HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
*Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.*

# **RUSSIAN LITERATURE** – Autobiography

**Overview** The literary genre of *autobiographical writings* is comprised of works written in the first person which provide a detailed account of the writer's life. The earliest form of autobiography in Russia began with *zhitie* (life story). From the 11th century, monks began to compose their life stories and they copied out other accounts from Byzantine sources that they had obtained. In later centuries, the writers' works covered the nostalgia of childhood, their early lives, and the events they had witnessed. In the 20th century autobiographical sketches became more varied and complex than in earlier eras. Literary critics in the Soviet period referred to autobiographical writings as "documentary prose". While recognizing that these works could contain "fictional elements", they regarded "authenticity" and the "documentary" nature of autobiographical writings as their most important characteristics.

## POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

The 12th century work the *Instruction* written by the Grand prince of Kiev, Vladimir Monomakh is considered the first autobiographical work. It was mostly written for his children as the future rulers of Rus land, and but it also included his short autobiography. The *Instruction* is divided into three parts: an introduction including extracts from a prayer, a letter to his children and another to Prince Oleg of Chernigov, and his activities such as travels, expeditions, battles and hunting experiences. The sole copy of the text of the *Instruction* is preserved in the 14th century *Laurentian Chronicle.*

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

In the 17th century, *The First Letter to Andrey Kurbsky* written by the Grand Prince of Muscovy, Ivan IV (the Terrible), was a message addressed to Prince Andrey Kurbsky, who defected to Lithuania during the Livonian War. The letter talks about Ivan's early years, his mistreatment and his abuse by Russian nobles.

*The Story of My Life* written by the monk Martiry Zelenetsky appeared in the same century. depicts his life in a monastery for few years, his journey to a place called 'Green Island' to establish a new monastery, the miracles he witnessed in Green Island, and his instructions addressed to the local monks.

*The Tales of Anzersky Cloister* (1636-1656) was written by Eleazar Anzersky, who founded the Trinity Monastery on Anzersky Island in the White Sea. The *Tales* includes stories about events that occurred in the course of founding the monastery and the miracles witnessed by Eleazar.

*The Life Stories* (1672–1675) written by Archpriest Avvakum was a self-testimony about his imprisonment in Pustozersk, his dramatic struggle for his religious convictions, and his inner struggles and emotions.

Following his close associate Avvakum, the monk Epiphany wrote his own life-story. In his autobiographical stories *The Life Stories* (1667–1671), Epiphany focused on his pain, his bad experiences and the miracles that he had witnessed in his lifetime.

Alexander Radishchev's work *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) is considered an autobiographical narrative that contains a harsh criticism of Russia's social and political system under Catherine the Great, and his violent reaction to the abuses of Russian serfdom. As a result of this work he was immediately arrested, tried for treason, and condemned to death, but his sentence was later commuted to exile in Siberia.

Nikolay Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveler* (1789-90) described the author's experiences during his travels through Germany, England, France and Switzerland. Karamzin also portrayed numerous sketches of literary figures he met.

*Open Hearted Confession about My Deeds and Thoughts*, written by Denis Fonvizin during the last years of his life was another autobiographical work that was left unfinished at his death in 1792. Fonvizin's *Confession* was an expression of his joy in all the diverse aspects of human and a response to the previously published pseudo-confession of Rousseau. Unlike Rousseau, he admitted to his sins and all the lawless deeds he had committed in his lifetime that was filled only with regret and repentance.

Fedor Glinka's eight volume *Letters from a Russian Officer* (1815-16) which described military events witnessed by the author and his experiences fighting in the campaigns of the Napoleonic Wars was considered on a par with Karamzin's *Letters of a Russian Traveler*.

