CHAPTER 1

The burden of freedom: Russian literature after communism

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After censorship

Even among specialists, not to mention the much wider reading public, the widespread impression of Russian literature is limited to the works of the great nineteenth-century writers as well as those of the heroic modernists of the Soviet period. For the majority of fans of Russian literature, it ceases to exist after Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky – that is, after the end of the communist era. Meanwhile, the time from the 1990s onward is unique in the history of Russian culture: it is the only lengthy interval in which Russian literature developed in the complete absence of censorship of both the political and moral varieties. Today, when censorship seemingly is returning, Russian literature enters a new cycle already enriched by the experience of unprecedented freedom.

With the weakening of censorship in the late Soviet years, at the peak of Gorbachev’s reforms, but particularly in the course of the two decades that have passed since the elimination of censorship, practically all of the significant literary work that was written over the course of the twentieth century but banned in the USSR has now been published in Russia. This includes literature written both in Russian and in foreign languages. Furthermore, the unity of Russian culture, which throughout the Soviet era was split among the official, the uncensored (underground), and the emigrant cultures, has now been practically restored. Contemporary writers living outside Russia have begun to be published routinely in Russian editions. What is more, underground writers and emigrants from earlier periods have appeared on bookstore shelves, have become part of Russian university and even high school curricula, and generated lively scholarly discussions. The development of the internet, particularly of blogs and online editions, has consolidated this unity in new, fluid forms.

The only time of freedom from censorship analogous to that of the post-Soviet one, although of significantly shorter duration, was the few
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months in 1917 between the February revolution and the Bolsheviks’ October revolution. The power of Soviet censorship had already begun to disintegrate in the Perestroika years (1987–91), when, with a growing intensity, literary works that had previously circulated only in samizdat and tamizdat began to find their way into the journals (see Blium 1995). Thus, by 1991 Bulgakov’s The Heart of the Dog and Platonov’s Foundation Pit and Chevengur; Zamiatin’s We and Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago; Akhmatova’s The Requiem and Tsvetaeva’s émigré poems, all banned in earlier Soviet times, had now been published by Soviet presses. There was a triumphant return of emigrant literature: from Nabokov to Solzhenitsyn and Brodsky. Finally, the texts of the contemporary underground made their way to the printing press – works that were incompatible with official Soviet literature not only for ideological reasons but also, to a large extent, for aesthetic ones. Among the latter, the ones to achieve the greatest resonance were the works of Venedikt Erofeev (Moscow to the End of the Line) and the Moscow conceptualists (Dmitrii Prigov, Lev Rubinshtein, and Vladimir Sorokin), as well as innovative women’s literature (see Goscilo 1996).

However, each of these publishing events had been accompanied by an internal struggle with censorship, and sometimes (as in the case of Anatolii Rybakov’s anti-Stalinist novel Children of the Arbat or of Solzhenitsyn’s works) the question of whether the work would be published was decided not by the journals’ editors but by the Politbiuro of the Communist Party’s Central Committee. In a strange coincidence with the events of 1917, just two days after the official announcement that the USSR no longer existed (December 25, 1991), a law about the mass media was adopted, in which censorship of any kind whatsoever was prohibited.

Turbulent shifts of the 1990s

The socio-political history of post-Soviet Russia is split into two unequal periods: the 1990s and the 2000s and beyond. In the first of these periods – the Yeltsin era – social freedoms, in particular, the freedom of the mass media, were exceptionally broad (though not unlimited). It was the time when the class of “New Russians” emerged; the most well-to-do of these – the so-called oligarchs – have energetically participated in political life. The nineties were also marked by political anarchy, the growth of crime and of the economic power of criminal organizations, severe social and economic marginalization of the intelligentsia, the intensification of social as well as ethnic conflicts, and so on. At the same time, this was a period of the exponential growth of the cultural institutions, the development of
The second period – the Putin era – is characterized on the contrary by booming economic growth tied to that of the prices of oil and gas (institutionally prepared by the radical economic reforms of the 1990s – see Iasin 2005: 85–90), the consolidation of “sovereign democracy” (centralization of economic power in the hands of a corrupt bureaucracy, the growth of the political and economic role of the Federal Security Service – the successor of the KGB – and the transformation of corruption from anarchic to systemic), along with the emergence of a middle class that also brings with it an improvement of the economic situation of the intelligentsia. This period is also characterized by a gradual but steady shrinking of the space of media and political freedoms, and growing control of the state agencies over cultural institutions.

