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Russian cultural history: introduction

What are the lessons of Russian culture, what does it have to offer us and our time? Fortunately, Russian cultural studies have a rich history – including the works of Nikolai Berdiaev, Pavel Miliukov, George Vernadsky, Nicholas Riasanovsky, Wladimir Weidle, Georges Florovsky, Dmitry Chizhevsky, James Billington, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Dmitry Likhachev (who is a contributor to this volume and a link to the earlier tradition), and more recently Alain Besançon, Yury Lotman, Caryl Emerson, Katerina Clark, Boris Groys, Mikhail Epstein, Irina Paperno, Boris Uspensky and Geoffrey Hosking among others – that offers orientation and points of engagement in answering such questions. In spite of a rich diversity of approaches that have changed over time and in reaction to historical and social context, these and other cultural analysts most often depend on certain basic vantage points they assume in common, whether in part or in whole. They are: the language origins of a culture, its geographic location, its religious and ideological attachments, and its broadly based folk ethos. Yet other points of view exist in aesthetic texts that are equally open to history and later uses by cultural observers but that have some material permanence in their media of transmission.

Such is the basis of the present book's structure. It is divided into two parts: the first combining approaches to culture which frequently influence both observers and participants; the second, offering brief histories of Russian contributions to the arts and emphasizing the modern period from 1860 on. The intersections of these analytical and creative concerns as well as the intersections within them of different personalities, events, and artifacts provide a comprehensive overview, although considerations of space and general readership have limited the contributors to introductions of many of the complex and varied parts of the Russian

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cultural experience. Guidelines for further study and interpretation are provided in the suggested reading sections that accompany each chapter and in a chronological chart of major historical and cultural events.

Surprisingly, and notwithstanding a marked tendency among observers to see centrifugal and authoritarian tendencies as dominants, Russian cultural history suggests an openness to others, passionate but rapidly changing commitments, and a precarious existence for authorities. Geography – and particularly the open steppe noted by Mark Bassin – is a site and metaphor of this free-flowing cultural space. Russian boundaries can be seen to be constantly transgressed, most often by the Russians' own initiatives, beginning with the invitation noted in the *Primary Chronicle* issued to the Vikings to assume political leadership, continuing with Peter the Great's modernization project, and including the new Westernization of Boris Yeltsin. At other times transgressions occurred thanks to unwelcome intrusions: of the Mongols, the Poles, the French forces under Napoleon, and the German armies of Hitler. As a result both of such violent and more peaceful forms of intercourse with North and South, East and West, the Russians came to share the significant movements of the civilizations around them.

Major agents of cultural and historical development described in the following chapters included first the Scandinavians, who arrived in the eighth century to help organize tribes into the typical fiefdoms of the medieval world and to shape an economic trade route by water from the North Sea to the Black Sea. From the ninth century on, the Greeks, via Byzantium, provided the common religious and philosophical heritage that the Russians shared with the West. From the twelfth to the fourteenth century – subsequently defined as the “Tatar Yoke” by the Russians themselves – the Mongols stimulated political structures such as that for the central gathering of taxes, and helped create a strong distrust of politics on the part of the Russian people. The East also provided Russia's broadest frontier – the conditions F. J. Turner's *The Frontier in American History* defined as contributing to American national identity and comparable to what the Russians think of as the Siberian element in their character. The Western turn from the sixteenth century on enabled the Russians to share, with various degrees of enthusiasm, the cultural inclinations commonly noted as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the nineteenth-century ideological syndromes Abbott Gleason outlines culminating with Marxism, and the rival economic and political processes of the end of the twentieth.