**Women Writers:** The first published autobiographies by women writers date from the last decade of the 18th century; public figures like Catherine the Great's and her friend Ekaterina Dashkova's autobiographical sketches were published only decades after their death. Catherine the Great, being a proponent of the Enlightenment, wanted to imprint the role of a woman's leadership on Europe.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

One of the 19th century Russian writers, Denis Davydov, wrote an *Essay towards a Theory of Guerrilla Welfare* (1821), included an autobiography prefixed to the 1832 edition of his poems, and authored a series of recollections of military life. His autobiography is peppered with puns and jokes, many unsuitable in polite company, and his highly readable military writings are regarded as some of the best in Russian.

Alexandr Pushkin, in his autobiographical work *Journey to Arzrum* (1836) and based on his travel to the Caucasus, depicted the places and people he encountered in the Caucasus.

Another writer who experimented with autobiographical fiction was Ivan Turgenev. His collection of short stories *Notes of a Hunter* (1852), based on his observations of peasant life and nature, and his novella *First Love* (1860) were famous for their autobiographical overtones.

Apollon Grigoriev's autobiographical work, *My Literary and Moral Wanderings* (1862-64) was about his experience of the cultural life that created him and the Russian nation during his early years.

Alexander Herzen's autobiography *My Past and Thoughts* (1852) covers the period from Herzen's birth in 1812 to 1868 and depicts his early privileged childhood among the Russian aristocracy, his interaction of people and events, his correspondence with friends and his ideological debates. He began writing his *My Past and Thoughts* in London, printed many of its chapters in *Polyarnaya zvezda* and *Kolokol,* and published the first and second volumes as a separate edition in London in 1861. The fourth and last volume came out in Geneva in 1867.

Sergey Aksakov's trilogy *The Family Chronicle* (1856)*, Childhood Years of Bagrov Grandson* (1858) and *A Russian Schoolboy* (1856) influenced autobiographical works of the mid-century with its focus on the history of the childhood and the family of the protagonist.

Lev Tolstoy published his autobiographical work entitled *Childhood* (1852) under the initials L.N. Although initially it was planned as the first part of a tetralogy, only *Childhood, Boyhood* and *Youth* were completed. The trilogy describes the transition from adolescence to adulthood and examines the emotional world of a young gentry boy. He published another autobiographical work *My Life* or *First Memories* (1878) based on his personal recollections.

**Émigré Writers:** Émigré writer Prince Peter Kropotkin wrote his autobiography *The Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (1899) in exile. His *Memoirs* covers his early life, cadet corps schooling, life in the royal court, his military service in Siberia, his political activities, his imprisonment, his escape from jail, his exile and activities in Western Europe.

**Women Writers:** Among women writers of autobiographical accounts, Nadezhda Durova's autobiographical texts written from 1836 to 1841 recounted her childhood experiences in *Autobiography*. In her *The Cavalry Maiden* she described her service in the military dressed as a man, and her participation in the defense of her country.

Another women writer, Varvara Bakunina's *The Persian Campaign of 1796* (1887) was another account of military operations and her experiences during her husband's expedition against the Persian invasion of the Caucasus in 1795.

Mariya Kamenskaya's *Reminiscences*, written in the late 19th century, was a family chronicle including the history of her father's family, the Tolstoy family and her own happy life as a daughter of the regiment of artists.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

The writer Aleksey Remizov's autobiographical novel *The Pond* (1908) was a reflection of his early childhood. It includes the depiction of the life of two merchant families: one rich and the other-poor.

Life writing began to adopt more experimental forms of expression in the 20th century. An early example of avant-garde autobiographical writing can be found in Vasily Rozanov's *Solitaria, Fallen Leaves* (1913-15).

One of the active revolutionaries, Maksim Gorky wrote his autobiographical stories in three novels: *Childhood* (1913), *My Apprenticeship* (1916) and *My University Years* (1923). His *Childhood* contains his experiences with the people, pain, sorrow, social injustice and incidents that he encountered in his younger days. In his second volume *My Apprenticeship*, he gives information about his adolescence in the years after the death of his mother, how he survived and how earned his own living. The third volume of his autobiography *My University Years* covers the years he spent in Kazan between 1884 and 1888 in which the only university he attended was the university of life. During this period, struggling to make ends meet, Gorky moved from one job to another.