From the standpoint of the development of literature and literary institutions, the 1990s were distinguished by a sharp decline in the print runs of literary journals, which in the Perestroika years had grown into the millions. Many regional journals were discontinued, and the remaining ones survived largely thanks to the assistance of the Soros Foundation. At the same time, there was a growth of independent publishers, which became centers of literary life. It was just these small presses, the lifespan of which was often very short, that published the most radical works created in the Soviet underground and by Soviet-era emigrants, and it is owing to these publishers that Russian readers came to be familiar with contemporary Western theory. These small 1990s-era publishers were precisely the ones out of which giants would later grow, such as, on the one hand, AST and Eksmo, which today holds a de facto monopoly on the mainstream fiction and nonfiction market, and on the other, the New Literary Observer (NLO), a publishing house that issues several intellectual journals (including Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, Neprikosnovennyi zapas, and Teoriia mody) and publishes the lion’s share of original and translated literature on the theory and history of culture, as well as “difficult” or experimental prose and poetry.

The 1990s precipitated a complete reshaping of the entire literary field and of the overall notions about the literary canon: what should be considered good literature, what traditions to hold on to, and which ones to reject. The question as to whether the age of Russian literature-centrism had come to a close was hotly debated (see Dobrenko and Tihanov 2011: 287–305, Menzel 2006: 178–255). In this period, for the first time since the end of the eighteenth century, there was a severe decline in the
status of literature as an institution, which had ceased to play its traditional role as a political tribune. With the emergence of a political process as such, as opposed to the Soviet period when politics was monopolized by the Party, these functions shifted beyond the boundaries of literature. Strange as it might seem, it was precisely the abolition of political censorship that brought the issues of literature \textit{per se} into the foreground: after all, in the Perestroika years it was primarily the political acuity of a literary work, substantiated by the censors' prohibitions, that had served as the truest criterion of artistic merit. And when the censors' prohibitions disappeared, then the problem of artistic value, as well as the conceptions of what literature really is, had to be reconsidered. Neither should we forget that it was just at this time that Russian intellectuals began exuberantly to become acquainted with Western theory from the 1960s through to the 1980s – from poststructuralism to feminism, from Freud and Jung to Foucault and Derrida. Needless to say, the newly revealed theoretical ideas were quickly projected onto Russian culture and, above all, onto literature.

Among the institutions that arose in the 1990s, literary prizes independent from the state took on an important role in the process of transformation of the literary field. On the one hand, the newly established prizes provided economic support for writers, replacing the Western institution of grants, or Soviet state support to politically loyal writers. On the other, expert communities were shaped around them, and their decisions provoked lively discussion in literary – and not only literary – publications. One of the first such prizes was the Andrei Belyi Prize, which had been created in the underground in 1977; in the 1990s it acquired public status, although it remained noncommercial and focused on experimental literature. Another in this vein, the NOS (New Literature/Society) Prize, arose later (awarded since 2009). Since 2000, the Debut Prize has brought young talents to light.

Some data suggest that in the 2000s, there were already about 300 state- and nonstate-awarded prizes in Russia, which attests to the compartmentalization of the literary field: instead of a single national space a great number of "turfs" have been established, which do not always recognize each other's existence. In all this, mainstream and experimental literatures have ended up in a number of analogical, though less discernible "literary realms," each with its own hierarchy, authorities, and system of values. This situation is fundamentally different from the late-Soviet process, in which there was always a corpus of texts – both published and
in circulation as *samizdat* – familiarity with which was a condition of belonging to “educated company.”

