

RUSSIAN LITERATURE – 20th Century

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PART I - Early 20th Century Russian Literature – Symbolism, Acmeism, Futurism

Introduction:

Silver Age. The period known as the Silver Age of Russian Literature lasted from the 1890s to 1917. The Silver Age is distinguished by the poetic works of V. Y. Bryusov, I. F. Annensky, and K. D. Balmont among others. The term Silver Age was first suggested by the renowned philosopher N. A. Berdyaev.

1915 marks the pinnacle of the Silver Age, which was characterized by a deep crisis in the government, and an unsettled, turbulent political atmosphere which called for radical change in the country. In the same way that Russian society desperately sought new paths to social order, writers and poets likewise struggled to master new artistic forms and ways of expression, to put forward bold, new ideas. Mere realistic portrayal of life was no longer satisfactory, and new literary movements, such as symbolism, acmeism and futurism emerged from their criticisms of 19th century literature.

Symbolism. Theorists of symbolism stated that an artist should create new art by means of symbolical images that would allow the poet to express his feelings, sensations and thoughts in a subtler and more general way than before. The symbolist movement united a number of diverse poets, among them K. D. Balmont, V. Y. Bryusov, A. Bely, and A. A. Blok.

Symbolic poets succeeded in depicting their era with all its instability, fluctuations and transitivity.

Acmeism. In the same way that symbolism emerged from the discontent with realism, a new literary movement – acmeism – emerged from the debate over symbolism. It was characterized by rejection of the symbolists' inclination towards the unknown, as well as their focus on one's one soul.

Acmeism did not aim at attaining the unknown; rather it focused on things that could be perceived, i.e. reality, and attempted to fully comprehend the world's diversity. Through such an approach the acmeist poet, in contrast to the symbolists, participated in the world rhythms, while at the same time considering the phenomena he was describing. The most prominent acmeist poets were N. S. Gumilev, A. Akhmatova, and O. E. Mandelstam.

Futurism. Typical of acmeism was total political indifference and disregard of important current issues. It is perhaps for this reason that acmeism gave way to futurism, characterized by revolutionary rebellion and opposition to bourgeois society, its morals and aesthetics, as well as the overall system of social links and relations. Some of the best known Russian Futurists were V. Khlebnikov, A. E. Kruchenykh and V. V. Mayakovsky.

Futurist poets attempted to combine poetry with political struggle, and poets such as Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov, V. V. Kamensky, etc. perceived a unique spiritual state for their era and tried to find new rhythms and images for poetic portrayals of revolutionary life.

Reading Assignments:

Blok, "The Scythians", "The Twelve"

http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Demo/texts/scythians_blok.html

<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj/1961/no006/blok.htm>

Trotsky, L., Literature and Revolution, Ch. 3, Alexander Blok

http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch03.htm

Gumilev, "The Word", "The Lost Tram", "The Giraffe", "The Street Car Gone Astray"

<http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Demo/poetpage/gumilev.html>

<http://www.ualberta.ca/~lmalcolm/poetry/acmeists.html>

Mayakovsky, **"At the Top of My Voice", "A Cloud in Trousers", "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste", "Our March", "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin"**

<http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/mayakovsky/>

<http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/~mdenner/Demo/poetpage/mayakovsky.html>

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Mayakovsky.php>

<http://www.ualberta.ca/~lmalcolm/poetry/futurists.html>

<http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=Mayakovsky+Vladimir+%3Flyich+Lenin&t=0>

The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature, Edited by Neil Cornwell, 2001, Ch.12.

Emerson, C., *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, Ch. 7.

The Cambridge History of Russian Literature, Edited by Charles A. Moser, 1992, Ch.7, 8.

The Silver age of Russian culture : an anthology / edited by Carl Proffer & Ellendea Proffer

The Cambridge Companion to Classic Russian Novel, Edited by Malcolm V. Jones and Robin Feuer Miller, Cambridge University Press, 1998, Ch. 11.

Pyman, A., *A History of Russian Symbolism*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, Part 3, 5.