Andrey Bely's autobiographical novel *Kotik Letaev* (1922) portrayed the author's experiences through his hero Kotik from his own early childhood and through his psychological and social developments. His *The Baptized Chinaman* explores the evolution of consciousness into self-consciousness in the mind of a child.

The nostalgia for childhood was the theme of several works such as Aleksey Tolstoy's *Nikita's Childhood*. *Nikita's Childhood* (1922) was a life story containing autobiographical sketches and realistic depictions of the life of a small boy living in a village.

Mikhail Bulgakov was a doctor, and in his autobiographical stories *Extraordinary Adventures of a Doctor* (1922) and *Notes of a Young Country Doctor* (1926) he covered his personal experiences while attempting to portray the circumstances of his current life.

Osip Mandelshtam's collection of autobiographical sketches *The Noise of Time* (1923) includes "The Egyptian Stamp," a novella; "Fourth Prose;" and the famous travel memoirs "Theodosia" and "Journey to Armenia". These works are an evocative portrayal of the intellectual milieu of early 20th century St. Petersburg as well as the author's own affairs of the heart.

Boris Pasternak's autobiography *Safe Conduct* (1930) portrayed his daily life, ideals, philosophical views, and negative statements about the Stalinist period.

Nikolay Ostrovsky's autobiography *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1936) was an account of his actions in the Civil War on the side of the Bolsheviks and his difficult process of recovery after the war from his serious injuries.

Mikhail Zoshchenko's autobiographical novella *Before Sunrise* (1943), about how the author tried to overcome his chronic depression, negative emotions and fear of life, was banned and three years later the writer was expelled from the Soviet Writers' Union. After Stalin's death, attempts were made to clear his name, and he was eventually re-accepted into the union.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Vladimir Tendryakov established his reputation with a more profound and memorable story, *Donna Anna*, which combines the same detailed depiction of the battlefield atmosphere with a portrayal of the disastrous effects of a Stalinist mentality on military behavior. *Donna Anna* is actually one of a series of eyewitness stories, autobiographical in nature.

Stalin's death in 1953 marked a new era in the development of Soviet literature usually referred to as the Thaw. Life writing of this period is represented by the autobiographical memoir.

Evgeny Evtushenko in his *A Precocious Autobiography* (1963) introduced snatches of his life experiences with his family, his grandfather, his schools years, his labor work on two geological expeditions, and his sorrow upon the news of Stalin's death.

Yury Olesha's *No Day Without a Line* (1965) is a collection of miscellaneous writings whose only common thread is that they all relate to the author's life and thoughts. They range from recollections of Olesha's childhood before the revolution, his ideas about literature in general and 20$^{th}$ century Russian literature in particular, and his impressions of famous cultural figures.

Ilya Erenburg's multi-volume *Memoirs: 1921-1941* (1961-65) recounts his memories of the historical events he had witnessed, and of his acquaintance with leading figures such as Sergey Yesenin, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Andrey Bely, Andrey Remizov, and Vsevolod Meyerhold. The *Memoirs* also included his recollections about Boris Pasternak Alexander Tairov, Marina Tsvetayeva, Osip Mandelshtam and Isaak Babel.

Yury Trifonov wrote his autobiography *The House on the Embankment* (1976) which embodied the everyday lives of his family and the residents living in a house on Embankment complex in Moscow. The novel covered the period of the Stalinist purges, the post-war late Stalinist time, and the stagnation.

Sergey Dovlatov's *The Preserve*'s (1983) plot was autobiographical, narrating a summer that was spent as a tour guide at the Pushkin Museum near Pskov, and reflected his views on provincial life. *Ours: A Russian Family Album* (1989) was another of Dovlatov's autobiographical works consisting of a collection of character sketches of four generations in the Soviet Union.

**Émigré Writers:** Kuprin's *The Junkers* (1932), written while an émigré, conveyed nostalgia for the Russia of his early childhood and his emotions during the long separation from his country.

