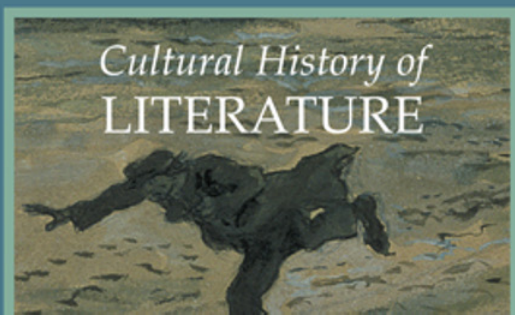




ANDREW BARUCH WACHTEL  
and ILYA VINITSKY

# Russian Literature





# Russian Literature

## **Cultural History of Literature**

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# Russian Literature

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ANDREW BARUCH WACHTEL AND ILYA VINITSKY

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# Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>List of Illustrations</i>  | vi  |
| <i>Chronology</i>   | vii |
| Introduction: Labyrinth of Links: Russian Literature and its Cultural Contexts              | 1   |
| 1 The Origins: Russian Medieval Culture   | 7   |
| 2 The Spirit of Peter: Russian Culture in the Eighteenth Century                            | 31  |
| 3 The Spirit of Poetry: Russian Culture in the Age of Alexander I (1801–25)                 | 57  |
| 4 The Russian Idea: The Quest for National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Russian Culture   | 89  |
| 5 Russian Psychology: The Quest for Personal Identity in Nineteenth-Century Russian Culture | 125 |
| 6 Life as Theatre: Russian Modernism  | 157 |
| 7 The Art of the Future: The Russian Avant-Garde  | 182 |
| 8 The Future as Present: Soviet Culture   | 204 |
| 9 After the Future: Russian Thaw Culture  | 233 |
| 10 Instead of the Apocalypse: Russian Culture Today   | 261 |
| Conclusion: Whither Russian Literature  | 285 |
| <i>Notes</i>  | 294 |
| <i>Bibliography</i>   | 302 |
| <i>Index</i>  | 308 |

# Illustrations

|    |   |         |
|----|---|---------|
| 1  | Andrei Rublev, <i>Old Testament Trinity</i>                                 | page 26 |
| 2  | Vasily Surikov, <i>Boyarina Morozova</i> , 1887                             | 30      |
| 3  | St. Peter and Paul Cathedral, St. Petersburg                                | 41      |
| 4  | Plan of St. Petersburg, 1737  | 43      |
| 5  | St. Isaac's Cathedral, St. Petersburg                                       | 62      |
| 6  | Pavlovsk: a view of the gardens   | 74      |
| 7  | Alexander Column, St. Petersburg  | 90      |
| 8  | A. M. Opekushin, Pushkin monument, Moscow, 1880<br>© Rem Sapozhnikov        | 106     |
| 9  | Ilya Repin, <i>They Did not Expect Him</i> , 1884–8                         | 140     |
| 10 | Cover from <i>A Trap for Judges II</i> , 1913                               | 187     |
| 11 | Vladimir Tatlin's "Monument to the Third International"<br>(model), 1919–20 | 206     |



# Chronology

- 862 Varangian Prince Riurik is invited to rule in Kiev. The Riurikovich dynasty lasts until 1598.
- 988 Baptism of Kievan Rus (a loose medieval association of East-Slavic principalities under the leadership of Kievan princes). Grand Prince Vladimir I accepts the eastern (Byzantine) form of Christianity. The Church of Rus' becomes a subsidiary of the Patriarchate of Constantinople (until 1448).
- 1051 Hilarion becomes the first Russian-born metropolitan bishop of Kiev.
- 1054 The split of Universal Christian Church into Roman and Greek (Byzantine). Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise dies and Rus' is divided between his sons.
- 1240 The destruction of Kiev by the Mongols. End of Kievan Rus and beginning of the so-called Mongol-Tatar Yoke (lasted until 1480).
- 1242 Prince Alexander Nevsky defeats the Teutonic (Livonian) Knights during the Battle on the Ice.
- 1326 Seat of the Metropolitan transferred from Vladimir to Moscow, which becomes the major political power aimed at the "reunification of Russian lands."
- 1453 Fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans. Moscow princes soon proclaim themselves heirs of Byzantine emperors and the Muscovite Tsardom as a new and the final reincarnation of the holy Christian empire (the Third Rome doctrine, 1510): "Pious Tsar! Listen and remember that all Christian kingdoms have now merged into one, your tsardom. Two Romes have fallen. The third stands firm. And there will not be a fourth. No one will replace your Christian tsardom."

