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NATIONAL IDENTITY IN RUSSIAN CULTURE

What is Russia? Who are Russians? What is "Russianness"? The question of national identity has long been a vexed one in Russia, and is particularly pertinent in the post-Soviet period. For a thousand years, these questions have been central to the work of Russian writers, artists, musicians, film-makers, critics, politicians, and philosophers. Questions of national self-identity permeate Russian cultural self-expression. This wide-ranging study, designed for students of Russian literature, culture, and history, explores aspects of national identity in Russian culture from medieval times to the present day. Written by an international team of scholars, the volume offers an accessible overview and a broad, multi-faceted introductory account of this central feature of Russian cultural history. The book is comprehensive and concise; it combines general surveys with a wide range of specific examples to convey the rich texture of Russian cultural expression over the past thousand years.

SIMON FRANKLIN is Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Cambridge. He has published widely on Russian history and culture, especially the Medieval period, and his recent books include *Writing, Society and Culture in early Rus: c.950–1300* (Cambridge, 2002), winner of the Alexander Nove Prize for 2002.

EMMA WIDDIS is Lecturer in the Department of Slavonic Studies at the University of Cambridge. She is author of *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven, 2003) and *Alexander Medvedkin* (London, 2004).

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An Introduction

EDITED BY

SIMON FRANKLIN AND EMMA WIDDIS

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Russia in the Age of Peter the Great (Yale University Press, 1998) and *Peter the Great, A Biography* (Yale, 2002). She is currently working on a study of responses to key monuments of Russian culture.

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Preface

What is Russia? What is 'Russianness'? Who are Russians? For a thousand years these and similar questions have preoccupied Russian writers, artists, critics, musicians, film-makers, politicians and ideologists, theologians and philosophers, intellectuals and demagogues. Implicitly or explicitly, questions of national identity permeate Russian cultural self-expression, from the very first native literary and artistic endeavours of the 'Rus' (ancestors of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belorusians) in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, through to the intensified self-questioning in the 'new' Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. And implicitly or explicitly, the same questions permeate a great deal of writing about Russia by foreigners, whether academics or journalists or travel-diarists or intelligence analysts. What need, then, for yet another book on the subject? Why add to the cacophony of competing voices?

In the first place, there is the matter of scope and convenience. We hope that this book will be useful precisely because so much else has been written, for it is surprisingly hard to find an accessible overview, a broad and multi-faceted introductory account of this central theme in Russian cultural history. To state the obvious: Russia is a vast country with a huge population and a varied culture which has emerged and developed and changed over many hundreds of years. Few individuals can plausibly claim adequate expertise across the full range, and most studies tend understandably to reflect the particular partial interests of their authors. There is nothing wrong with this, and the results can be stimulating and admirable; but equally there can be clear benefits in pooling resources, in bringing together the combined experience of a number of scholars in distinct disciplines, specialists in different areas and periods of culture. No survey in a single, medium-sized volume can truly claim to be comprehensive, but we have tried to convey at least some sense of the amplitude and diversity of the problem: across time, across cultural forms, across types of expression and idea.

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Secondly, there is the matter of approach. Much discussion of Russian identity is driven by the belief, or at least by the assumption, that the question has an answer, that Russianness is a 'thing' to be located, described, and explained. The assumption behind the present book is rather the opposite: that to seek an answer in such terms is, in a sense, to misrepresent the question. Identity is not a 'thing' to be objectively described. It is a field of cultural discourse. It is each person's perception of themselves: as an individual, in relation to a group or groups, and by contrast with other individuals and groups. Russian identity is and has been a topic of continual argument, of conflicting claims, competing images, contradictory criteria. And that is the point. There is no need to resolve the contradictions, to take sides, to adjudicate between contested notions of true Russianness. There is no separate 'reality' behind the cultural expressions of identity. Hence the somewhat pointed title of this book: national identity *in* Russian culture. The multiple cultural expressions and constructs *are* the identity, or the identities. Their reality, or their truth, is in their own existence as facts of culture, not in the extent to which they accurately reflect a set of external facts.

Third, there is the matter of organisation, both of the book as a whole and of the chapters within it. Taken together, the sections of the book, and their constituent chapters, are designed to form a kind of grid, a conceptual geography of the subject, a way of mapping the various categories of discourse on identity. The grid can be extended and applied beyond the confines of the specific surveys and analyses in this book. Within the sections, each chapter has a dual structure, starting with a very broad overview of the wider implications of its topic, and proceeding – by contrast – to some very specific readings or case studies. If the sections combine into a map, the case studies combine more as a mosaic. In each chapter, the case studies by themselves are merely illustrative fragments, but when put together and assembled over the course of the book they provide a fairly representative and nuanced picture of the diverse ways in which notions of national identity function in cultural practice. The book is intended to be accessible to those with little or no special knowledge of Russia and Russian culture. References to places, people, and events are, as far as possible, explained, and each section is prefaced by an introductory summary.

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A note on the transliteration of Russian

There are several systems for rendering Russian words in English transliteration. Different systems may be appropriate for different purposes, even in the context of a single publication. Thus in the present book our practice varies as follows.

(i) In most instances we use a modified version of the 'Library of Congress' system. This means, for example, using 'i' where some other systems have 'y': hence Tolstoi and Maiakovskii, rather than Tolstoy and Mayakovsky. We stick to this system even when the name has become familiar in English in a different form: hence 'Chaikovskii', not 'Tchaikovsky'. Immigrants pose problems. We leave Stravinsky as he is, rather than converting him back to Stravinskii.

(ii) We omit most diacritics (superscript marks). The only exception is the indication of the Russian 'soft sign' (ˈ), which indicates that the preceding consonant is 'soft' or – to put it technically – palatalized. However, we only use this symbol in words which are clearly marked as 'foreign' (through being set in italics) and in bibliographical references. Where Russian names appear as part of the normal English text, we omit the 'soft sign': hence Gogol, Gorkii and Prokofev rather than Gogolˈ, Gorˈkii, or Prokofˈev (or indeed Prokofiev).

(iii) In general Russian personal names are given in their Russian forms, not anglicised: thus Aleksandr Nevskii and Nikolai Leskov, not Alexander Nevskii or Nicholas Leskov. The exceptions, by oddly powerful convention, are the rulers of the Russian Empire from c.1700 to 1917: thus Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Nicholas II, not Petr, Ekaterina, or Nikolai. Earlier rulers keep the Russian forms: Aleksei rather than Alexis; and of course Ivan the Terrible cannot be reduced to just plain John.

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Map: The growth and contraction of Russia and its empire.

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