

RUSSIAN LITERATURE - Postclassical Period

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POETRY

Byliny (Epic Songs): Russia's earliest poetic form was *bylina*. Between the 10th and 14th centuries a type of epic called *byliny* (pl.) emerged. *Byliny* were a type of short story, often in the form of a poem that was sung and accompanied, at times, by a type of string instrument called a *gusli*. Their topics varied from events in the Kievan state, nomadic groups, the deeds of Novgorod, and mythology. Three different groups played a role in the dissemination of *byliny*: travelling performers, *skomorokhi*; peasant performers, *skaziteli*; and itinerant pilgrims, *kaliki perekhozhie*. Although *byliny* were initially recited by professional bards in the courts of the nobility, over time they came to be sung or recited by peasant storytellers in rural areas. The theme of many Russian *byliny* is some variant of the hero's quest; for some reason the hero, *bogatyr*, leaves his home, is given a task or tasks to accomplish, accomplishes his task or tasks in spite of numerous obstacles, and, in the end, becomes wealthy or gains the hand of a beautiful maiden. Popular heroes in many *byliny* are *Ilya Muromets*, *Alyosha Popovich*, *Sadko*, and *Dobrynya Nikitich*. Frequently encountered villains include *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, *Ivan the Fool*, *Grandfather Frost*, *Baba Yaga*, *the Firebird*, *the Immortal Kashchey*, etc.

Dukhovnye stikhi (spiritual poems): These are oral poems with religious content composed between the 15th and the 17th centuries. Their themes were taken from the Bible, hagiographic and apocryphal texts. These spiritual verses also described events from the lives of saints and their miracles, heroes, punishment, torture of the people, religious holidays etc. For example, the spiritual poem *The Saturday of St. Dimitry (Dmitrievskaya subbota)* explains the origin of a church holiday. These spiritual poems are still recited today.

Epic Poetry: The distinguishing characteristic of epic poetry is heroic content. The heroes of epic poetry strive for their people, not for petty, personal interests. These heroes must use all of their abilities to overcome the difficulties in their path and be willing to even sacrifice themselves to attain their goals, but in epic poetry this is their path to success. *The Tale of Igor's Campaign (Slovo o polku Igoreve)* is Russia's first written anonymous work, written in Old Russian, is set in the context of the feudal conflicts 12th century Russia, and describes the unsuccessful campaign led by Prince Igor against the Cumans (Polovtsy) in 1185. The poem describes Igor's defeat, escape from captivity and eventual return to his people and serves as a warning to other Rus' princes on the need for unity in the face of continuing threats from Turkic tribes. The other epic poetry *Zadonshchina (Beyond the River)* is about the Russian victory over the Mongols at Kulikovo battle in 1380, and it follows the style of the Tale of Igor's Campaign.

Verbal poetry (skazovy stikh): Examples of verbal poetry from old Russia are limited; most are found in the riddles, proverbs and incantations recited by the *skomorokhi*, hymns composed in Church Slavonic, and in Daniel's *Supplication*.

FICTION

From the 14th to the 16th centuries there were translated fiction works that reached Russia through Serbia, like the *Alexandriad*, a Hellenistic romance attributed falsely to the historian Callisthenes. This work not

only presented an inaccurate account of Alexander the Great's life and deeds, but was viewed with a great deal of suspicion by the church.

Another work that came to Russia from Serbia was the *History of Troy*, which covers not only the siege of Troy, but also other stories like the story of the Argonauts.

In the 15th century the first examples of literature of entertainment were produced. *The Tale of Dracula* written by Fyodor Kuritsyn depicts a person who was supposed to visit the lands where the action takes place. However, the facts in this work were all distorted.

This century also produced *The Tale of Three Kings: Arcadius, King Nemesyan the Proud, and King Borzomysl Dmitrievich* which was a version of a well-known anecdote. The story, however, depicts an appalling ignorance of Catholicism.

The late 15th century had more modern pieces of fiction such as *The Tale of Luke of Koloch* which describes a poor peasant who travels all over the country with a miraculous icon that brings cures.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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*.