CHAPTER 1

'All the Russias . . .'?

Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis

> The first rule which we have to follow is that of national character:
> every people has, or must have, a character: if it lacks one, we must
> start by endowing it with one.[1]
>
> Jean-Jacques Rousseau

In 1902, one Henry Norman (MP) published a book entitled *All the Russias: Travels and Studies in Contemporary European Russia, Finland, Siberia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia* – the result, he claimed, of some fifteen years' interest in Russian affairs, and four journeys in European and Asian Russia. 'Russia!' he wrote: 'What a flock of thoughts take wing as the word strikes the ear! Does any word in any language, except the dear name of one's own land, mean as much today?'[2]

'What *is* Russia?' Norman asked, in the introduction to his book: is it the Tsar, Orthodoxy, St. Petersburg, 'the vast and nearly roadless country', Siberia, Central Asia? It was, of course, all of those things. And in the end, Norman concluded with the intriguing assertion that 'it would be easier to say what is not Russia . . . In world affairs, wherever you turn you see Russia; wherever you listen you hear her. She moves in every path, she is mining in every claim. The "creeping murmur" of the world is her footfall – the "poring dark" is her veil. To the challenge of the nations, as they peer from their borders, comes the ever-same reply: "Who goes there?" . . . "*Russia*!"'

With allowances for the poetic flourish, Norman's words have lost little of their resonance over a century after they were published. His evocation of the power and threat of Russia can be traced in Western representations of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and indeed of the Russian Federation in the early years of the twenty-first century. With the Empire that Norman described in 1902 dissolved, the Soviet Union disbanded, Russia today remains the largest country in the world, and exerts a power as much symbolic as practical. Norman's was one of many, many attempts, before

1

and since, to encapsulate Russia for Western readers. Often they share
Norman's sense of puzzlement, of mystery. Russia has seemed to be in a
category of its own, a place and a culture that apparently fail to fit any
habitual Western mental geography. Where, for example, is Russia? Is it
'Western' or 'Eastern'? It 'ought' to be Western in that – like 'the West'
(which in such comparisons tends to be seen as a single cultural entity!) – it
is heir to the traditions both of Christianity and of the Enlightenment, and
has been a full and leading participant in 'Western' traditions of literature
and music. Or perhaps it 'ought' to be Eastern: located predominantly in
Asia, it is said to be mystical and authoritarian in its approach to religion,
monolithic and despotic in its governance. Yet it is not quite 'the East' either:
not India, Persia, or China (also lumped together as a single cultural entity
in such comparisons). Russia's indeterminacy even leads to the invention
of a special physical and conceptual space for it: 'Eurasia'.

Happily, the fictions and flaws of such definitions do not directly concern
us here. In the first place, we are not concerned with Western perceptions
of Russia but with Russians' perceptions of themselves. Western stereotypes
are relevant only to the extent that (as is sometimes the case) they are filtered
back into Russia and affect Russian habits of self-representation. And sec-
ondly, by contrast with Norman and others we are not attempting to define
what Russia 'actually' is. The focus of this book is not any putative 'true'
identity that might be traced amongst Russians present and past, nor any
fixed definition of statehood or citizenship or national character. Rather,
we are interested in Russia as what the influential historian and theorist
Benedict Anderson might call an 'imagined community'.[3] Anderson's sug-
gestion that national identity is constructed and sustained in cultural texts
provides the theoretical justification for this volume, just as it has provided
the basis for much recent theorization of 'the nation' and 'nationality'. The
nation, as Homi Bhabha writes, is 'a system of cultural signification'.[4] It
is located in its texts – in its flags, its anthems, its monuments, popular
heroes and educational practices, in its fairy tales and literature. These texts
embody and make real the abstract ideas of Russia and 'Russianness', mak-
ing the collective identity visible for those who reckon themselves part of
it. As such, in effect, they *create* identity. Or, more appropriately, they cre-
ate *identities*, such that Russia and Russianness become constantly shifting
and multiple forms. National identity is therefore a process rather than a
result. Yet the suggestion that this is an 'imagined' Russia and Russianness
should not imply that it is not *real*. To put it somewhat glibly: to note
that such things are imagined is not to dismiss them as imaginary. Rather,
these imagined Russian identities – *as they are written, discussed, pictured,*

or sung – are the only ones there are. They are facts of culture, and culture is a fact. They are constructs, certainly, parts of a process of identity formation that is ongoing, fragile, and always incomplete; but they are also *lived*, and as such real.

