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Introduction: An Age of Genius

Russians under the late tsars and Bolsheviks created and enjoyed a century of literary and artistic genius. Evidence of its existence persists in the monumental achievements of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, Igor Stravinsky, Marc Chagall, Vladimir Tatlin, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Sergei Prokofiev, Sergey Eisenstein, and many others whose works live on in world culture and in the Russian national identity. But along with these are the millions of less well-known but equally vital ephemeral creations of the age: postcards, illustrations, broadsides, prints, cheap serialized novels of the popular press, posters, and works of satire.

The creators of both the lasting and the ephemeral did not exist in isolation. They lived and worked in diverse but interconnected cultural communities. Each drew on immediate experience but also on deep Russian traditions. Each wrestled with transformative social, economic, and political change. In so doing, they created a flourishing imaginative ecosystem shared by low, middle, and high society alike. The interactions of people at multiple levels and the cross-fertilization of ideas within this connected and rapidly evolving cultural system spurred its movement away from older, established cultural boundaries to produce new horizons of creative vision and achievement.

This book examines the shared themes and exemplary characters that recurred over roughly a century of this intense cultural interaction and traces their origins to core elements of Russian tradition. I do so to celebrate the existence of this unique epoch in Russian creativity and to reflect on the social, economic, and political conditions that came together to create such global treasures.

Creative genius is rarely isolated geographically. Russia from the Emancipation of the serfs in 1861 through the 1930s and beyond had links with cultural developments abroad – initially largely in Europe but later with America as well. But Russia's creative world was defined and bounded by its own traditions. Deeply Russian themes are shared up, down, and across the cultural spectrum, and through characters created,

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dropped, and reincarnated in its literature and art. The array includes ideas and motifs from Russian religious and political tradition (that is, Orthodoxy and autocracy), as well as influences from the many ethnic peoples who comprised the vast and heterogeneous empire. Indeed, the designation of the resulting culture as "Russian" refers not to a singular ethnicity but to a shared experience within a common geohistory and dominant language. These traditions, reinforced by Russia's strongly differentiated sociopolitical realities, distinguished its cultural development from that of its global neighbors throughout the period studied here.

In the same way that creative genius is rarely isolated geographically, neither is it entirely isolated in time. Eras of genius have neither clear beginnings nor precise endpoints. Precursors can be seen in hindsight, and successors continue to innovate in different directions and perhaps with different intensity. For this reason, my designation of a "creative century" is necessarily approximate. Still, from the death of Nicholas I in 1855 to Stalin's death in 1953, we get a span of about a century, and while references are made to developments before and after, that century will be the main focus of this book.

Taking 1850–1950 as a period for cultural study contrasts with a literary scholar's approach, which might begin in the 1830s with the achievements of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol. As the following chapters make clear, the works of this earlier period in high culture contributed importantly to the interplay that made the later period so rich, though they stand nonetheless outside it. The coverage of this book also contrasts with histories focusing on political or economic eras, whether tsarist or Soviet. The period spans a great range of events: beginning when Nicholas, the arbiter of Russia's fate for three decades, gave way to Alexander II and the Emancipation of the serfs, and continuing onward through reform, reaction, and revolution. It witnesses the developments of the mid- to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when writers and illustrators, many of whom were semi-educated, supplanted Russia's early modern folk culture with commercial materials responding to consumer demand. It also includes the contribution of the creative community in vitalizing Bolshevik culture and the subsequent struggles of its members to survive under Soviet bureaucratic consolidation, terror, and war. And throughout, the period is one of fundamental transformation: the unprecedented rise in national literacy and communication, the surge in agency of people of common origins, and the explosion of cultural activity among both the lower classes and the elite.[1]

Much of the exposition that follows shows how high culture drew on folk and popular genres, a practice that predates the 1850s. Alexander Pushkin repurposed traditional tales of devils and magical fish and

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inserted folkloric elements into "Ruslan and Liudmila" (1820), the subject of Mikhail Glinka's opera (1837–1842) of that name. Mikhail Lermontov highlighted Ivan the Terrible (1530–1584) in "A Song of Tsar Ivan Vasilyevich, a Young Oprichnik, and the Bold Merchant Kalashnikov" (1837). He also offered educated readers a fiend from popular religious tradition in "*Demon: A Tale of the East*" (1839), a narrative in verse in which an evil spirit enchants a Caucasian princess. Nikolai Gogol likewise enhanced his *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1829–1832), retellings of scary stories from his youth in a village in Ukraine, with folkloric antecedents.