- 1552 and 1556 Ivan the Terrible conquers Kazan and Astrakhan khanates. In 1582, Siberia is included in the Muscovite Tsardom.
- 1565 Ivan established the *Oprichnina*, a special institution and subdivision of his state, with the mission to punish evildoers and traitors (in his eyes). The reign of terror begins.
- 1589 The Metropolitan of Moscow Job becomes the first Patriarch of All Rus'.
- 1598-1613 Time of Troubles; Russian civil war caused by a dynastic crisis.
- 1613 Mikhail Romanov is elected tsar by the Assembly of the Land. The new, Romanov, dynasty begins.
- 1653–7 Russia gains Left-Bank Ukraine (including Kiev).
- 1653–4 Beginning of the Russian Schism. Patriarch Nikon (head of the Russian Orthodox Church) forbids the old Russian ritual; the Old-Believers' opposition.
- 1682 Archpriest Avvakum, the leader of the Old-Believers, is burned at stake.
- 1699-1700 Tsar Peter Alexeevich (1672-1725; Emperor of all Russia – Peter I – beginning 1721) initiates a great age of reforms.
- 1700–1721 The Great Northern War between Russia and Sweden. In 1709 Charles XII of Sweden is defeated at Poltava. Russia gains the Baltic territories.
- 1703 Peter founds St. Petersburg, soon to become the new capital of a “westernized” Russian Empire.
- 1762 Peter III issues his manifesto freeing nobles from obligatory state service: “[N]o Russian nobleman will ever be forced to serve against his will; nor will any of Our administrative departments make use of them except in emergency cases and then only if We personally should summon them.”
- 1762–96 Reign of Catherine II (Great): the “Golden Age” of the Russian nobility.
- 1767 Catherine II published her political declaration of intentions *Nakaz* (*The Instructions to the Commissioners for Composing a New Code of Laws*): “[E]very Individual Citizen in particular must wish to see himself protected by Laws, which should not distress him in his

- Circumstances, but, on the Contrary, should defend him from all Attempts of others that are repugnant to this fundamental Rule.”
- 1773–75 The Peasant Rebellion (“War”) led by Emelyan Pugachev.
- 1772, 1793, 1795 Partitions of Poland. Russian Empire expands westwards.
- 1783 And southwards . . . Crimean territories annexed after series of successful Russo-Turkish wars.
- 1801 Unpopular Paul I (1796-1801), Catherine’s son, assassinated. His son Alexander I ascends the throne and vows to return to the pro-gentry policies of his grandmother.
- 1812 War with Napoleon; the fire of Moscow.
- 1814 Liberation of Paris by the allied armies and establishment of a new European order under control of the major Christian powers (Holy Alliance).
- 1825 The Decembrist revolt.
- 1830–1 Polish uprising and its defeat.
- 1849 Nicholas I (1826-55) sends the army to help the Austrian Emperor defeat the Hungarian revolution.
- 1853–6 The Eastern (or Crimean) war; Russia’s defeat and national shame.
- 1861–3 The emancipation of the serfs, the major action in a new series of Great Reforms initiated by Alexander II (1855-1881): “[T]hey are granted the right to purchase their household plots, and, with the consent of the nobles, they may acquire in full ownership the arable lands and other properties which are allotted them for permanent use. Following such acquisition of full ownership of land, the peasants will be freed from their obligations to the nobles for the land thus purchased and will become free peasant landowners. (. . .) At the end of two years from the day of the promulgation of this decree they shall receive full freedom and some temporary benefits” (Manifesto of February 19, 1861). In the text when we talk about the abolition of serfdom we mean the actual abolition (1863) rather than the announcement.
- 1863–4 Polish revolution (insurrection) defeated.

- 1881 Alexander II assassinated by a terrorist.
- 1905 The first Russian revolution follows Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War.
- 1914 – 1918 World War I (or the "German War").
- 1917 The liberal (February) and Bolshevik (November) Revolutions. End of the Russian Empire and beginning of the Soviet state (from 1922 – The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) with Moscow as the capital.
- 1918–21 (or 23) Civil War between "Reds" (Bolsheviks) and "Whites" (monarchists).
- 1921 Relatively liberal New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced. Ends in 1928 with the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan, the proclamation of new policies of accelerated industrialization and, beginning in 1929, collectivization.
- 1924 Death of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Revolution. In the 1920s, Joseph Stalin gradually consolidates absolute power.
- 1937 Peak of Stalin's "purges": many members of the literary and artistic intelligentsia are arrested and executed or imprisoned.
- 1941–5 Great Patriotic War with Nazi Germany. In 1945 the Soviet army captures Berlin. Formation of the socialist camp in Europe, with Warsaw Treaty signed in 1955.
- 1953 Stalin dies.
- 1956 XX Congress of the Communist Party: denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality by Khrushchev. Millions of inmates return from labor camps. The "Thaw" period begins.
- 1961 Yuri Gagarin becomes the first human in space.
- 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.
- 1968 Soviet army invades Czechoslovakia to prevent it from leaving the socialist camp.
- Mid-1960s The end of the "Thaw." The Soviet dissident movement emerges.
- Late-1960s–mid-80s "Period of stagnation" of the Soviet regime. "Afghan" War of 1979-89.

- 1971–2 The start of the “third wave” emigration (with the first wave following the Revolution and the Civil War and the second after the World War II). In 1972, 35,000 people left the Soviet Union (mostly representatives of the intelligentsia).
- 1985 Gorbachev’s Perestroika (a futile attempt to reconstruct the centrally planned Soviet economy) begins.
- 1991 The USSR is dissolved. Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, and other former Soviet republics announce independence.
- 1994–6, 1999–2006 Russo-Chechen wars. Vladimir Putin becomes President of the Russian Federation in 2000.



# Introduction

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## Labyrinth of Links: Russian Literature and its Cultural Contexts

Russian literature (like any other literature) is not an island, but part of a complex cultural process. A journey through its “labyrinth of links” (to use a phrase of Lev Tolstoy) is a fascinating and, we hope, helpful adventure: we learn not only about curious facts, names, and works, but also acquaint ourselves with the experience of a particular Other. Let us begin with a case that illustrates the complexity of this process. Our choice may seem strange: the hero is not a well-known writer, the event is not significant, and the work under discussion does not belong to the canon of famous literary texts (it was never completed, in fact). However, this case serves as a fitting introduction to our narrative, since it presents as if in a miniature the ways in which a literary process originates and develops.