This view of the nation as text, broadly understood, or as cultural discourse, raises inevitable questions both about agency and about consumption and community: who writes the texts of national identity? And who reads them or subscribes to them? If visions of Russian identity are located in cultural production, who produces them? And who shares, or is swayed by, or sees themselves reflected in, the vision? Clearly, the ideas of Russia and Russianness explored in this book are not solely the creations of the apparatus of state power. Nor are they the products of some kind of instinctive popular sentiment. They are created in a nexus between state and people, between policy and practice. But they are also – crucially – created by what might be called 'producers of culture' in the broadest sense (intellectuals, writers, film-makers, cartographers, historians, musicians, theologians, philosophers, artists, etc.). It is these culturally inscribed Russias that are our focus here. It would of course be nice to know what proportion of the wider population might have heard of or associated themselves with which aspects of which type of identity at which time. By and large, however, we try to steer clear of the trap of taking the populace for granted when attributing an identity to it, and such speculations are beyond our scope. Generally speaking, the discourses of national identity may spread as widely and as effectively as the relevant cultural technology, though we should beware of assuming that modern technologies, though massively quicker, are necessarily more inclusive than older technologies in the longer term.

Inclusivity is implied by the title of Henry Norman's book, *All the Russias*, which also happens to have been the working title for the present volume and which we retain as the heading for the present introductory chapter. It is not a claim to completeness. Its usefulness lies rather in the variety of cultural perspectives which it can evoke, for the expression 'All the Russias' may be read on at least three levels.

On one level, the expression 'All the Russias' cannot but carry echoes of its traditional English usage in imperial nomenclature, where the 'Tsar (or 'Autocrat') of All the Russias' ruled over a realm that included 'Great Russia', 'Little Russia' (Ukraine), and 'White Russia' (now Belarus).[5] Its usage here should *not*, of course, be taken to imply any suggestion that Ukraine and Belarus are 'really' part of Russia. The inclusiveness is nothing to do with modern politics. It simply reminds us that the limits of our subject are the historical limits of Russian cultural self-representation, and

neither the modern political map, nor our or anybody else's preferred notion of what Russia should be or should have been, can impinge. Secondly, in similar vein, the phrase 'All the Russias' may be taken to allude to the apparent sequence of political embodiments of the land and people over the past millennium: the Land of the Rus in the Middle Ages, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation. Again, the construct is questionable as 'fact', but again it is a proper topic of cultural discussion in the present context. Thirdly, and more revealingly, the inclusive phrase 'All the Russias' may be taken to imply the plurality and layering of identities that might constitute the field of 'Russianness'.

A great deal of Russian culture is – explicitly or implicitly, to a greater or lesser extent – self-referential, about Russia or indicative of 'Russianness'. But the 'self' turns out not to be a constant, clearly definable entity. Russian culture expresses a range of different types of 'myths' of Russia and Russianness (and here we understand 'myth' as a narrative which validates a community, a fact of culture regardless of its relationship to facts of history). Hence, even as its essence is asserted, Russia is continually represented as a question, a field of possibilities, a set of contradictions. This book does not seek to resolve the contradictions so as to explain what Russia and Russianness 'are'. Its purpose is to provide a guide to the many types of criteria and expressions of Russia and Russianness. In a sense, Russian national identity lies not in the resolution but in the nature of the discussion and argument. The flaw, therefore, in the notion of 'all the Russias' lies not in its appropriately programmatic sense of plurality, but in its further unrealisable implication of a kind of completeness, of totality, of potential closure.