But I believe it essential to recognize that the influence was bi-directional, particularly as folk traditions evolved under commercialization. Developments in high culture colored the rapidly expanding body of work for the newly literate. Writers shored up the oral culture before large numbers of common readers came on the scene, and subsequently shaped commercially produced popular works. Take Ivan Turgenev, for example. Authors of cheap popular fiction reworked stories from his *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* (1852); satirists brought his characters to a mixed urban public that would not have considered purchasing his books; and editors of new magazines for popular readers, who did not publish Turgenev's works, drew upon the way he focused on people within their physical landscape.[2] Even writers revered for their contributions to high culture, most notably Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, wrote for middling and popular outlets – in Tolstoy's case for ideological reasons and in Chekhov's, at least in part, to pay the rent.

Interactions among cultural audiences in the Soviet period remained a feature of public life, albeit guided by organs of the party and the state, rather than the market.[3] The disruptions of collectivization, war, and continued industrial development had by the 1950s rendered the social groupings that had interacted in the earlier cultural dynamics unrecognizable. The life of art and letters thereafter moved in different directions in response to new imperatives. Interesting and great works continued to be produced in the late Soviet decades, though they drew less than in the earlier period on the shared themes, traditions, folklore, and rural influences that contributed so much to the "century of genius" covered in this book.

The Firebird and the Fox takes its name from two motifs and characters in Russian culture. This grouping evokes, of course, philosopher Isaiah Berlin's archetypal hedgehog and fox, though my intent is different from Berlin's.[4] While Berlin used his categorization to place Russian writers in a global intellectual comparative frame, my interest is primarily to probe their relationship with Russian traditions and the rapidly changing

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political, economic, and social context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I replace the prosaic and dogged hedgehog with the flamboyant firebird to reflect the importance of the latter to Russia's cultural traditions and to emphasize the incandescence of the era. I select the fox because many Russian writers and tellers of folktales did the same, and because the characteristics of the wily fox are deeply embedded in the cultural landscapes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[5]

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga identified play as a basic mechanism of cultural evolution and used the term "play-sphere" to describe a space of adaptive playfulness.[6] Firebirds and foxes belong to the Russian "play-sphere," together with the related figures of the fool, the rebel, and the trickster. Readers project themselves into this space to interact with characters and situations, and to test hitherto unconsidered choices.

In many cultures, birds and flying figures appear as instruments of creative departure from the staid world of the everyday. In the Russian setting, the firebird embodied the rewards and perils of imagination: a symbol of flight, an object of pursuit, and a vehicle of transport to a freer world. Even more vividly than Jack's magic beans in the English tradition, the firebird launches the reader or viewer on a journey of adventure. Ivan Goncharov, one of Russia's literary geniuses, called it "Russia's Holy Grail."

So, for example, the Firebird is at the heart of Russia's most popular and first commercialized folktale, *Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird, and the Grey Wolf*, in which the hero confronts extraordinary challenges with his magical lupine helper. Based on folklore, the story spread across mid-nineteenth-century Russia through cheap prints and popular fiction in enormous editions retold by enterprising authors, many of common origins.

Soon there were more firebirds, in many versions, across many media. The Firebird was an important figure in the famous children's tale of the 1830s by teenage prodigy Petr Pavlovich Ershov, *The Little Humpbacked Horse*; this story, too, circulated widely through bowdlerized popular editions and cheap prints. Elizabeth Bem, a well-regarded late imperial artist, featured a firebird (in Russian, "*zhar-ptitsa*") for the letter Ж (*zh*) in her popular alphabet book for children. Ivan Bilibin, the celebrated illustrator and theater costume designer, enlarged the bird in his version of the original folktale to the size of a small elephant (see Color Plate 1). And, of course, Diaghilev, Stravinsky, and company featured the bird as their hero's artistic muse in the famous ballet, *Firebird*.

The most influential versions of the firebird tale feature a Fool (*Ivan-Durak* or *Ivanushka-Durachok*) who rejects the existing order,

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overcomes evil, and supplants his unworthy older brothers or assumes the throne of an unworthy tsar. Thus, the firebird, symbolizing imagination and creativity, became paired with an avatar of social justice. The avant-garde of the late tsarist and early Soviet periods could hardly craft a more efficacious self-image than one based on the firebird of imagination and the naive Tsarevich Ivan (or his religious counterpart, *Iurodivy*, the Holy Fool), who confront tyrants and survive. Some of the greatest figures in Russian culture, such as Boris Pasternak and Dmitri Shostakovich, were in their time identified with the tradition of Foolishness, whether sacred or secular. Nor has this tradition lost its import. Oliver Ready has noted the continuing Russian literary fascination with the Holy Fool and Little Ivan the Fool.[7]

