

## EARLY MODERN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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### PART I : 15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries : Early Muscovite Period

#### Outline

Muscovite Period, *The Life of Stephen Permsky*, *The Life of Sergiy Radonezhsky*, *Nestor Iskander's Tale on the Taking of Tsargrad*, *Afanasy Nikitin's Journey across Three Seas*, 16th 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 Life of Avvakum*, *The Tale of Ersh Ershovich*, *The Tale of Woe and Misfortune*, *The Tale of Savva Grudtsyn*

#### 15<sup>th</sup> Century

In the works written in the last years of the 14th century and the early years of the 15th century, when 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 15th 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)*.

***The Life of Stephen Permsky.*** *The Life of Stephen Permsky*, written by Epifaniy Premudriy, was composed in the early years of the 15th century. The subject of the work is the canonization of Stephen Permsky, who faithfully served the prince of Moscow and who, in addition to his church duties, played a major role in the efforts to unite the Russian territories around the Moscow state.

***The Life of Sergiy Radonezhsky.*** *The Life of Sergiy Radonezhsky*, also written by Epifaniy Premudriy, relates the struggle to prevent Sergiy from being included in the ranks of the saints.

***Nestor Iskander's Tale on the Taking of Tsar'grad.*** The conquest of Constantinople by Mehmet II brought an end to the almost 600-year-long religious and cultural relations between the Russians and the Byzantine Empire, and the subsequent transfer of the political sovereignty of Rome's successor the Byzantine Empire to its successor, Moscow, and Moscow's status as the Third Rome became subjects of debate.

The theme of Constantinople's fall was the subject of a number of manuscripts. The most important of these was *Nestor Iskander's Tale on the Taking of Tsar'grad*. Beginning with an explanation of how Constantinople was founded, it ends with a description of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine XI's defense of the city.

***Afanasy Nikitin's Journey across Three Seas.*** In addition to tales and biographies, travelogues were also written in this century. The most significant of these is *Afanasy Nikitin's Journey across Three Seas*. It describes the journeys a

## 16<sup>th</sup> Century

The most important works of 16th century literature are *The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir* (*Skazanie o knyazyakh Vladimirskikh*), *Legend of Sultan Mehmet* (*Skazanie o Magmetesaltane*), *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*).

The most important reform carried out in the mid-16th century during the time of Ivan the Terrible who took the throne after the death of Vasiliy III was the start of printing. The first Russian book *Apostol* was printed by Ivan Fedorov in 1564. In these years in which the rate of literacy outside the church increased greatly, Ivan Fedorov's first grammar book *Alphabet* (*Bukvar*), and Lavrentiya Zilzaniya's *Grammar* (*Grammatika*) were published in 1574 and 1596 respectively.

***The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir.*** In *The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir*, written at the beginning of the 16th century, significant ideas related to the autocracy's official doctrines are presented. It is recorded in the *Tale* that the Russian princes are from the line of the Roman emperor Augustus, and that Vladimir Monomakh received the symbol or tsardom from the Byzantine emperor. Writers of the period began to debate in their works such subjects as the structure of the state and its development; laws and justice; the role of the church in the state and its acquisition of property; and the problems of the peasants.

***Legend of Sultan Mehmet.*** In the first half of the 16th century, when the autocracy of the landowners was at its height, the writer and ideologue Ivan Peresvetov, who came to Moscow from western Russia, found himself in the midst of a political war. He depicted the dangerous effects of the landowners' system determining the fate of the state in his work titled the *Legend of Tsar Constantine*. In his work the *Legend of Sultan Mehmet*, written as a type of satire, Peresvetov compared the Byzantine Empire with Sultan Mehmet's rule.

***Great Monthly Readings.*** One of the most important works written in the mid-16th century is the 12-volume *Great Monthly Readings* prepared according to the order of the months by the Metropolitan Makariy. He became Metropolitan during the time of Ivan the Terrible, and in this book that he wrote to strengthen the church's authority includes saints' lives, tales, monks' writings and readings from the Gospels arranged according to Christian holidays and saints' days. Makariy, with the exception of those not approved by the church, by including all the books read in Russia in his work, formed, in a sense, the first compilation of Russian literature.

***The Book of Degrees of the Tsars' Genealogy.*** *The Book of Degrees of the Tsars' Genealogy*, written by the priest Andrei Afanasiy through the initiative of Metropolitan Makariy, presents the genealogical order of 17 generations of tsars, beginning with Rurik up to Ivan the Terrible. In addition to the lives of the tsars, biographies of the metropolitans and saints are also given in the book.

***Chronicle of Kazan.*** The *Chronicle of Kazan*, written in the mid-16th century is a tale in 100 chapters. It covers all historical events from the founding of the Kazan Khanate to its fall in 1552.

***Domostroy.*** The *Domostroy* is an anonymous work composed in the mid-16th century which contains household rules, instructions and advice on the various religious, social and family matters of Russian society. Rather than a didactic work, the *Domostroy* is more of a record of the social and political structure of the Russian people in the medieval period.