It was also in the 1990s that the publication of popular literature, both translated and original, began to grow precipitously (see Borenstein 2008, Olcott 2001). As this happened, many well-known writers transformed themselves into pop-lit authors, primarily of mystery novels, often writing under pseudonyms. Standing out against the backdrop of the rapid development of the mystery-novel genre is the original literary project of Grigorii Chkhartishvili, a well-known translator from Japanese and English and the deputy editor-in-chief of the journal *Inostrannaja literatura* (Foreign Literature). Writing under the pseudonym “B[oris] Akunin” and originally concealing his identity, Chkhartishvili published a series of stylized mystery novels featuring the character Erast Fandorin. Unfolding in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, these novels combined historicism and recognizable references to the present time, as well as numerous overt and covert references to Russian and Western classical literature. The charming protagonist of the series, Fandorin, was particularly important: a prototypical intelligent was depicted as serving the state (and not trying to undermine or destroy it); moreover, this great detective served various state agencies, including the notorious Gendarmes Third Division that fought against the revolutionary movement! Such previously unseen positioning of an intelligentsia character as a defender rather than an opponent of the state obviously marked a beginning of the new period in the two-century-long “romance” between the Russian intelligentsia and the Russian state.

The enormous popularity of Akunin’s novels among the intelligentsia and others bore witness to the fact that in a society that had experienced a peaceful anticommunist revolution led by a liberal intelligentsia, there was still a belief in the possibility of cooperation between liberals and the authorities, a possibility understood as a most significant lesson drawn from the historical past; and this very cooperation was seen as the only way of averting new upheavals. The fear of new historical catastrophes, however, reflected a growing disillusionment with the radical political reforms that had brought the intelligentsia face to face with poverty, had destroyed the familiar (although hateful) system of values and social guarantees, and had brought on an even greater nostalgia for “the Russia we have lost.” If in the 1990s the prerevolutionary era was by and large understood to be the “lost Russia,” then in the 2000s a nostalgia for the Soviet era was added to this. Nonetheless, the latter, contrary to expectations, merged with the former, giving rise to occasionally whimsical hybrids.
Describing the ideological and discursive features that united the period of the 1990s with that of the 2000s, the sociologist Lev Gudkov remarked: “The ‘rebirth of the great power’ has become the sole symbolic thesis on which liberal Westernizers, Communist patriots, and crusaders for ‘holy Orthodox Rus’ can come together. Its component elements, the definition of the great power’s ‘majesty,’ as well as the means for achieving this goal, may vary greatly, but the general programmatic composition has remained unchanged.” (Gudkov 2004: 660). The neotraditionalism that arose from this “symbolic thesis,” which subsequently evolved into neoconservatism, neoimperialism, and revanchism, became the ideological resultant around which the cultural and literary mainstream of the 2000s took shape. According to Boris Dubin’s characterization, starting from about 1999 Russian public discourses displayed a perceptible increase in “the motifs of neotraditionalism, including those of an Orthodox cast. Isolationist tendencies and xenophobia directed both inwardly and outside the country (anti-Western, but especially anti-American rhetoric) grow stronger. At work is a mythologization, an archaization of national history both on an official-governmental level and in newspaper and magazine writing, popular cinema, and television. One cannot but notice a growth and even routinization of anti-reform and anti-modernization tendencies, ideas, and symbols in Russian society, assimilation or imitation of them by various political forces and circles of public intellectuals, and adaptation of them in the everyday practices of the mass media” (Dubin 2004: 136).

All these transformations of the regime and of society were orchestrated, and in many ways accomplished, by the mass media and popular culture, which were either focused on a nostalgic restoration of the attributes of “grand” style, with the obligatory imperial sheen (one of the earliest examples being Nikita Mikhalkov’s 1998 film The Barber of Siberia) or else engaged in a quest for new – but in fact quite time-worn – “positive” heroes that would affirm national superiority by way of humiliating ethnic (or social, religious, or ideological) “others.” Examples of this “quest” – with quite predictable results – were Aleksei Balabanov’s wildly popular films Brother (1997) and especially Brother-2 (2000), as well as numerous television series that depicted the “heroic everyday” of employees in the structures of power and of their doubles – mafiosi – with the requisite mythology, in both cases, of the social family (see, for example, Zvereva 2006). Of particular significance along these lines was the fundamentalist rhetoric, stylized in Orthodox fashion, that pervaded even
news announcements as a substantial factor of public policy – ranging from the public prayer services for Putin to the proclamation of a “sovereignly Russian” and aggressively anti-individualist concept of “human rights”; official support of homophobic actions and assaults on exhibits considered objectionable to the church leading up to the Pussy Riot trial (see Ryklin 2006, Gessen 2014). In this context, the discourse of “spirituality” and “restoration of the sacred,” supposedly forgotten irrevocably in the late 1970s, took on a new intensity – however, it was understood quite broadly, and also integrated odds and ends from discourses as dissimilar as Soviet moralism, religious “piety,” and imperialist grandeur.