Thus far we have used a sequence of terms without clear differentiation: Russia, Russian, Russians, Russianness; as if they are interchangeable in their relations to 'national identity'. The trouble is that they are not. In fact, they present a problem of theory, or at any rate of approach. Russia is often left out of Western European stories of 'nationalism' and 'nationhood'. Russia is not and has never been a 'nation state', where the geo-political boundaries and the ethno-cultural boundaries coincide. More or less from the start it has been a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual polity – an empire (even if its rulers have not always presented it as such) – but with a strongly dominant Slav (Rus, Russian) population and culture. Rus, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union – all were expanding powers, continually enlarging their territorial boundaries and their spheres of influence through conquest and annexation. The creation of a 'Great Russian' identity became a political imperative,

a process of cultural incorporation. Should Russia, then, be viewed through
the prism of theories of empire, or theories of the nation state?

Perhaps part of the 'problem' of Russianness is its uncomfortable position
between these two definitions. It lies, in a sense, on a fault line between
imperial and national identities; or more precisely, between geo-political
and ethno-cultural criteria of self-definition. In English this leaves an ambi-
guity even in language: are 'Russians' all the citizens of 'Russia', regardless
of (for example) their mother tongue, religion, clothing, or political aspi-
ration? It used to be common, even in reasonably sophisticated Western
publications, to see 'Russian' used as a synonym for 'Soviet' (just as in
Russia and elsewhere one will often find 'English' used as a synonym for
'British'). Or are 'Russians' a distinct nationality, regardless of where they
live or where the lines are drawn on a map? The Russian language has
developed the usage of two separate words (originally synonyms) to deal
with this: *rossiiskii* and *russkii*. Both mean 'Russian', but *rossiiskii* refers to
Rossiia, the geo-political entity (hence the imperial identity) while *russkii*
is more narrowly ethnic and linguistic. These two terms make visible the
coexistence of geo-political and ethno-cultural criteria of self-description.
In Russia this coexistence has not always been easy.

Such conceptual uncertainties flow in both directions. Some of the
Russian concepts may not migrate comfortably into English, but the
Russian conceptual tools of self-identification have often themselves been
imported and adapted. From the conversion to Christianity at the end of
the tenth century, through the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the
ideas gleaned from Romanticism or Marxism and on to market capitalism
and globalization: it is as if Russians have periodically sought to locate
and re-locate themselves on conceptual maps originally devised by and for
other people and other places. This can be true quite literally. In Russian,
for example, Jerusalem is part of the 'Near East' despite being slightly to
the west of Moscow: in this metaphorical geography it is as if the very
language looks from Western Europe. In a sense, Russian discourses of
identity have been formed in an implied dialogue with outsiders. It might
be an overstatement to say, in the phrase of the literary theorist Harold
Bloom, that Russian culture is marked by an 'anxiety of influence', but we
can legitimately suggest a *negotiation* of influence, a relationship with an
'other', both real and imagined.

Our introduction to Russian identities in this book does not eliminate
such ambiguities and tensions. We are not limited by theories of the nation
state, or by visions of empire, or by any one of the successive or opposing

sets of ideas, whether originally imported or indigenous. Rather we examine
how such complexities have been negotiated. The flux between competing
models and frameworks of identity is part of the cultural process that is
Russianness.

The sections and chapters in this book represent points of orientation within
the vast field of identity formation. They aim to equip the reader with the
means of surveying the field, mapping the dimensions of Russian identity.
The headings we have selected are by no means exhaustive. They repre-
sent key ideas, or areas, around which discussion of identity has focused,
providing nodal points within the discourse(s). The 'grid' that we propose
represents a framework through which to read identity as a field of sig-
nification. Each of the sections of the book explores a different type of
identity, and the chapters within each section explore these broad con-
ceptual categories in the Russian case. The grid is not a key to the secret
essence of Russianness, but rather a structure through which to understand
its articulations.