## 17th Century

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 17th 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. Of these, one group of writers wrote works such as *The Tale of the Year 1606 (Povest' 1606 goda)*, and *Metaphor (Inoe skazanie)* claiming that the ruling landowner class would save the the Russian people from this confusion. Another group of writers produced works whose topics were the people's hopes, behavior and psychology, such as *The Tale of the Death of Mihail Vasil'yevich Skopin-Shuyskiy (Povest' o prestavlenii ry Mihaila Vasil'evicha Skopina-Shuyskogo)*, *The New Tale of the Orthodox Russian Tsardom (Novaya povest' o preslavnom Rossiyskom tsartsve)*.

In the second half of the 17th century for the first time a history book, *Synopsis (Sinopsis)*, written by the monk Innokentiy Gizel was published. This was followed by Andrei Lizlov's *History of the Scythians (Skifskaya istoriya)* and S.U. Remezov's *History of Siberia (Istoriya Sibirskaya)*.

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)*.

**The Life of Avvakum.** In the second half of the 17th century the abbot Avvakum defended the position that only religion held a higher position than the tsar, and opposed the Patriarch Nikon who had caused the church to split into factions by making small changes in the rituals and practices of the church. Not only did he oppose the Patriarch and struggle against him, he opposed the use of overly elaborate language, and by his masterful use of the simple language of the people, put his mark on the development of Medieval Russian literature.

**The Tale of Ersh Ershovich.** The writer of *The Tale of Ersh Ershovich*, written as a satire at the beginning of the 17th century, is unknown. The subject of the tale is the case between Ersh Ershovich, a member of the landowning class who was attempting to maintain his hold on Lake Rostov by force, and the lake's long-time owners the villagers Leshch and Golavl.

**The Tale of Woe and Misfortune.** The main subject of the anonymous *Tale of Woe and Misfortune*, written in the second half of the 17th century in the form of a poem, is the tragic fate of the young generation which was struggling to free itself from old dogmas. In this work the conflict between old generation, made up of good people who say that the family and the young return home, and the new generation, who see freedom superior to everything else, oppose the patriarchal family and break their bonds with this family and the bitter fate that eventually awaits this new generation are presented.

**The Tale of Savva Grudtsyn.** The anonymous *Tale of Savva Grudtsyn*, like *The Tale of Woe and Misfortune*, has the conflict between two generations as its subject. *The Tale of*

*Savva Grudtsyn* is considered to represent a transition period between the literature of medieval and modern Russia.

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### Questions

How does Ivan Peresvetov describe Sultan Mehmet in his Legend on Sultan Mehmet? Why does he compare the Sultan with the Emperor?

To what other books in history can we compare Domostroy (the rules of domestic discipline)?

How are gender roles described in the Domostroy?

In what ways did Muscovite literary style differ from the style of the Kievan period?

Does Nikitin's work demonstrate a religious framework? Why?

How would you compare Nikitin's *Journey* to Ibn Fadlān's story of *his Journey to Russiyyah*?

Discuss the conflict between the two generations in the *Tale of Woe and Misfortune*.

Why does the *Tale of Savva Grudtsyn* represent a transitional period between medieval and modern Russian literature? Can we talk about a transition from religious to secular themes in the *Tale*?

What is the impact of the *Tale of Savva Grudtsyn* in Russian literature?

## *PART II : 18th Century*

### **Early 18<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Literature**

Neoclassicism, Western Influence, Rise of a Secular Literature

#### *Introduction:*

18<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature is noted for being a century which borrowed the forms, themes, and expertise of the West, initially from Protestant Europe and later from France. In contrast to the present, which prizes originality, in the 18th century borrowing, translating, or imitating another culture's works was not considered mere imitation as reason and human nature were assumed to be universal. Neoclassic poetry, predominant across Europe, was based on an idealized imitation of ancient Greek and Roman forms. However, by the middle of the 18th century the search for national identity was emerging as a value in Russian upper-class culture. This was partly due to the fact that major historical events of the previous two centuries in Western Europe, events such as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Counter-Reformation, had bypassed Russia, a state on the distant borders of Europe. Russia would have to show how her history and culture reflected universality, if she were to enter what was regarded as civilized history in the West.

Western influence in Russia first becomes noticeable in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, both by the numerous translations made from western European languages and in the establishment in 1662 of Russia's first theater. This process of westernization increased pace during the reign of Peter I the Great; it was accompanied by a revision of the Russian alphabet and the publication of Russian works in the spoken language. This increasing familiarity with European culture initiated a century of applying of Western literary forms to Russian works.

The poet Prince A. D. Kantemir combined European neoclassicism with his depictions of Russian life and utilized the syllabic system then common to French and Polish poetry. On the other hand, V. K. Tredyakovsky wrote poetry in a manner more suitable to Russian, by using tonic form. Poetry of this type was perfected by the poet M. V. Lomonosov. The founder of Russian drama, A. P. Sumarokov, wrote fables and stage plays which blended European forms with Russian themes. Among Sumarokov's other works are the "Letters to Writers", in which he elucidates the principles of Classicism. Sumarokov was the first Russian writer who, due to his personality and style, was able to attract a group of followers around him who viewed themselves as pupils of a famous teacher. The Classicism espoused by Sumarokov's was like that in western Europe, namely: literature was a form of communication, a craft that could be learned through effort and practice; imitation of the proper models (and the best models were the works written by classical authors) would ensure success; and that intellect and moral clarity were the most important characteristics of any composition.