On August 8, 1801 the twenty-year-old poet Andrei Turgenev, son of the director of Moscow University, leader of a literary group of enthusiastic young men that included the future founder of Russian Romanticism Vasily Zhukovsky, recorded in his diary:

I bought *Werther* from Horn today and decided, without any particular goal, to have it translated. . . . Without knowing what I would need it for. Just now a quick thought came suddenly to mind.

*So eine wahre, warme Freude ist nicht in der Welt, als eine große Seele zu sehen, die sich gegen einen öffnet*, Werther says in one passage. Earlier, I read this indifferently and dispassionately; now, a trivial word in a conversation between Ivan Vladimirovich [Lopukhin] and [Archbishop] Platon showed me the noble firmness of his soul and made me feel pleasure, although he wasn't speaking to me. Another thought came to me instantly after that. I remembered that passage in *Werther*, and in my new *Werther* I will check my feelings against his, and note for myself the things that I felt the same as he did.

So I began *within* myself. I jumped up and ran to my room to write these lines.

Morning – its arrival chased away the peaceful sleep which had embraced me softly; I woke, and with a fresh soul went up the hill from my humble

hut; at every step I was delighted by a new flower, heavy with dew and bending towards the earth; the young day was rising with joy, everything about me was coming to life and bringing me to life.

As I ascended, the mist slowly spread [. . .] Soon it was as if I was surrounded by clouds and I was in twilight.

Suddenly the sun seemed to break through and light appeared in the darkness. It fell now below, now rose again, splitting itself over the groves and hills. With what great impatience I waited to welcome the bright sun; I awaited its doubled charm after the gloom. The airy fight had not finished yet; brilliance surrounded me, and I stood blinded.

Soon a feeling within my heart roused me to gaze about. I had to do it quickly, as everything was blazing and burning all around.

The Divine Woman slowly descended onto the clouds before me; I had seen nothing in my life more beautiful; she looked at me and slowly came to rest.

“You do not recognize me?” she said in a voice overflowing with love and grace – “You do not recognize the one who so often poured the purest balm over the wounds of your heart? No! You do know me; your passionate heart has formed the closest, eternal bond with me. Even as an infant, you reached your hands out to me, weeping bitter tears.”

“It is so!” I cried, blissful, bowing toward the earth; “I have sensed you for a long time; you brought me peace when passion raged furiously through my limbs, you sent me the best of life’s gifts; and any blessing I receive, I want to receive only from you.

“I do not name you. Many give you names, and consider you their own; every eye seeks you, and for almost every gaze your radiance is happiness.

Oh! When I was misled, I had many friends; when I came to know you, I lost almost everyone; no one but myself have I to share in my joy.”<sup>1</sup>

This diary entry requires a brief commentary. It dates from August 1801, the fifth month of the reign of the young Emperor Alexander I, who had ascended the throne after the death (assassination) of his tyrannical father Paul I. It was a period of great aspirations and enthusiasm, “the clear morning of the century,” as contemporaries called it. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774) is an epistolary novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of the most important works of German *Sturm und Drang* movement. The German citation from *Werther* says that the greatest joy in the world is to see how a great soul opens itself to the other. Horn owned a bookshop in Moscow (there were very few bookshops at the time, with no more than a couple of hundred Russian readers). Ivan Lopukhin was a Russian statesman, influential freemason, religious writer, and philanthropist. He was one of the leaders of the



Russian spiritual Awakening movement (which derived from its German counterpart) and a good friend of Andrei Turgenev's father. At the center of his mystical doctrine was an idea of universal Love-Wisdom presented in the feminine symbol of Divine Sophia. Bishop Platon was the Metropolitan (Archbishop) of Moscow and also an amateur poet. The situation described in the diary may be reconstructed as follows: A young man bought Goethe's volume in the German book store; then he witnessed a conversation; between two religious men; he was deeply moved by the beauty of their souls, as this was revealed in this conversation, recalled Werther's opinion concerning the soul which opens itself to the other; decided to test himself to see whether he was also able to feel and express such lofty emotions; rushed home and started to write a piece about the dawn, ascension of a mountain, and the vision of a beautiful woman.

However, here is a paradox. The young man's work is actually a verbatim translation of Goethe's poetic "Zueignung" (Dedication), which opens the edition of *Werther* Turgenev used ("Der Morgen kam; es scheuchten seine Tritte. . ."). In this magnificent poetic introduction, the Poet ascends a mountain, sees a beautiful divine woman who welcomes him, gives him the veil of Poetry and demands that he return to the world of men to share their hardships and show them the way to the truth. It is as if the young Russian poet composed someone else's poem. In fact, a diary translation for him was a means of self-comprehension and self-establishment: if I can feel like Goethe, then I also belong to the "chosen natures." This translation exemplifies the formative period of Russian Romantic poetry when "someone else's" might mean (or help to discover) "one's own." Such a translation does not merely introduce a great foreign work to the reader (in fact, Turgenev wrote it for himself and never completed it). It is rather a poetic initiation, a young man's attempt to discover the poet's self. Here German words become Russian, ideal poetic emotions and Western poetic mythology are filtered through the Russian poet's heart and find their new form in the Russian text.