On the whole, there are unlikely to be surprises when emphasis is placed on such cross-cultural conditions. There are, however, elements of history that carry unusual weight in this particular culture and that give it specific directions. The Mongol invasion was not merely a fleeting moment, as say the German presence in Paris in the Second World War, but lasted for over 250 years; the Renaissance occurred late in Russia and at a considerable distance from its original cultural energy in the West; the economic and political programs of Peter the Great and Stalin were brutal and extreme by any world standards. Other frequently noted geopolitical, economic, or social circumstances are: the lack of fresh water ports, the presence of numerous rivers for commerce, the drive to expansion encouraged by the fur trade, an insecure middle class, late industrialization and modernization, and the instabilities of an unusually large empire – by the modern era Russia included many different ethnic groups and religions and their proximity and intersections served both for mutual cultural enrichment, and the familiar social tensions and dilemmas of cultural diversity. If these conditions are not taken to be exclusionary or too important, thus reducing and simplifying what is richer and more complex than all of them put together, they can be seen to provide the economic and social superstructures on which the Russians built their cultural history.

Much of what Russian cultural identity is all about is suggested by the ways in which the Russians themselves reacted to such particularities of their geographic space and contacts throughout history. What were the basic directions and emphases of their response? The introductions to literature, art, music, theatre, and film included in this book are especially helpful in answering questions of this sort. The histories of aesthetic media indicate not only cultural processes, but cultural products transmitted through history and forming its strongest links. Books, paintings, opera scores, records of stage performances, and cinema recordings, are lasting, material evidence of explorations in a civilization's consciousness; they open cultural history to the creative engagements that show a society's highest aspirations, achievements, and doubts. They are both different from the hard evidence of social or economic acts, and often the most telling record of them. A strong indication of cultural directions – and a measure of validity for their interpretation – is the central and recurring responses of this creative record and the evidence it brings to the fundamental viewpoints of historical process.

The introductions to language and religion written by Dean Worth

and Dmitry Likhachev – which assume divergent perspectives but arrive at the same decisive events – give us one starting point of definition. The investigation of cultural origins, Homi Bhabha and others have pointed out, is a risky business, subject both to the absurdity of continual regress in a search for first causes and continual reappraisals according to the predilections of observers arriving later in history. Most of what we know about early Russian culture comes down to us through the chronicles, those first expressions of both self-definition and literacy created by monks that begin with the intent of clarifying “the origins of the land of Rus’.” As Dmitry Obolensky noted in an earlier Cambridge Companion (Robert Auty and Dmitry Obolensky, eds., *An Introduction to Russian Language and Literature*, 1977), the chronicles not only provided a universal framework within which the Russians could orient themselves, but were incomplete and thus ever open to future interpretations of the meaning and directions of the originary condition. Nevertheless, the chronicles make clear that literacy and religion were vital to the beginnings of cultural consciousness, and that their bonded early histories, thanks to the work of missionary representatives of Greek civilization, were of fundamental importance for later cultural development.

The Byzantine legacy – particularly in the aesthetic inclinations noted by Professor Likhachev – became a critical element of Russian Orthodoxy and Russian self-definition, although it is equally clear that Russian Orthodoxy itself did not become a fixed and unchanging doctrine based solely on Greek tradition but continued to evolve through a cross-cultural and open-ended process. Over time such interreligious transmutations included not only the Hesychast influence transmitted by the Greeks and striking in similarity to Sufi Moslem mysticism, but Ivan IV’s extremist interpretations of the Judaic tradition and the Old Testament, the strong influence of Catholics such as Yury Krizhanich in the seventeenth century and Joseph de Maistre in the nineteenth, the Protestant inclinations shown in Peter the Great’s time by Feofan Prokopovich, and various other fecund contacts.

The history of the Russian language charted by Dean Worth was part of this free-flowing and cross-cultural process. By Peter the Great’s epoch – the time when Professor Worth ends his observations – modern Russian was essentially in place, although still evolving through interaction with other languages, particularly French, German, and later English. The continual flux of language and its natural propensity to undermine stable meanings was reflected in specific Russian instabilities. During the

early nineteenth century French, not Russian, was the language of choice of the aristocracy and it is not surprising, therefore, that Petr Chaadaev, a young man who had a prolonged stay in Paris along with the Russian army that had defeated Napoleon, was sufficiently impressed by such contacts with other cultures to suggest that Russia had too little of its own and to argue that Catholicism best served humanity's universal obligations.