Literature written in the time of Catherine II clearly shows the influence of the European Enlightenment. The combination of satire and classical style is found in a number of works, among them the odes of G.R. Derzavhin, N.I. Novikov's journals and the dramas penned by Catherine. D. I. Fonvizin, the author of Russia's first truly national drama *The Minor*, wrote plays which combined satire and realistic motifs, as do the fables of I. I. Khemnitser.

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### *Questions*

DISCUSS about the period of Peter the Great and Western influence in Russian Literature. How was the Russian language affected?

Read Kantemir's "Satire I. To My Mind" and Trediakovskiy's "Solemn Ode on the Surrender of the City of Danzig". In his satires what does he criticize and why?

Read Lomonosov's "Evening Meditation on the Majesty of God," "Morning Meditation on the Majesty of God," "Letter on the Use of Glass". Talk about Lomonosov's role in Russian history and culture.

Read Fonvizin's "The Minor". Why does it have an important place in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian Literature?



## **Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Literature**

Sentimentalism Enlightenment Ideas, Complete Change in Spirit, Censorship

### *Introduction:*

Although Catherine II had originally been quite open to Enlightenment ideas, had corresponded with some of the most important Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Diderot, and had made efforts at internal reform, the violence which emerged in the French Revolution made her reject these earlier inclinations. At one point, she even entertained the idea of restoring the French monarchy by sending an army to France.

During Catherine's reign, more works were published in Russia than ever before and the contemporary Russian language was used in place of the much older "Church Slavonic". This period also saw the founding of Moscow University, and Catherine was known for encouraging the construction of elementary and intermediate schools in Russia.

Like Frederick the Great and Joseph II of Austria, considered Enlightened monarchs, Catherine was willing to allow a degree of reform to take place, primarily in the areas of civic and social life, as long as it did not affect her power. In fact, a number of trends that could hardly be considered enlightened occurred during her reign: serfdom expanded and became more rigid; and the publication of books criticizing either her reign or the autocratic system was prohibited. This rationale behind this censorship was that the "intellectual elite" were able to read Western philosophies and political works. Many in the elite were attracted by republican ideals, seeing them as an alternative to the autocratic controls found in Russia. Some even imported printing technology as a means to spread these new political ideas. Catherine approved the first official board of censors prior to her death in 1796.

Earlier Catherine had authored a work entitled *Nakaz*, based on the ideas of Montesquieu and Beccaria. It was considered so liberal that *Nakaz* was banned by the censors in France. However, the Pugachev rebellion cooled Catherine's enthusiasm for liberalism, and by the end of her reign, in light of the course of events in the French Revolution, she abandoned all pretense of being a liberal and became an outright reactionary.

Catherine was considered by her detractors as a "Tsar-slayer, usurper, and whore", in part due to her scandalous private life and tendency towards self-promotion. Voltaire only changed his skeptical views about Catherine due to her persistent correspondence. He later declared her work *Nakaz* "the finest monument of the age". While her role in Russian history and political acumen had long been recognized, Catherine's literary talents and status as a figure of the Enlightenment were disregarded. For example, K. Waliszewski, G. A. Gukovskii, and others claimed that as a ruler Catherine was a reactionary conservative, and a mediocre amateur as an author. Specifically, Gukovskii pointed out that Catherine's spoken Russian was excellent, but in print required extensive editing to be considered acceptable. Critics in the west tended to be more interested in her literary patronage, and were only interested in her own works as reflections of European trends and her attempts to import Enlightenment ideas into Russia.

Despite having initiated the publication of satirical journals in Russia in 1769, Catherine ended their publication four years later when these journals became too independent for her liking and too critical of the political and social conditions in Russia at that time. Arrest and exile to east Siberia was the eventual fate of critical writers such as N. I. Novikov and A. N. Radishchev.

Toward the end of the 18th century the works of Radishchev expressed the beginning of political radicalism was given expression combined with Rousseauian sentimentalism. In drama, V.A. Ozerov employed Sentimentality, and was best seen in *Poor Liza* by N. M. Karamzin.

The beginnings of the literary movement of Sentimentalism appeared only in the last years of Catherine's reign. 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.

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## *Questions*

Discuss the intelligentsia in Russia in the Age of Enlightenment.

Discuss Catherine the Great as an empress and a woman of letters.

To what extent did Catherine accept the progress and reform associated with Enlightenment belief?

Discuss the beginning of Russian literary criticism.

Discuss the effects of the European literary movement 'sentimentalism' on 18th century Russian literature.

Why did Catherine the Great consider Radishchev a threat to the state and pronounce him a rebel worse than Pugachev? Read his "A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow" and explain why he was very critical about Russian life.

Discuss why Karamzin's "Poor Liza" is considered the best example of Sentimentalism.

Discuss Karamzin's journalism experience.