Trotsky, L., Futurism, http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/ch04.htm

Dadswell, S., Re-approaching Russian Futurism: The Inter-Revolutionary Years, 1908-1915

<http://www.pitt.edu/~slavic/sisc/SISC4/dadswell.pdf>

Questions

Blok in his poem "The Scythians" was comparing Russians and Europeans. Discuss how.

Read Gumilev's "The Word" and discuss the religious symbolism in Gumilev's poems.

Read Mayakovsky's *At the Top of My Voice* and talk about Mayakovsky's thoughts on the Russian revolution.

Talk about Mayakovsky's views on Futurism. According to the Futurist Manifesto what were the goals of the Russian Futurists? What was LEF?

What is the difference between Cubo-Futurism and Ego- Futurism?

Mid 20th Century Russian Literature – Socialist Realism

PART II - Mid 20th Century Russian Literature – Socialist Realism

Introduction:

Following the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in 1917 Russian literature witnessed radical changes. Although the 1920s remained comparatively open, literature soon became merely another form of state propaganda. Writers found themselves forbidden to create works that the Communist Party considered dissident or objective; they were also expected to obey the Party's orders when told to produce propaganda on specific, limited themes that were of interest to the Party at that time.

Avant-garde Literature. A number of avant-garde literature groups flourished during the first years of the Soviet regime. Of these groups, one of the most important was the *Oberiu* (Union of the Real Art) movement which counted N. A. Zabolotsky, A. I. Vvedensky, K. K. Vaginov and the most famous Russian absurdist D. I. Kharmis among its followers. Other notable writers who experimented with language were the novelists A. Platonov and Y. K. Olesha and short story writers I. E. Babel and M. M. Zoshchenko.

Socialist realism. Socialist realism became the dominant trend in Russian literature during the 1930s. The leading figure of this trend was M. Gorky, the forerunner of this style with his work *The Mother*. According to Gorky, socialist realism was the realism of the people who were rebuilding the world. The main task of writers in Gorky's view was to aid in the development of the new man in socialist society.

The new proletarian literature is often considered to begin with Gorky's novel *The Mother*. This would be the literature of socialist realism, reflecting the assaults of and the rising struggle of the Russian proletariat.

Besides Gorky, other leading figures of socialist realism were the novelists M. A. Sholokhov, and A. N. Tolstoy; and the poets K. M. Simonov, A. T. Tvardovsky, A. Serafimovich, N. A. Ostrovsky, A. A. Fadeyev, and F. V. Gladkov.

A major example of socialist realism was N. A. Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*, a work depicting the struggle of the Soviet peoples for the victory during the course of the October Revolution.

Repression. Stalin's rise to power in the late 1920s ushered in a decade of unprecedented repression. The struggle to collectivize agriculture in the countryside resulted in the loss of more than 10 million lives, almost half from starvation. All independent literary groups were dissolved in 1932 and replaced by the Union of Soviet Writers, an institution without parallel in the West.

The Union of Soviet Writers became the means by which the state maintained control over literature; being expelled from the Union was tantamount to literary death. Socialist Realism was officially proclaimed the only acceptable form of writing in 1934. All literature would now be governed by official directives on the details of style and content to guarantee that each work presented a truthful depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. Soviet literature would now be party-minded and typical, depicting the triumph of heroes who were entirely positive.

Some writers directed their talents to writing that was less regulated, such as children's literature and translation. Others, such as V. P. Katayev, attempted to make official writing more interesting, as seen in his production novel *Time, Forward!* A. N. Tolstoy, a writer who returned to the Soviet Union from abroad, became a favorite of Stalin. He praised those tsars particularly admired by Stalin in his unfinished novel *Peter the Great* and his stage play *Ivan the Terrible*.

Very few Soviet writers before the Second World War would be published unless they closely adhered to the guidelines of Socialist realism.