Chaadaev's often-cited example of cultural self-consciousness and insecurity is symptomatic of larger contrary patterns of stability and instabilities. On the one hand, the impermanence and flux of language did not stop the Russians from using their own language to grapple with the same religious concerns throughout their history, or to formulate beliefs in a transcendent realm of God's "truth of truths." Words of this sort create the ethical codes and borders that organize civilization, and the issues of aesthetic-ethical conjunctions, of love and its expression in universal engagement, of humility, and the self's obligations fundamental to Russian Orthodoxy, were explored by language masters of the stature of Aleksandr Pushkin, Fedor Dostoevsky, Vladimir Soloviev, and Mikhail Bakhtin. On the other hand, the very nature of language's inevitable diffusions and a basic volatility at the religious core made such concepts problematic. The play of language and the attraction of symbolic formations over material ones, in combination with intransigence before earthly imperfections and the yearning for beauty and the absolute, if pushed far enough, can lead to a condition of perpetual dissatisfaction, abstraction, and withdrawal from society, all manifested in Chaadaev's later life.

Withdrawal – to the desert, the monastery, the wanderer's roads, the philosopher's or theatre director's quiet rooms – was, in fact, one typical Russian cultural gesture. The urge or necessity to leave society, however, often stimulated by political considerations as during the Mongol era of St. Sergius of Radonezh or Constantine Stanislavsky's and Sergei Eisenstein's times of Stalinist terror, was frequently followed by subversion of the separate place by a sense of obligation. St. Sergius, thus, went on to build the monastery of Trinity-Sergius in Zagorsk that became an emblem of moral-social commitment and Russian cultural identity, and Stanislavsky and Eisenstein devoted the last part of their lives to students who continued the strong traditions of Russian theatre and film. The gesture of withdrawal was part of a larger cultural pattern for the Russians that combined intransigence, initial separation to better one's

self, and optimism that such betterment could be put to good uses in the world at large.

Nevertheless, the optimistic reach for transcendent truths through self-betterment and the self-placement in a universal context that began with the chronicles contributed to excessive abstractions and neglect of the practical local realities – material things to satisfy human needs and political and legal structures to regulate them. That is not to say the Russians did not develop strong legal and political systems – the law codes of the early *Russkaia Pravda* (Russian Truth) or those implemented after the reforms of 1862 and 1912 were progressive for their day – but that their functions in society were always subverted by a larger yearning for the transcendent. A state of grace, the Russians held in their heart of hearts, could not be determined by the inevitable corruptions and hypocrisies of earthly laws and earthly politicians. The religious imperative of Russian culture, in André Malraux's words about Byzantine art, was "the charm of the absolute"; it resulted both in an inability to lower its sights, and the inevitable shocks of the real to the ideal that followed.

Communism, of course, was one such major shock. The Russians led the way in bringing Marx's upside-down religious principles to ideological and social-political realization and in discovering the consequences of pushing such ideologies too far. The prophecies of the Slavophiles, Soloviev, and Fedor Dostoevsky that Russia had a unique universal mission to contribute to humanity turned out to be true in the twentieth century, except the contributions they imagined were replaced by a cautionary tale of the central principles played out in historical communism – the diminution of human beings to social and economic categories implemented by force – and by the tragic earthly resolution of the perennial hopes of complete freedom, complete human mastery of the world, complete equality and moral being. This course of Marxism was the result of cultural predilections we have already noted: an eager welcome and use of ideas from the outside were only possible for an open culture; the radical intelligentsia's maximalism encouraged by its origins in the clerical class made political gradualism and concern for legal niceties unlikely; the notion that earthly means were secondary to ultimate ends sanctioned the expediences of Soviet terror in serving the communist future; the moral obligations of sacrifice, humility, and disrespect for material things supported the party's programs and allowed its failures in servicing the everyday needs of USSR citizens.