In other words, in both the regime’s rhetoric and in the masses’ “hopes and fears,” there was a turnaround from radically modernizing strategies to pre- and early-modern models of social unity and stability (national, or more often, blood kinship; a single religion; various social “families” – from the army to the mafia) sealed by the image of the enemy and the corresponding myths and rituals. This shift in the entire discursive palate is strikingly reminiscent of the transition from revolutionary to Stalinist culture described by Vladimir Papernyi as a transition from “Culture One” to “Culture Two” (see Papernyi 2002).

Papernyi’s study, first published in 1985, is devoted predominantly to the architecture of the Stalinist period, but in fact its subject is quite a bit broader: the book makes the case for a concept (one fully in keeping with that of the binary model of Russian culture worked out by Jurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii 1985) of a “pendulum-like evolution” of Russian history: according to Papernyi, in Russia a revolutionary, cosmopolitan, and experimental “Culture One” is regularly transformed into an imperial, complacently solidified and stagnant, monumental and nationalistic “Culture Two.” Papernyi regarded the transition from the avant-garde “Culture One” of the 1920s to the imperial “Culture Two” of the 1930s to the 1950s as a displacement of the structure of culture – from Diffusion towards Solidification, from Mechanism towards Man, from the Lyric towards the Epic, or, in a more general sense, from a centrifugal tendency towards centralization, or from the crossing of boundaries towards an establishment of them. Assessing the culture and politics of the 2000s, Papernyi spoke confidently about a new onset of Culture Two:

It is obvious to anyone that “Culture Two” is now taking shape in Russia. [...] Borders are becoming fixed – the world of good is within our borders, and the world of evil is outside their limits. The enemy skulks in from behind the border. The role of hierarchy is growing – in politics, a steep
vertical is becoming established, in the appointment of governors, for example. And everyone wants to become an aristocrat. [...] The Internet shows that “Culture Two” is growing both from above and from below. What began during Perestroika, when “Culture One” predominated, is now becoming frozen. (Timofeeva 2013)

In this transformation of post-Soviet society, literature’s role was at least twofold: on the one hand, it articulated and shaped the dominant discourses, and on the other, it critiqued them and engaged in a quest for alternative approaches to both individual and collective identity. Meanwhile, as it so happened, both approaches frequently coexisted in a single text.

Notions of literature as a “reflection” of social reality remained in the Soviet past. Post-Soviet literature exemplifies a process that is the opposite of “reflection.” Shaped by a transition from a traumatic or nostalgically constructed past to an uncertain future, and in a situation wherein the most significant discourses defining the concepts about society, the subject, and their interaction were frequently in a fragmentary, amorphous state, this literature to a large extent played a programming role, articulating and completing the statements of what was still, at the time, just “in the air.” But precisely because post-Soviet literature developed without censorship, the social resonance of certain texts is an extremely important symptom: the reader’s reaction was a sort of “vote of confidence” for the discursive “script” being offered. In turn, this vote assumed that the rhetorical constructs in the works that became popular, by virtue of their consonance with “the broad masses of readers,” acquired a greater possibility than other literary pronouncements of being reproduced on an individual, group, and, ultimately, social level.

From this viewpoint it is not surprising that Generation “P” (1999; English translations: Homo Zapiens and Babylon), Viktor Pelevin’s post-modernist satire about the “mythical” nature of post-Soviet capitalism, after a decade began to be taken as an almost documentary description of the media power of the entire post-Soviet period, and parodic advertisements lifted from the pages of the novel were plastered onto real billboards. Also telling is the fact that the neoconservative political turn grotesquely depicted by Vladimir Sorokin in Day of the Oprichnik (Den’ oprichnika, 2006) was recalled by many in 2012 and 2013 when Orthodox-nationalist political rhetoric began to assume the form of articles of law and doctrines of cultural policy. Zakhar Prilepin’s novel San’kia (2006), which told a tale of the everyday existence of National Bolsheviks who led the
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heroic struggle against Putin’s regime of social injustice and who, at the end, occupy the town hall of a small Russian city, also foretold not only the psychology but also the specific political acts of those who unleashed the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

This is why in this volume we allot a significant amount of attention to “resonant” works – regardless of whether they belong to the mainstream, to experimental literature, or to “trash.” Their resonance attests to the high “programming” potential of these texts – not always realized with such obviousness as in the examples noted above, but nevertheless influencing the discursive landscape of the times.

