sultan Mehmet* (Skazanie o Magmete-saltane), *Great Monthly Readings* (Velikie Chet'i - Minei), *The Book of Degrees of the Tsars' Genealogy* (Kniga stepennaya tsarskogo rodosloviya), *Chronicle of Kazan* (Skazanie o Kazanskom tsarstve) and *Domostroy* (Domostroy).

**17<sup>th</sup> Century : Early Western Influence** The continuing social conflicts, foreign interventions, changes in the socio-economic life of the country, and the unavoidable influence of western European culture all played a major role in the development of 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian culture. In this century we see that the attempts of Russian culture, which was beginning to become more universal, to free itself from the influences of church become more important. In this period, called by contemporaries as the *Time of Troubles* (Smutnoe vremya), works whose subjects were the period's stormy event were written by both churchmen and lay authors. The most important works written in this period were *The Life of Avvakum* (Zhitie protopopa Avvakuma), *The Tale of Ersh Ershovich* (Povest' o Ershe Ershoviche), *The Tale of Woe and Misfortune* (Povest' o Gore-Zlochastii), and *The Tale of Savva Grudtsyn* (Povest' o Savve Grudtsyne).

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 17<sup>th</sup> century many foreigners, Germans in particular, were in Russia.

**18<sup>th</sup> Century : Westernization and the Development of Distinctive Russian Literature**

When Peter the Great came to the throne at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 Great. The final result of all these efforts was the emergence of secular Russian literature.

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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.

**Enlightenment:** 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 18<sup>th</sup> century, influenced by Peter I's reforms, established the precedent for writers in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Sentimentalism:** The beginnings of the literary movement of Sentimentalism appeared only in the last years of Catherine's reign. In drama, V.A. Ozerov employed Sentimentality, and was best seen in *Poor Liza* (Bednaya Liza) by N. M. Karamzin. Reform of the literary Russian language was a continuation of Peter the Great and Lomonosov's reforms. However, the gap between the written and the spoken language, between the educated classes and the ordinary people, between the new and the old Russia was increased by Karamzin's language reform. On the other hand, his language reforms would also help to usher in an age of classical poetry.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

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.

**Golden Age:** Traditionally the 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Romanticism:** 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.

**Realism:** 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-19<sup>th</sup> 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. Tyuchev'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.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Socialist Realism:** Although Socialist Realism claims to present an unbiased, accurate depiction of life, as did its predecessor 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian realism, there are significant differences between the two, particularly in regard to subject matter. Socialist Realist works focus almost exclusively on the themes of building socialism and creating a classless society. Maxim Gorky is widely regarded as the pioneer of this genre with his novel *The Mother*.

**Symbolism:** Symbolism conveys its message through the use of symbols whose meanings are grasped intuitively. It emerged as a reaction against realism and can be seen in the works of F. Sologub, V. K. Brynsov, 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.

**Acmeism:** Acmeism, 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.

**Émigré Writers:** 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.

**Silver Age:** 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.

**Oberiu movement:** Numerous avant-garde literary groups emerged in the early years of Soviet rule, and the Oberiu movement was one of the most significant of these many groups. Writers such as Alexander Vvedensky, the absurdist writer Daniil Kharmis, Nikolay Zabolotsky and Konstantin Vaginov were among its more famous members. The short story writers Mikhail Zoshchensko and Isaak Babel, as well as, the novelists Andrei Platonov and Yuri Olesha were also associated with the Oberiu movement.

**Formalism:** Based in St. Petersburg, the OPOJAZ (Society for the Study of Poetic Language) was a major element in the creation Russian Formalism, which emerged in tandem with Russian Futurism. Among OPOJAZ's members, two became particularly influential. The first was Yury Tynyanov who wrote a number of historical novels, many set in the time of Pushkin, that were based on his extensive knowledge of Russian literary history. The second was Viktor Shklovsky whose blend of social commentary, narration, aesthetic commentary, and autobiography in his works make them difficult to categorize.

**Moscow Linguistic Circle:** Regarded as the Moscow counterpart to St. Petersburg's OPOJAZ, the Moscow Linguistic Circle was active between 1915 – 1924, and was composed of specialists in literary theory, semiotics, and linguistics such as Grigory Vinokur, Filipp Fedorovich Fortunatov, Petr Bogatyrev, Roman Jakobson, and Boris Tomashevsky. The formation of Russian formalist literary linguistics and semiotics was a result of the activities of the Moscow Linguistic Circle and OPOJAZ.

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.

### **Discussion/Questions**

1. What do medieval Russian documents from the 11<sup>th</sup> century reveal about the literary genres used in this time?
- 2- How do the writings about saints' lives differ from modern biographical stories?
- 3-Discuss the period of Peter the Great and Western influence in Russian Literature. How was the Russian language affected?
- 4- Discuss the effects of the European literary movement 'sentimentalism' on 18<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature.
- 5- Discuss Utopian Socialism and Utilitarianism. How was it spread among the Russian intelligentsia? Who were the leading figures of this thought in Russia?
- 6- How can we characterize Russian literature at the age of Socialist Realism?
- 7- Discuss the response of émigré Russian writers to being exiled and living abroad as reflected in their works.

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