An obvious lesson of Soviet cultural history, then, lies in the dangers of forcing utopias upon reality – or at least in excessively trusting those who advocate them – but to confine ourselves to such pessimistic modalities of the Russian cultural experience would be to underestimate it. For Aleksandr Herzen, Soloviev, Dostoevsky, and a host of other Russians who envisioned cultural utopias were fully aware of the quandaries and unrealities of their hopes, and the interesting cultural fact is that they did not stop hoping. They arrived at visionary realizations of ambitions shared by most civilized peoples, and they themselves, seeking the ideal, continued to question their discoveries in the most unrelenting ways. The larger lesson they provide – forgotten during communism – was not that one should stop hoping but that one should not stop questioning by accepting ideological reductions; the Soviet period of Russian culture was a moment when cultural questioning stopped and a mindless faith, encouraging Soviet citizens to live myopically and hypocritically, predominated.

A central tenet of this faith was the notion of the *narod*, the people. As pointed out in Catriona Kelly's overview of popular culture the concept has been much abused, in the Russian instance, across the ideological spectrum. Social conditions – the sheer number of peasants who made up 80 to 85 percent of the Russian population at the end of the nineteenth century – provided the foundation for a vast and complex popular culture and combined with a moral sore point – serfdom – to make the peasants and their mores a central issue for upper-class culture as well. Both those who wanted to find native strengths in Russian history – the historian Mikhail Pogodin, the Slavophiles, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy – and those who looked to paradigms of progress from the outside – the Westernizers and the various socialists – imagined the peasant world to be a peculiar Russian advantage. The historical realities of poverty and servitude stimulated rather than undermined this vision, and serfdom, which ended in 1861 one year before Lincoln's proclamation freeing Afro-Americans, was as long-lasting in cultural repercussions and social retributions as American slavery. A crucial factor, reminiscent of American liberal angst in the 1960s, was the upper classes' feeling of guilt. It impelled the 1870s "going to the people," a specific historical event, but also a description of fundamental directions in Russian social and political agendas in the modern period.

And again, a maximalist insistence on this agenda of "the people" guided Russian cultural history on its problematic course in the modern

era. Popular culture in the Soviet period became an object of ideological insistence, a central principle – *narodnost'* – of socialist realism and its mandate to develop easily understandable forms of communication to propagandize and impose the government's wishes. The beneficial effects of political concern for mass culture included the huge financial outlay the state injected into amateur organizations – theatres, dance troupes, choruses – that came to form part of the ubiquitous Palaces of Culture and that encouraged the ordinary citizen's participation in the arts. The negative effects of an imposed *narodnost'* was that it had neither the subversive benefits of free folk laughter and questioning of authorities Mikhail Bakhtin defined in a true people's culture, nor the opportunity for its participants to rise above the mediocre intellectual and creative standards encouraged by the government. As the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once noted, all human beings, whatever their class origins, are potential intellectuals, but not all perform the social function of intellectuals. Soviet culture was predicated on the principle of totally controlling or eliminating this social role.

A historical event organized by the young Bolshevik government in 1922 serves as an emblematic moment of Russian culture's deintellectualization. Ostensibly motivated by moral disapprobation of the hostile upper classes, but in reality wary of ideological competition, Lenin's government put over 160 men and women of letters on a train and forcibly expatriated them to the West. This one-way journey was not the only instance, of course, and the trains continued to transport Russia's best minds and talents not only to the West but also east – to prison camps – well into the time when trains were replaced by airplanes carrying Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Joseph Brodsky. One result of the Russian emigration was very noticeable repercussions in cultures beyond the former Russian borders; the introductions to literature, art, music, theatre, and film offered in this book remind us how hard it would be to imagine the modern Western course of the arts without Sergei Rachmaninov, Vasily Kandinsky, George Balanchine, Vladimir Nabokov, or Igor Stravinsky. The other result was a vastly impoverished culture at home, marked by the banality, obtuseness, and prejudices of a people's state deprived of many of its best people.