Writers who held that authors had the right to write independently of political ideology, like those of Serapion Brothers group, were compelled by the authorities to renounce their views and accept the principles of Socialist realism. There were a few writers, among them M. A. Bulgakov with his novel *The Master and Margarita* and B. L. Pasternak with his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, who continued the classical tradition of Russian literature. However, these writers knew that there was almost no chance that these works would be published in the USSR at the time of their writing. Publication of their major works would not be possible until the Khrushchev Thaw, but even then Pasternak would be forced to decline his Nobel prize for literature.

Reading Assignments:

Gorky, *The Mother* <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3783>

Ostrovsky, *How the Steel Was Tempered*

Book 1

<http://www.cpa.org.au/resources/cpa-presents/how-the-steel-was-tempered-book-1.pdf>

Book 2

http://ciml.250x.com/archive/literature/english/ostrovsky_how_the_steel_was_tempered_2.pdf

Emerson, C., *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, Ch. 8.

Wachtel, A.B. & Vinitsky, I., *Russian Literature*, Polity Press, 2009, Ch. 8.

The Cambridge History of Russian Literature, Edited by Charles A. Moser, 1992, Ch. 8, 9, 10, 11,.

The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature, Edited by Neil Cornwell, 2001, Ch. 15.

The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature, Cambridge University Press, 2011, Ch. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.

Clark, K., "Socialist Realism in Soviet Literature", *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature*, Edited by Neil Cornwell, 2001, Ch. 15.

Questions

Read Gorky's *The Mother* and discuss how the proletariat is depicted in the novel. Does the proletariat act according to socialist ideas?

Discuss Gorky's life. Can you see any reflections from his childhood in the novel?

Why did Gorky name his novel *The Mother*? Talk about women and their role in society as described in the novel.

Read Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* and discuss why it is called a true dedication to revolution. Talk about the Stalin era and Stalin's approaches to the novel.

PART III - Late 20th Century Russian Literature – Anti-Soviet Ideology

Introduction:

Emigration. Emigration of Russian writers began as early as the 16th century when Prince Andrei Kurbsky escaped Ivan the Terrible's regime. It continued through the 19th century, especially under the repressive regime of Nicholas I. For instance, A. I. Herzen established a Russian press abroad, in London, and from there he smuggled his journal *The Bell (Kolokol)* into Russia.

Emigration of writers who opposed the Soviet regime increased dramatically after the Bolshevik Revolution. Among the prominent writers who fled to the West were I. A. Bunin, V.V. Nabokov, M. I. Tsvetaeva, V. F. Khodasevich, J. A. Brodsky, B. L. Pasternak, A. D. Sinyavsky and A. I. Solzhenitsyn.

All Soviet artists and writers were required to follow the party line in their works, and failure to do so could result in severe persecution. Between 1946 and Stalin's death in 1953, in a period known as *Zhdanovism* (a cultural doctrine developed by the secretary of Andrei Zhdanov in 1946), Soviet writers and artists endured severe repression.

Dissident writers were unable to publish their works in the Soviet Union until the 1960s. There was also a campaign against older literary styles which was led by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers who vehemently criticized O. E. Mandelstam, B. L. Pasternak, and V. V. Mayakovsky. For this reason, Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* was surreptitiously taken out of the Soviet Union and published in Milan, Italy in 1957. Despite winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958 for *Doctor Zhivago*, Pasternak was forced by the Soviet government to decline the prize.

Thaw. From Stalin's death until Khrushchev's removal from office in 1964 several *thaws* in official restrictions on artists and writers occurred. The term *thaw* was applied to literature following the publication of I. G. Erenburg's novel *The Thaw*. Used to describe a period of relative liberalism during Khrushchev's time, it did not survive his political career by long. By the 1970s, some famous writers had been prohibited from publishing, and others were even put on trial for alleged anti-Soviet propaganda.