Turgenev died a year later, having published just one serious poem. His friends created a peculiar myth of him as an unrealized genius (later on, the premature death of Russian poets would become a key Russian poetic myth). Eighteen years later his friend Zhukovsky would translate a part of Goethe's "Zueignung" and create a cycle of poems about the beautiful Spirit of Poetry descending from the heavens. The vision of a divine woman preoccupied the Russian socialist writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky in the 1860s and was central to the mystical philosophy of the religious thinker Vladimir Solovev at the end of the nineteenth century. The latter's

ideal of eternal womanhood, in its turn, affected many Russian symbolist writers of the early twentieth century. In the late 1910s, the Russian avant-gardist poet Boris Pasternak would translate Goethe's poem and the symbolist Alexander Blok, known for his lyrics dedicated to the "Beautiful Lady," would severely criticize Pasternak's idiosyncratic translation and suggest his own.

Turgenev's diary entry was written at the dawn of the period known as the Golden Age of Russian poetry. It provides a glimpse inside the process of the formation of Russian poetic consciousness and reveals important tendencies and themes of the modern Russian literary tradition: the cult of poetry as a transforming force and the idea of the poet's sublime mission in the world; "echoes" between poets of different nations and times; the search for Russian identity inside or against the Western literary background; close links between literature and religious and mystical traditions; literature's confessional character, its attempt to transform everyday life into poetry, as well as to render "the spirit of the time."

To be sure, for most Anglophone readers Russian literature consists not of a series of topics such as those enumerated above, nor of a historical sequence of works and literary movements, but rather of a small number of individual writers. These include, first and foremost, the great nineteenth-century novelists Fedor Dostoevsky, Lev Tolstoy, and Ivan Turgenev, as well as Anton Chekhov, known primarily for his plays. From the twentieth century, these same readers know some works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, perhaps Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. The brilliant tradition of Russian lyric poetry stretching from the eighteenth century to the present is almost completely terra incognita, as are the complex prose experiments of Nikolai Gogol, Nikolai Leskov, Andrei Bely, and Andrei Platonov. It is our job in this book to connect the known and the unknown, and to place both in a context that will allow the reader to appreciate works with which she is familiar and to stimulate her to explore new territory. We do so by considering these works in the context of a cultural history of Russian literature.

So what is a cultural history of Russian literature and how does it differ from a traditional history of Russian literature? A traditional literary history assumes, either explicitly or implicitly, that the most appropriate way to understand the development of a nation's literature is by focusing on the internal evolution of that tradition itself. Hence, the foreground tends to be occupied by the relationship of one group of canonized authors and texts to another. In its turn, if we are talking about the history of a Western nation's literature, those developments are set in the context of

a broader European literary tradition with which the given national tradition interacts. As a result, if we are dealing with Russia for example, we can appreciate how Dostoevsky grew out of Gogol, how Russian realism grew out of Russian Romanticism, and how Russian Romanticism and realism both borrowed from and rejected features of European Romanticism and realism. In recent years, literary historians have begun to make this schema more complex by paying greater attention to writers and traditions that had earlier been excluded from the canon, such as women's writing, émigré writing, and so forth. While this broadens the list of authors and works under consideration, it does not change the basic concept.

Two things fall out of such histories. First, traditional literary histories behave as if writers produce their work in an environment in which literature is the only relevant art form. They therefore neglect the fact that writers are always part of a larger cultural milieu that includes composers, painters, architects, actors, dancers, choreographers, directors, photographers, and filmmakers, and that literary work frequently borrows from and interacts with other cultural forms. One of the major sea changes that has occurred in the study of the humanities over the past few decades has been instigated precisely by the concern to recognize the implications of these sorts of interactions, and much of the best recent work by cultural historians concerns this topic. Literary histories, even non-traditional ones, have been slow to recognize their importance. Although it is clearly impossible to elucidate all such interactions, the reader here will find a greater focus on Russian visual art, music, and theatre, than is generally the case in a literary history.

While interactions between literature and other spheres of art could be a focus of literary historians focusing on any national tradition, there is also one particularity of Russian literary development (at least in comparison to the better-known literary histories of West European countries) that a cultural history of Russian literature needs to take into account. It is a rare literary history that fails to mention the broader social and political context in which authors produce their work, but, for understandable reasons, such material generally remains in the background. After all, the basic periodization of English and Russian literature is deemed identical in the nineteenth century, passing from sentimentalism through Romanticism to realism, and then to modernism. Given that this line of development occurs despite enormous political and social differences between the two countries during the same period, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the internal arc of literary development is more significant than the non-literary background.

When we speak about Russian literature, however, such an approach has significant problems. It may be true that from the Enlightenment forward in Western Europe literature lived a somewhat autonomous existence from the state, but in Russia the relationship between literature in general and its most significant producers in particular with the state remained close and highly salient. At almost every period, Russian literature attempted to play, and usually did play, a significant extra-literary role. Literature was frequently the primary medium for political discussion in Russia, as well as the locus for much of the country's significant philosophical thought. It worked either for or against the political power of the state, but almost never could it be said to have existed in an autonomous sphere. Literature did not merely reflect social and political reality, it frequently created social and political reality. As a result, if we are to provide a satisfactory cultural history of Russian literature, then the political and social context in which that literature was produced and the interrelationship between that context and the literary sphere must get at least equal billing with the internal development of the literary system.