Section I – the first part of our 'grid' – is concerned with identities in
time and space. It explores questions of orientation and location, attempts
to construct or interpret Russia as a temporal or physical entity. Chapter 2
examines the importance of history in the narratives of identity. Shared
histories create a shared sense of the present and future; but these histories
are themselves unfixed. There are many possible narratives of Russia *in time*,
and the negotiation of competing stories, various foundation myths, and
alternative pasts is part of the discourse of Russianness. In Chapter 3, we
examine the same problem of location *in space*. In order to conceptualize a
country we first need some idea of where it is, of it shape and size, of what it
looks like. We need, in other words, some kind of mental or physical map.
Vast and diverse, often hostile and uninhabitable, the Russian territory
poses problems not just of management, but also of symbolic definition.
Where are the borders of the nation? As Henry Norman asked, what *is* the
Russian landscape? Can there be a shared image of the territory?

With Russia thus located (or rather dis-located), our second section
explores what we have called 'contrastive identities'. It shifts our atten-
tion from Russia to Russians, and examines how self-definition has been
expressed and mediated in political and cultural terms. Who or what do the
Russians think they are? Identity is often established in contrasts and com-
parisons. 'We' define ourselves not just through ourselves, but through how
we believe we are similar to, or distinct from, 'them'. We can specify who we
are by specifying who we are not. This raises questions of community and

belonging, for visions of the national 'self' shift. Is national self-definition to be expressed in ethnic terms? Or in social terms? How can diverse strands of the population, separated by class, or by race, be integrated and united under the common heading of 'we'? How does Russia's status as Imperial power shape criteria of identity? Chapter 4 explores Russian ideologies of self, tracing official and unofficial constructs of the 'people'. Chapter 5, by contrast, examines representations of the 'other', showing how discussions and images of foreigners have provided a space in which Russian identities have been tested and refined.

Our third section is concerned with 'essentialist' conceptions of identity: the notion that what we *are* is innate and unique. The essentialist vision posits national identity in terms of inherent characteristics, creating an idea of the nation as a single entity or being, unchanging in time (and space). As such, the heterogeneity of a people is reduced to homogeneity, plurality to singularity. Such myths of identity might claim that Russians *do* view the world in a particular way, that they *are* all Orthodox, *are* melancholy and passionate, that they exhibit a particular relation to everyday life, etc. The widespread idea of 'the Russian soul' is a revealing example of such an essentialist myth of identity. The four chapters in this section trace four such hypotheses of Russianness, revealing how they have been constructed and functioned over Russia's long history. Chapter 6 explores the status of Orthodox Christianity as a symbol of identity, showing how the religion has been used to encode different categories and visions of Russia and Russianness. Chapter 7 investigates the myth of the 'soul', using the example of Russian music to trace the emergence of melancholy as a trope of identity. Chapter 8 considers the idea that the Russian language exhibits characteristics that are inherently 'Russian,' or that it *creates* an essentialist vision of Russianness. Chapter 9 turns to everyday life, revealing and unpacking essentialist myths of a specifically Russian 'way of living' or 'attitude to existence'.

The fourth and final section of the book explores 'symbolic' identities, examining how identities have been projected onto prominent visual or verbal emblems. How do particular buildings, monuments, or symbols assume significance in the discourse of identity? In Chapter 10, we discover the history of Russian monuments – the buildings, paintings, and sculptures that have been invested with significance over time, and their shifting prominence. The chapter explores, moreover, how the *idea* of the monument as a symbol of identity was constructed and promulgated in Russia, and its contemporary resonance. Finally – and surely fittingly – our last chapter turns to one of Russia's most famous children (and least successful

exports): Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. The concern here, though, is not Pushkin as a poet, or Pushkin as a historical figure, but rather Pushkin as an idea, a symbol of Russian identity. In the example of Pushkin, we can see how the discourse of identity shapes and alters its objects, rendering the reality of the poet and his work a vessel through which the shifting terms of Russianness can be projected.