Realist writer Ivan Bunin's autobiographical novel *The Life of Arseniev* (1952) was also from his émigré period. It was published in parts in France; later the complete version of the book appeared in New York. *The Life of Arseniev* depicted the narrator's childhood, his education, his ignorance, his struggles, and his emotions in the social and cultural atmosphere before and after the Revolution.

Émigré writer Ivan Shmelev's *Pilgrimage* was an autobiographical work of his own first pilgrimage to Trinity-Sergius in the 1930s.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak Memory* was an autobiographical memoir containing twelve short stories about his childhood days in an aristocratic family in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg from 1903 until his emigration to America in 1940; and three stories about his émigré life at Cambridge, in Berlin and in Paris.

Andrey Sinyavky's autobiography *Goodnight!* was published after his emigration to France in 1984. In his novel he attempted to find the meaning of his life in the Soviet Union, his role as a writer and his thoughts on literature and ethical questions.

**Women Writers:** Anastasiya Verbitskaya's autobiography *To My Reader* echoes her childhood and youth and traces her development into confirmed individualist in conflict with the revolutionaries and their ethos of selfless service to the state.

Valentina Dmitrieva wrote her autobiography, *The Way it Was* in the 1920s to document her difficult transition from a peasant daughter to a physician and a writer, and her acquaintances with the literary thinkers and intellectuals.

Anastasiya Tsvetaeva in her *Reminiscences* echoes the psychological shifts she went through in her first twenty years, and examines her youth from the perspective of tolerant old age.

Nina Berberova wrote her autobiography, *The Italics Are Mine* to portray her acquaintances with many influential Russian writers of the 20th century.

Osip Mandeshtam's wife Nadezhda Mandelshtam's autobiographical story *Hope Against Hope* reflected her life with Osip, and the daily struggle to survive in most desperate circumstances during Stalin's Soviet Union.

The autobiographical trilogy *The Little Caftan*, *The Polack*, and *The Break* (1930-31) written by Vera Gedroits was originally published under the masculine name Sergey, indicating possibly that conventional sex roles were merely arbitrary.

Journey into the Whirlwind was Evgeniya Ginzburg's account of her time in prisons and labor camps that included a two-year stint in solitary confinement.

Lidiya Chukovskaya's *Going Under* (1949) was an attempt to portray the Stalinist epoch, a period that destroyed people physically, mentally, and morally with its cruelty.

Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* (1963-64) was a cycle of poems about the Great Terror, the suffering of people, and her personal life during the time of terror and her son's arrest.

**Discussion/Questions**

1. Compare the autobiographical writings of the Soviet period with works written in pre-Soviet time. What are the significant differences and similarities?
2. How does the study of Russian autobiography reflect the evolution of historical developments?

**Reading**

1-*Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, Edited by Jane Gary Harris, Princeton University Press, 1990
2-Cooper, N.L., "A Chapter in the History of Russian Autobiography: Childhood, Youth, and Maturity in Fonvizin's A Sincere Avowal of My Deeds and Thoughts", The Slavic and East European Journal, Vol. 40, No. 4, Winter, 1996, pp. 609-622.
3- *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, Edited by Neil Cornwell, Routledge, 2013.
4- Terras, V., *A History of Russian Literature*, Yale University Press, 1991.
5- Beaujour, E.K. "Proust-Envy: Fiction and Autobiography in the Works of Iurii Olesha", Studies in 20th Century Literature Studies, Vol.1, Issue 2, 1977.
6- Mirsky, D.S., *A History of Russian Literature* and *Contemporary Russian Literature*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Limited, 1949.
7- *A History of Women's Writing in Russia*, edited by Adele Marie Baker, Cambridge University Press, 2002, Ch. 5.
8- Greenleaf, M., "Performing Autobiography: The Multiple Memoirs of Catherine the Great (1756-96)", The Russian Review, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Jul., 2004), pp. 407-426