Mainstream and “minor” literature

As opposed to the 1990s, which were characterized by decentralization of the literary field, the 2000s have been marked by the formation of a literary mainstream – which reflected both a strengthening of the book market (the emergence of several nationwide networks of bookstores) and an overall economic stabilization. However, the economic conditions merely stimulated processes already at work in literature throughout the entire post-Soviet period. The above-mentioned fragmentation of the literary field engendered an aspiration – on the part of both writers and readers – for a literature different from pulp fiction, inheriting the traditions of both 1960s–80s Soviet literature and the underground, and which would at the same time be interesting and accessible to a reasonably wide range of readers.

As we have already mentioned, Akunin became one of the pioneers of the post-Soviet mainstream; after him followed the leaders of Russian postmodernism – Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin, whose novels were published in huge print runs starting in the late 1990s and were in demand by readers. In 2001, as a result of the major publishing-prize scandal (see Kukulin 2008), the ultranationalist discourse represented by Mister Hexogen (Gospodin Geksogen, 2000) and other works by Aleksandr Prokhanov gained a foothold as one of the legitimate elements of the mainstream. Subsequently, the mainstream was infused by diverse and ideologically unlikely authors such as Tatyana Tolstaya and Liudmila Ulitskaia, Aleksei Slapovskii and Dmitrii Bykov, Aleksei Ivanov and Zakhar Prilepin, Vladimir Sharov and Mikhail Shishkin (our volume will touch on all these writers), as well as Vladimir Makanin, Ol’ga Slavnikova, Aleksandr Kabakov, Dina Rubina, Aleksandr Terekhov, and a number of others.
What do these authors have in common? First, they all to some degree or another strive to resurrect the tradition of the psychological novel, with numerous characters and several plotlines unfolding against a broad historical background, which often gravitates toward what Nabokov caustically designated as the Literature of Ideas. The spectrum of literary traditions that are drawn into dialogue with contemporary subject matter is meanwhile rather broad: from Lev Tolstoy to the social sci-fi of the Strugatsky brothers, from Zamiatin to Latin American Magical Realism. At the same time, the cumbersome compositions created by these authors are rarely dynamic. As a rule, they are reminiscent of frescoes centered around some catastrophic event or its consequences. In other words, they are all distinguished by their attention to historical traumas. Moreover, the concept of historical trauma comes into the literary mainstream from two mutually contradictory components that fuse with each other: the trauma of all Soviet history, and, more broadly, of Russian history seen in its entirety; and the trauma inflicted by the breakdown of the Soviet symbolic and social order in the 1990s, added to the trauma of everyday existence, which often seems endless and immutable (in more detail see Etkind and Lipovetsky 2010). Contradictoriness, as well as mutually exclusive interpretations of what is considered to be historical trauma, lies at the heart of many social and political conflicts explored by the mainstream; these are also the sources that fuel the culture wars of post-Soviet times.

Nevertheless, the mainstream did not strive to create a direct replica of traumatic experience. The writers who won over the mainstream reader skillfully use the various techniques of modernism and postmodernism – from stylization to the grotesque, from phantasmagoria to myth-making – that allow them to introduce critical distance into the experience of historical traumas. The more notable this distance between the author and the character was, the more obvious it was that the most traumatic phenomenon in this literary discourse and in post-Soviet sensibility in general was this impossibility of separating the present from the past – mesmerization by a past that with a mystical inexorability dictates the logic of present-day events and behavior, dooms the characters to a “recurring return” to the Soviet catastrophe and the post-Soviet nightmares that follow from it. This mesmerization apparently follows from a cohesion of post-Soviet traumas with the unworked-through memory of Soviet history. The lack of consistent processing of the historical past, Alexander Etkind believes, gives rise to Magical Historicism as a defining method of the post-Soviet mainstream (see Chapter 6), when traumatic memories find an embodiment in uncanny phantasms.