Underground Literature. During the Brezhnev era, writers of the Soviet *underground* whose works are distributed by hand (*Samizdat* was the name given to *underground* literature. *Samizdat* writers works were secretly written and distributed within the Soviet Union by dissidents. *Underground* literature lasted until the fall of the Soviet Union), among them prominent writer A. D. Sinyavsky, were arrested, prosecuted and imprisoned. After having served a 7-year camp sentence, he was released from prison. In 1973 Sinyavsky immigrated to France and there he published his critical essays *Walks with Pushkin* and *In the Shadow of Gogol*, and his camp memoirs *A Voice from the Chorus*.

There were also other underground writers who were trying to publish anti-Soviet propaganda abroad (*Tamizdat*). A number of writers were arrested and expelled from the Soviet Union during the Brezhnev era like A. I. Solzhenitsyn.

Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn, some of whose works described life in prisons (One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich) and conditions in the Gulag camps (The Gulag Archipelago), was among the *underground* writers with the courage to oppose the Soviet regime. After winning a Nobel prize for literature in 1970 Solzhenitsyn became the subject of official persecution.

The KGB even tried to kill him with poison, and in 1974 Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Soviet Union and came to the West, settling in the United States in 1976.

1960s and 1970s. In the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, new satirical and prose writers emerged. These were F. A. Iskander, V. N. Voinovich, Y. P. Kazakov, Y. A. Yevtushenko, A. A. Voznesenskiy and J. A. Brodsky. These writers struggled against government restrictions on artistic expression, sometimes at great personal cost. For example, in 1964 Brodsky was arrested on charges of *social parasitism* and exiled within Russia for refusing to have a state job. He was sentenced to five years labor on a farm in the north of the country, but released after serving only 18 months in 1965. He returned to Leningrad and continued to write poetry, but his increasing fame as a poet did not save him from being forced to leave the Soviet Union in 1972. Brodsky emigrated to the United States. While living abroad he received the 1987 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Reading Assignments:

Pasternak, "Doctor Zhivago" <http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=pasternak+doctor+zhivago&t=0>
<http://gen.lib.rus.ec/search?req=boris+pasternak&nametype=orig&column%5B%5D=title&column%5B%5D=author&column%5B%5D=series&column%5B%5D=periodical&column%5B%5D=publisher&column%5B%5D=year>

Solzhenitsyn, "The Gulag Archipelago"
<http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=Solzhenitsyn%2C+%E2%80%9CThe+Gulag+Archipelago&t=0>
"One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"
<http://gen.lib.rus.ec/search?req=solzhenitsyn&nametype=orig&column%5B%5D=title&column%5B%5D=author&column%5B%5D=series&column%5B%5D=periodical&column%5B%5D=publisher&column%5B%5D=year>

Emerson, C., *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 2008, Ch. 9.

Lanin, B., *Experiment and Emigration: Russian Literature, 1917-1953*, The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature, Edited by Neil Cornwell, 2001, Ch.16.

The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature, Cambridge University Press, 2011, Ch. 10.

The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Russian Literature, Cambridge University Press, 2011, Ch. 11.

Brown, D., *Soviet Russian Literature since Stalin*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, Ch. 11.

Wakamiya, L.R., *Locating Exiled Writers in Contemporary Russian Literature*, Palgrave, MacMillan, 2009, Ch. 3.

Dmitriyev, A., *European Exile for Russian Westernizers: The Logos Circle, The Limits of Exile*, *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Crossroads*, Vol. 3, No.1, 2006, p.79-95.

Russia and Western Civilization, Edited by Russell Bova, ME Sharpe, New York, 2003, Ch. II, Sect. 4.

Questions

Discuss the response of émigré Russian writers to being exiled and living abroad as reflected in their works.

Read Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago". Can we consider Dr. Zhivago as a "Superfluous Man" in his time? Compare him with the main character, the Underground Man in Dostoyevsky's "Notes from the Underground". Determine the differences between them.

Read Solzhenitsyn's "The Gulag Archipelago" and "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich". Explain what the main concepts are in "The Gulag Archipelago". Do we see the same ideas in "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich"? How can you characterize them?

What is the difference between Russian Classical literature and the literature of socialist realism? How can we characterize Solzhenitsyn's novels? Can we trace both traditions in his novels?