We have chosen an unusual way to present the narrative of Russian literature in its broad cultural context, one that tries to retain a basic chronological framework without falling into an encyclopedic presentation. Our book is divided into ten chapters, each of which deals with a bounded time period from medieval Rus' to the present. In a number of cases, chapters overlap chronologically, thereby allowing a given period to be seen in more than one context. To tell the story of each period, we provide a longish essay touching on the highpoints of its development and then we provide a discussion of one biography of a significant individual, one literary / cultural event, and one literary work which serve as prisms through which the main outlines of development of a given period can be discerned. This makes our history primarily conceptual in nature, and it will encourage readers, from the casually interested to the professional scholar, to see Russian literature in surprising contexts and from unexpected perspectives. Certainly, there are many other events, works and authors on whom we could have focused, and we hope to create a sufficiently polemical atmosphere through our choices to invite colleagues and the public to propose different ones. Nevertheless, we are confident that the thirty nodal points selected are sufficiently representative to allow us to present the central mytho-poetic conceptions that have driven the development of Russian literature and simultaneously to provide a conceptually challenging history.

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# The Origins: Russian Medieval Culture

## I

According to one influential view of Russian cultural history, a book devoted primarily to modern developments could well begin with a consideration of eighteenth-century Russian literature. Anything before that belongs to a completely different cultural formation, one no more closely related to modern Russia than classical Roman culture is to modern Italy. This attitude grows from a broadly accepted understanding of the import of the reign of Emperor Peter I (the Great). Peter, it is said, created Russia anew from the ground up, annihilating earlier Russian cultural practices and refashioning a new culture oriented to Western Europe rather than to the autarkic and/or “Asiatic” cultural tradition that had developed in the Russian lands over the previous 750 years. The historian and philosopher Mikhail Pogodin (1800–75) expressed this sentiment baldly in the first issue of his journal *The Muscovite* (Moskvitianin) in 1841:

We cannot open our eyes; we cannot make a move; we cannot turn in any direction without encountering him: at home, in the street, church, school, court, regiment, at leisure. He is everywhere, every day, every minute, at every step. We wake up. What day is it? 1 January 1841. Peter the Great ordered us to number years from the birth of Christ. Peter the Great ordered us to take January as the first month. Time to get dressed – our clothing is sewn in the manner Peter the Great prescribed, our uniforms according to his design. The fabric is woven at a factory that he founded; the wool is shorn from sheep that he bred. Our gaze falls upon a book – Peter the Great introduced this alphabet and carved this type himself. You begin to read – Under Peter the First this language became a written, literary one, supplanting the earlier church language. The newspapers are brought in – Peter the Great founded them.

Although no one would dispute that much in Russia did change in the wake of Peter’s reforms, we do not accept the claim that modern Russian literature can be understood without reference to medieval Russian culture,

which in fact remained remarkably vibrant and influential in many spheres despite all attempts to suppress it and which played an important role in creating the distinctive outlines of modern Russian culture in general and literature in particular. That having been said, it is important to recognize that the cultural mentality of Russians, even well-educated Russians in the period before the eighteenth century was, from a modern Western perspective, peculiar, and needs to be understood on its own terms rather than as a direct precursor of modern Russian thought. Furthermore, although there are significant continuities in the culture of Russia from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries, it is dangerous to lump all of the dynamic development of this long time frame into a single “period” whose defining characteristic is that it is *not* identical to modern Russian culture. Recognizing and appreciating these difficulties, we nevertheless sketch a history of Old Russian culture, focusing primarily on those elements that remained salient into the modern period.

## II

Before beginning, the ambiguity of the term “Old Russian” must be considered. The Rus’, according to the best evidence that can be mustered, were a relatively small group of Norse (Viking) war lords, who came to rule over a group of speakers of East Slavic dialects in the area of today’s northwestern Russia (around Novgorod), beginning sometime in the ninth century. In a relatively short time this ruling caste became Slavicized and extended its reach to other territories in the immediate vicinity and farther south along the trade route that connected the Baltic to the Black Sea. Though they shifted their base of operations depending on the vicissitudes of war, dynastic politics, and the personal preference of various warlord leaders, Kiev, in today’s Ukraine became their most important stronghold by the tenth century. It remained the center of what has come to be called Kievan Rus’ through the beginning of the thirteenth century when the city was sacked by the armies of Batu Khan.

As was the case with analogous political formations all over medieval Europe, the Rus’ state was unified, insofar as it was unified at all, by a dynastic rather than a national conception, held together by the horizontal relationships of the rulers of its various territories rather than by a vertical conception of the cultural or ethnic solidarity of its inhabitants. Thus, while the ruling class had a fairly strong notion of the Rus’ territories, which comes through clearly in various literary works, they

had no interest in the creation of a homogeneous Rus' nation. After the destruction of Kiev, Rus' fragmented and a number of formerly peripheral cities attempted to take up the mantle of Rus' in the forest regions that the Mongols could not control (or did not find worth controlling). Among these were Vladimir-Suzdal in the northeast, Novgorod in the northwest, and Volhynia in the southwest. In the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, Moscow, which had been unimportant during the heyday of Kievan Rus', became the most powerful East Slav city, eliminating rival Slavic centers of power as a vassal state to the Tatars, and eventually leading a coalition against the Tatars by the late fourteenth century. As Moscow gained political hegemony, it also claimed religious and cultural centrality and its leaders came to view their state as the natural heir, not only to the cultural patrimony of Kievan Rus' but to that of all Orthodox Christianity. The Byzantines had seen themselves as Romans and Constantinople was dubbed the Second Rome. After its fall to the Ottomans in 1453, Moscow was the only remaining Orthodox Christian power, and Muscovite ideologues developed the theory of Moscow as the Third (and final) Rome.

