

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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RUSSIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY - 20th 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 Mandelstam'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 snippets of his life experiences with his family, his grandfather, his school 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 20th 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 Turov, Marina Tsvetayeva, Osip Mandelstam and Isaac 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 *Invitation to a Beheading* 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 Sinyavsky'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 a 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.