The Soviet period, however, also included a counterculture of men and women like Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, Eisenstein, Mikhail Bulgakov, Dmitry Shostakovich, and Mikhail Bakhtin. They and many others continued the struggle to main-

tain high standards and to push the arts forward even in the face of the most brutal repressions of Russian history in the modern era. Compromises were unavoidable, social-political forces vitally damaged their works and their lives, but one can hardly deny their achievements. The cultural roots of these men and women, as well as those who emigrated, sank deep into the past and were nurtured in a specific historical period of unusual brilliance and creative vitality: the end of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. This was the central moment of modern Russian culture, its historical crux, and, as Abbott Gleason notes, a primary point of orientation and hope after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

What cultural processes gave this period – sometimes undervalued with the label of the Silver Age – its staying power and its influence? One such cultural imperative underlying many of the aesthetic and intellectual achievements noted in the following chapters, was that the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth saw Russia produce a body of theoretical works on philosophy and the arts unprecedented in its history. The singular analytical spirit derived considerable energy from an impulse to take stock of past accomplishment in the light of the new century's possibilities. A propensity to retrospection and assessment before the uncertain course of the future was given voice by Sergei Diaghilev in a much discussed speech delivered in 1905. The occasion was a banquet given to commemorate Diaghilev's influential retrospective exhibition of portraits and the closing of the journal *World of Art*. It was "the hour of summations," Diaghilev noted, a "grandiose historical moment of summations and endings in the name of a new unknown culture."

The second keynote speaker, Valery Briusov, together with other participants of that dinner such as the merchant-patron Savva Mamontov and the painters Valentin Serov and Konstantin Yuon, had already felt strong impulses of appraisal and change. Two men, Nietzsche and Vladimir Soloviev – a philosopher we have already noted – provided particular directions for the cultural milieu in which they worked. Soloviev was as, if not more, important to the Russians as Nietzsche; he died in 1900 but left for his followers – considerable both in number and influence – a philosophical system comparable in scope and the creative energy it stimulated (if not in ultimate achievement) to Hegel's work. A host of original, at times brilliant, thinkers followed Soloviev, including the Trubetskoy brothers Sergei and Eugene, Dmitry Merezhkovsky,

Sergei Bulgakov, Semen Frank, Nikolai Berdiaev, Lev Shestov, Pavel Florensky, and others such as Mikhail Bakhtin.

The respect and attention accorded ideas were not only philosophically driven, however, but were sustained at their core by religious tradition and its intellectual revival. The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century was a period of new accomplishment in Russian theology. The exploration of religious issues, with Soloviev again at the center of influence, responded to deep-rooted values and cultural attachments and inspired all other forms of cultural activity, whether historical, philosophical, or aesthetic.

By the beginning of the twentieth century religion had taken on firm ideological functions. Transcendent notions of self and the world continued to motivate basic intellectual and ethical commitments in Russia but without the faith of the past and in conditions of secularization. Dostoevsky's defense of Christian verities even in the face of atheism's strong arguments, Tolstoy's demystification of the Gospels, and Soloviev's insistence on theocracy and faith before his own strong sense of irony, were all symptomatic of this ideological condition and contributed equally to the complexity of intellectual discourse and to its intensity. Added cultural impetus was provided by a revival of mysticism and interest in life beyond death, ranging from Nikolai Fedorov's resurrection project to P. D. Uspensky's *Fourth Dimension* published in 1909, and an epidemic of séances reminiscent of the occult vogue in the reign of Alexander I.

This religious sensibility, combining skepticism with passion, was at least consistent in the old Russian intransigence before life's realities. It continued to measure the nature of things and to invariably find them lacking. The turn to history was partially the result of such dissatisfaction with the present and with prophetic warnings of the "Age of the Lout" as Merezhkovsky called it. Attacks on louts in their middle-class prototypes (made vivid through a biblical connotation of the Russian word for lout, *ham*, also given as a name to Noah's son) were already familiar to Russian intellectual history in the works of Herzen, Dostoevsky, and Konstantin Leontiev, while Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with the bourgeois type Leontiev called "the average man, average European" added a new stimulus. In theatre, of course, Alexander Ostrovsky had created an immense body of dramatic texts evoking the "kingdom of darkness" and the grotesque mediocrity of the developing middle class. At the beginning of the century, the sense of evil attached to the average was so strong that