When modern European notions of the nation appeared in the mid to late eighteenth century, Russian nationalists created a narrative of political and cultural development that outlined a natural arc from Kievan Rus' through Muscovy to modern Russia. This narrative remained more or less unchallenged as long as Russia was the only East Slavic national state. More recently, however, nationalist-oriented scholars in Ukraine, and to a lesser extent Belarus, have claimed the culture of Kievan Rus' as their ancestor, dubbing it not Old Russian culture, as had been the standard usage, but Old Ukrainian or Old Belarusian culture. Recent, post-nationalist scholarship has emphasized the problematic nature of any such assertion, focusing on the wide variety of proto-national cultural formations among the East Slavs and noting the artificiality of any narrative that seeks to assert a single, teleological line of national cultural development. From our perspective this controversy misses the point. Certainly other modern cultures can plausibly claim to be the heirs of what has traditionally been called Old Russian culture. Rather than engaging in polemics regarding who owns the legacy of this culture, however, we prefer to explicate some of its specificities and to point out ways in which it affected the formation of modern Russian culture. We will, however, use the term Old Russian to describe the culture of Kievan Rus' and reserve Old Russian for the culture that developed in the Eastern portions of the Rus' lands after the Mongol invasions of the early thirteenth century.

### Event – The Christianization of Rus'

According to the *Primary Chronicle* (*Povest' vremennykh let*) the crucial historical source for our knowledge of Kievan Rus' as well as a key early literary work (see below), the Rus' prince Vladimir agreed to be baptized and to convert his people to Byzantine-rite Christianity in the late 890s. This choice was undoubtedly the single most important cultural event of the entire pre-modern period, as Christianization laid the foundations for practically every cultural development that would occur on the Russian lands over the next seven hundred years.

According to the Chronicle account, Vladimir chose Byzantine-rite Christianity having carefully considered alternative monotheistic religions – Judaism, Latin-rite Christianity, and Islam. Islam was rejected because of its prohibition against alcohol – “Drink is Rus’s love,” Vladimir is quoted as saying, “we cannot do without it.” Judaism was rejected because its contemporary Diasporic reality suggested that it lacked the ability to be the basis for a strong political state, and there is no doubt that Vladimir was interested in conversion at least as much for political as for spiritual reasons. While Roman Christianity impressed Vladimir’s envoys, they were awed by the pomp and circumstance of Christianity as practiced in Constantinople, then the greatest city in the Western world. “The Greeks led us to the edifices where they worship their God, and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss how to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men, and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations.”<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the Chronicle account must be taken with a grain of salt, or at least it must be recognized that the choice of Byzantine-rite Christianity was over-determined. The Byzantine Empire had been the main civilization with which the Rus' had been trading for more than one hundred years, and a religious alliance with the Greeks made more sense than one with religions professed by groups whose center was more distant. Constantinople was, after all, the capital of the most powerful empire of its day, and could likely provide the Rus' lands with some added protection. As had been the case with South Slav rulers who had converted earlier, Vladimir also probably recognized that Christianity could be a unifying force in his kingdom. Furthermore, individual members of the Rus' elite had been converting to Byzantine Christianity for many years (including Vladimir’s grandmother Olga who had been baptized some fifty years earlier by the Byzantine Emperor himself) so the religion was not completely unfamiliar. Finally,



according to the Chronicle, Vladimir reaped significant personal benefits from his willingness to convert, including the ultimate trophy wife: the sister of the Byzantine Emperor. A marital union with the most powerful empire in the Western world was an obvious sign that Vladimir and his realm were important.

Nevertheless, just because a ruler agreed to convert did not necessarily mean that his subjects thought the same way. For the rank and file, the benefits of conversion were unclear. The pagan gods had provided a sense of security for many, and it is difficult to believe they were eager to give up familiar idols for the abstract, text-based Christian faith. As the Chronicle account states when recounting that Vladimir forced the sons of the “best people” to study Christian books: “The mothers of these children cried over them; for they were not yet firm in their faith and they cried over them as if they had died” (132). Given that we can find exhortations against various pagan practices in texts by Christian clerics for hundreds of years, we can guess that despite Christianity’s ability to fold pagan customs into its practices, Christianity and paganism continued to exist side by side for a long time. Indeed, ethnographers could still find echoes of pre-Christian practices in the life and folkways of nineteenth-century Russian peasants, though they had lost any connection to an organized pagan Slavic belief system.

Regardless of how quickly or thoroughly the masses embraced the new religion, the adoption of Christianity in Rus’ was of critical importance for further cultural and social developments. In accepting the Orthodox religion, Rus’ became part of the Byzantine Orthodox world and unavoidably assimilated many Byzantine political customs and assumptions. The Byzantine Empire was first and foremost a Christian state, whose basic doctrines were defined by the church fathers, the church councils, and the decisions of the various Byzantine emperors. Although during earlier centuries the church had been racked by heresies and doctrinal disagreements, after the final victory of those in favor of icon veneration in 843, the doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church was essentially fixed. By comparison with Catholicism (not to mention later Protestantism), Orthodoxy was a traditionalist religion, which placed great stock in liturgy and ritual and tended to be less concerned with individual achievements. To be sure, at the time of the conversion, Christianity had not yet split definitively between Orthodoxy and Catholicism (this would occur only in 1054). Nevertheless, for both political and ecclesiastical reasons the two wings of the church had been drifting apart for hundreds of years, and by the late tenth century, they were clearly distinct. As the Chronicle account indicates, the Rus’ were

particularly impressed by the liturgical and sensory aspects of Orthodoxy, rather than by its theological principles, and they would remain attached to the somewhat more mystical and less rational practices of Orthodoxy.