The broad headings of our grid enable readers to track the discussion of Russia and Russianness across a millennium of relocations – historical, ideological, geographical, and cultural. They begin in the eleventh century and end in the early years of the twenty-first. As such, they offer a broad chronological framework, providing a perspective on Russian history which is not bounded by historical 'period'. They span the history of discourses of Russianness under the influence of diverse cultural and ideological influences and relocations, from Byzantine theology to postmodernism. To ensure coherence within such a broad frame of enquiry, each of the chapters in the book follows a common pattern. The first sections of each chapter outline their theme in general terms, across the larger time-span. They show how particular dimensions of identity have been discussed, represented, and contested. The later sections use focused case studies to illustrate how the issues can be played out at the level of the particular. This shift between the general and particular is vital. It is, after all, at the level of the particular, in the detail, that identity is located. Across the ten chapters, our contributors explore a vast range of cultural texts. Together, then, they reveal the *texture* of identity, the interwoven strands and multiple layers of imagined Russianness.

SECTION I

Identities in time and space

Before Russia can be described, it must first be circumscribed: found, located, identified – that is, defined as an entity – in time and space. Or so we might tend to think. A country, we are tempted to assume, is a distinct place with a distinct history: look at a map, and there is Russia, and its history is the important things that have happened in and to it over the course of time. Finding Russia is not, however, quite so straightforward. Russia in time is not a single, fixed narrative but a range of possible stories; and over that same time entities which we or their inhabitants might call Russia have appeared in radically different shapes and sizes, and even in different places.

Chapter 2 is concerned with the linear narratives of Russia, with the emergence and development of stories designed to create and sustain a sense of 'historical' coherence and significance: from chroniclers and sermonists in the eleventh and twelfth centuries right through to post-Soviet reflections on the shape of Russia's past. In the second part of the chapter, two 'case studies' illustrate how modern cultural products can play (both crudely and subtly) upon the accumulated narratives and thus make implicit – and sometimes polemical – claims about national identity.

Chapter 3 begins with a summary of shifting political borders and locations, from the early 'Rus Land', through Muscovy, the Empire with its capital in St Petersburg, the Soviet Union and eventually to the post-Soviet Russian Federation. The theme here is not just expansion, but expanse. Expansion is a geo-political process, expanse becomes a dominant image of Russia, a sphere of imagining, a metaphor which transfers from the physical to the spiritual, to representations not just of Russia but of Russianness. Yet it is also problematic, ambiguous. The case studies illustrate a constant slippage, or tension, between visions of chaos and order, conquest and freedom, openness and domestication.

9

CHAPTER 2

Russia in time

Simon Franklin

In the late 1990s a book was published in Moscow with the same title as this chapter: *Russia in Time*. I quote from its conclusion: 'Across the vast Eurasian land mass . . . in the fourth to the second millennium BC' the written culture of the ancient Slavs, 'whose sounds are close to those of modern Russian . . . gave rise to the following civilisations: Sumerian, Babylonian, Proto-Indian, Cretan, Ancient Greek, Ancient Roman (and eventually European)'.[1] This kind of grandiose claim about a Russia spanning the millennia is a fairly typical product of the post-Soviet boom in amateur history. The shelves bulge with ever more ambitious assertions: that the ancient Et*rus*cans were ancestors of the Russians; that Je*rus*alem was a Russian city, and that Christ was therefore a Russian prophet. Or, by complete contrast, according to one particularly fashionable theory: nothing in world history is more than about a thousand years old and Alexander the Great is a fiction invented around the time of Tsar Ivan IV (the Terrible) in the sixteenth century. In the chaotic freedom of post-Soviet popular publication, Russia in Time has become strangely elastic.

Historians wince. But the point, for present purposes, is not whether such schemes are true or false (in almost all cases they are utter claptrap), but the shared preoccupation with the shaping of time; the assumption that the way we shape time has significance for determining who 'we' are; the belief in linear narratives through time as the key, or a key, to something which might commonly be termed 'historical' identity. Such beliefs do not begin with the intellectual liberty – or anarchy – of the post-Soviet period. For as long as they have been able to write (and possibly longer), Russia's cultural opinion-formers have sought to define themselves and their status through control over the linear narratives, over the shaping and telling of time. The first part of this chapter therefore consists of a narrative of such narratives, an *overview* of some of the ways in which 'significant' time has been conceived in Russian cultural discourse. We subsequently look more