In the Byzantine scheme of things, the emperor, chosen by God, was more powerful than any Western ruler. It was the emperor, not the patriarch (the title given to the spiritual leader of the Orthodox church), who presided over church councils and expounded dogmatic pronouncements. While Catholic popes could make even the most powerful Catholic kings bend to their will at times, the Byzantine patriarch was appointed by the emperor and could be dismissed by him. When one eleventh-century patriarch tried to challenge this arrangement he was arrested, beaten, and thrown into prison where he died before a trial could occur. In the Orthodox world, therefore, the linkage between church and state was tighter than in the West, and state interference with church affairs was more pervasive.

Because the Byzantine church permitted the liturgy to be celebrated and the central religious texts translated into local languages and because some southern Slavic groups had converted earlier (the Bulgarians, for example, had done so by the early 860s) translations of many basic theological texts already existed in a comprehensible Slavic idiom. The rapid influx of “pre-packaged” religious texts was of cardinal importance to future literary developments. There is no evidence that the Rus’ possessed any writing system before their conversion to Christianity. The provenance of the religious texts translated by Saints Kiril and Methodius for missionary work among the Eastern and Southern Slavs ensured that their language (which would later come to be called Old Church Slavonic) and the language of everyday conversation in Rus’ would not be identical. Linguists use the word diglossia to describe a cultural system in which two languages or linguistic registers exist side-by-side in a given cultural milieu and can be called upon to serve different functions. This is a useful term and applies well to the situation in Rus’, though it would be better to imagine the two spheres as more like poles on a continuum than separate and impermeable systems. Thus, the religious texts brought to Rus’ and copied by local scribes quickly took on features of the local spoken dialect, and the local dialect rapidly began to absorb words and grammatical constructions borrowed from the bookish language of the church.

Throughout the history of Russian literature writers have exploited the diglossia between Church Slavonic and spoken Russian for stylistic effect, and this rich linguistic potential is one of the most significant long-term influences of Old Russian culture on modern Russian literature. In the 1750s

Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–65) developed a theory of “three styles” for modern Russian literature distinguished by the relationship of Slavonicisms to colloquial Russian. The high style, suitable for epic and tragedy, was to contain a preponderance of Slavonic forms, a middle style, suitable for lyric poetry, verse comedy, and prose, would exhibit a mixture of Slavonicisms and Russian forms, while a low style suitable for fables and other popular genres would primarily employ colloquial Russian. Battles between proponents of Slavonicisms and those who favored a more colloquial idiom would continue from the mid-eighteenth century into the 1820s, after which time Russian forms generally gained the upper hand. Nevertheless, Slavonicisms continue to exist in parallel to more standard Russian forms to this day. To an extent, the modern usage is analogous to the option writers of English have to choose between more colloquial Germanic words and rarified Latinate synonyms (to find someone innocent or to exculpate him, for example) except that in modern Russian the relationship is more consistent and more frequently exploited.

In addition to literary culture, the Rus’ borrowed heavily from the architectural and visual lexicon of Constantinople. The first Russian stone churches were built by the late tenth century in Kiev and in Novgorod in the eleventh century, and a number of these edifices remained in a remarkably good state of preservation into the modern period. The domed church building (though not onion-domed – this characteristic Russian style did not appear until later, probably in the thirteenth century) became a ubiquitous feature of the Russian landscape. And the icon, again imported originally from Constantinople but quickly nativized by Russian painters, became a feature not only of church interiors but also of homes, both peasant and noble. Even after the Petrine reforms, the icon did not lose its central place in the traditional Russian home, and iconic images retained a significant place in the cultural memory of modern Russians.

Initially, the Rus’ were satisfied to attach themselves to the great Christian narrative but did not claim to play a crucial role in it. This attitude shifted in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as Moscow gained influence and the power of other centers of Orthodox Christianity diminished (beginning with the Ottoman subjugation of the Balkans in the late fourteenth century and concluding with their capture of Constantinople itself). The Russians began to develop a more muscular attitude to their role in the Christian narrative. Thus, whereas earlier versions of the *Primary Chronicle* noted that no apostle had set foot in Russian territory, later versions present an apocryphal story claiming that the apostle Andrew visited not only the coasts of the Black Sea (as Byzantine legends had it) but also the Dnepr river basin

and the site of the future city of Novgorod where he became acquainted with the Slavs. In particular it was asserted that he had marveled at the peculiar bathing customs of the Slavs near Novogorod: "I saw the land of the Slavs, and while I was among them I noticed their wooden bathhouses. They warm them to extreme heat, then undress, and after anointing themselves with tallow, they take young reeds and lash their bodies" (47). Such stories permitted the Muscovites to claim a direct connection, however, tenuous, with the earliest Christians. The marriage in 1472 of Prince Ivan III to Sophia Paleologus, the surviving niece of the last Byzantine emperor, allowed the Muscovite state to claim important symbolic trappings of the fallen Byzantine Empire.

At about this time the curious *Tale of the White Cowl* (Povest' o belom klobuke) was composed in Novgorod, which was in an increasingly desperate struggle with Moscow for its political autonomy. According to this narrative, in gratitude for a healing vision in which the pope had appeared, Emperor Constantine had given a white cowl to Pope Sylvester as a sign of the primacy of clerical over imperial power. This holy object remained in Rome until the popes fell into heresy (by this time the Orthodox considered Catholicism as heretical). It had been transferred to Constantinople where the Orthodox patriarchs had shown it due respect until such time as the Byzantine Empire itself began to collapse under the weight of its sins. At this point, sometime in the early fifteenth century, the cowl was claimed to have been transferred to Novgorod, making this Russian city the symbolic heir of the mix of political power and Christian ideology once characteristic of Rome and then Constantinople. This story was loosely associated with a broadly accepted theological theory that posited three Christian kingdoms – that of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Russia, in the local interpretation, was the last of these.

Novgorod would eventually lose the struggle for primacy among the Russian pretenders. Its final political destruction would come at the hands of Ivan IV (the Terrible) in 1570. But the idea of Russia as the third and final Christian kingdom had been further developed in Muscovy by the monk Filofei in the 1520s. Filofei famously wrote that "two Romes had fallen, Moscow was the third, and there would be no fourth," thus putting Russia at the very center of Christian eschatological history. The belief, derived at least in part from this theory and its subsequent interpretations, that Russia had a special, messianic destiny would play a crucial role in Russian literary and cultural history in the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. It underpinned Emperor Alexander I's "holy alliance of Christian states" after the defeat of Napoleon, and was held by Nikolai Gogol (1809–52), who

tried unsuccessfully to instantiate it in his epic “poem” *Dead Souls* (Mertvyedushi, 1842). This notion was held even more strongly by Fedor Dostoevsky (1820–81), who wrote about Russia’s messianic destiny at length in his *Diary of a Writer* (*Dnevnik pisatel’ia*, 1873–9, 1880–1) and, in less obvious ways, in *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Brat’ia Karamazovy*, 1880). It remained central to the eschatology of Russia’s most influential philosopher Vladimir Solov’ev (1853–1900) and would color the apocalyptic thinking of the symbolist generation, many of whom initially saw the 1917 revolution as the fulfillment of Russia’s messianic destiny. Although Christianity was consigned to oblivion by the Bolsheviks, they never abandoned the idea that Russia had a messianic role to play in world history as their attempts to spread world communism attest. In the post-Soviet period Orthodoxy has begun to play an ever more prominent role in Russian society, and it is clear that Christianity, officially brought to Russia by Vladimir in the late tenth century, will remain a key component of Russian culture, literary and otherwise, into the future.

### III

Before beginning a short survey of the cultural history of Old Russian and Old Russian literature a few more broad questions should be considered. One has to do with the definition of literature. If by literature we have in mind written texts produced primarily for aesthetic enjoyment, it is safe to say that practically no literature was produced in Kievan Rus’ and rather little in pre-modern Russia. If, on the other hand, we have in mind texts that have an aesthetic component regardless of their primary function, then it is possible to speak of literature in this period, for many writers were clearly aware of the expressive component of their texts. That is the sense in which we will use the term literature here, focusing, we repeat, on those elements of the literary/cultural system that would remain relevant for modern Russian literary culture.

Another important question relates to those who engaged in writing and reading in this long period. A few decades ago, the answer would have seemed fairly unambiguous, at least for the Kievan period: the vast majority of writing was believed to have been commissioned either by the church or the various Rus’ princes. In the Muscovite period, especially in the seventeenth century, although clerics still dominated text production, some texts were created by and for members of the merchant caste. In the past few decades, however, archeological excavations, particularly in Novgorod,

have turned up large quantities of written material incised on birch bark and these finds have forced a reconsideration of who wrote in the Kievan period and why. It now seems that writing, particularly in Old Russian rather than Church Slavonic, was quite prevalent in the merchant milieu. Such communications, however, had an exclusively functional character, so the belief that what can be called literary writing in this period was produced exclusively by and for a small group of educated clerics and their patrons in the princely courts remains unchanged. The prevalence of literacy among merchants from the earliest period does, however, provide a convincing explanation for the rise of literary works in that sphere in later periods.

A final broad question regarding Old Russian literature relates to oral literary production. In the mid-nineteenth century, inspired by the German theoretical insistence on the importance and beauty of folk literature, as well as by the powerful works collected among their South Slavic “cousins,” Russian ethnographers recorded a wide range of folk material including short epic poems (the so-called *byliny*), folk stories, and lyric poetry relating to various stages of life such as birth, death, and especially marriage. Both because of references in these works to ancient historical figures and events as well as to certain pre-Christian practices, it was assumed that this oral literature dated back to the Kievan period. In the twentieth century scholars became aware of the likely oral origin of some of the greatest epics of the Western tradition, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In this context it became apparent that the most aesthetically accomplished work of Old Russian literature, *The Lay of Prince Igor* (*Slovo o polku Igoreve*), which likely dates from the twelfth century and which had an enormous influence on a number of modern Russian literary works, had oral origins as well. Thus, in considering Old Russian and Old Russian literary production, we need to keep in mind that not everything written was literature (far from it) and not all of what can be called literature was written.

#### IV

As noted earlier, the first written texts to appear in Rus’ had been translated into Church Slavonic by speakers of South Slav dialects – primarily religious in character, they included most importantly such standbys as The New Testament and the Psalms, as well as some works by the Eastern Church fathers. Very quickly, however, East Slavs assimilated the Slavonic idiom and began to compose original works, based to be sure on translated models. The first substantial piece that can be definitively attributed