And the fox? In the Russian language, "fox" is a feminine noun, and the creature of folktale and stories is usually imagined as a mature vixen or female pup (*lisa, lisitsa*). Just as the folkloric trickster Br'er Rabbit served as a hero for American slaves (long before the character was intermediated by Joel Chandler Harris),[8] so Russia's serfs apparently delighted in the brutal trickery of the vixens – wily survivors who humiliated their powerful enemies, the wolves and bears, and even played cruel jokes on humans. The Russian fox or vixen also personifies appetite and desire. Thus, Ivan Krylov (1769–1844), Russia's premier fabulist, recast Aesop's *The Fox and the Crow* to emphasize the intensity of the fox's desires; whereas Aesop simply has the fox discovering the cheese by "following his nose," Krylov tells us (in Stephen Pimenoff's translation), "The scent of the cheese stopped the fox in her tracks."[9]

Anthropomorphized foxes people Russian folklore. Aleksandr N. Afanas'ev (1826–1871), the Russian "Brothers Grimm," includes more than forty stories of foxes in his mid-century collection of folktales.[10] In one of the first, a fox tricks fishermen to steal their catch and then outwits a wolf who would have taken the morsels for himself. The fox finishes with a lovely dinner and the wolf with his tail stuck in the ice.[11] A postcard published in 1955 in a million copies shows the confident vixen and the much larger but soon-to-be outfoxed wolf (see Color Plate 2).

Thus, at the time of Emancipation, the fox had an established folkloric pedigree as a sympathetic character with a reputation for cleverness, self-interest, and appetite. In subsequent decades, it came to express the heightened ambition of common people for agency over their own lives under the changing economic and social conditions of the late nineteenth century. New opportunities were opening for energetic people willing to exercise their wits. New temptations beckoned, and peasants and urban dwellers with kopecks or even rubles to spare could pursue them. The fox of folklore strutted into the new era with aplomb and acclaim, and even

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found its place in high culture: the near-penniless Stravinsky, stranded in Switzerland in 1916, seized upon this seminal figure to create his now almost-forgotten ballet *Renard* – The Fox.

In the 1920s and later, Soviet writers, artists, and publishers featured foxes and vixens in new versions of old folktales as well as in new children's stories. Soviet-era writer Alexei Tolstoy (who, as Stalin's favorite, would become head of the Writers' Union) created remarkable stories of foxes, including a new version of *Puss in Boots* in which a vixen replaces the famous Puss of the title. Other Soviet-era stories of the fox celebrated the vixen's wiles in subtle retellings that would elude Stalin's censors and fortify authors and readers facing the baffling terrors of their age.

Throughout the tales, the clever fox and the naive Fool appear as opposites in almost every respect but share a trait of humorous playfulness. Each appears and reappears as a jester, a trickster, and a clown. The transformative power of each to overcome adversity and evil is the stuff of resilience and triumphant laughter. In 1944, just after the end of the brutal, nearly nine-hundred-day siege of Leningrad, purchasers of a Great Patriotic War postcard could have seen in the illustration an echo of the city's starvation, its survival – and perhaps also the promise of coming victory. The picture was of Krylov's hungry fox, looking with longing at the cheese in the crow's mouth – and as many readers would have remembered, the fox will win (see Color Plate 3).

These tales of firebirds and foxes, and the much larger bodies of work of which they are part, reflect three meta-themes. The first is Russia's enduring fascination with freedom – construed as agency, free will, and self-realization – and its conjoined twin, order. In *The Firebird and the Fox*, the dynamic tension between freedom and order is illuminated by Russian works great and small, drawing from the political, social, religious, and geographic dimensions of the nation's life. The firebird, caged or free, captured or in flight, is central to this theme. The stories assert that freedom, despite its evident allure, is not without its perils, and order not without its appeal. Freedom is fugitive desire, disorder, and demonic governance; order is divine rule, constancy, and social harmony.

A second meta-theme concerns boundaries: the Self and the Other; the Russian and the foreigner; even the boundary between the audience for art and those outside that audience. Division and unity, an ancient philosophical question, proved to have special resonance and meaning in Russian culture of this period. Russia under the tsars and Soviets comprised many nationalities, and by construction, the country or empire was and is inclusive. Yet for much of the country's history, political leaders have emphasized borders, and society has been embroiled in the related questions of inclusion and exclusion. During the period

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discussed in this book, Russia's cultural creators treated the categorization of people into "us" and "them" on many levels: some emphasizing the merits of uniqueness, and others arguing for the dismantling of barriers. Conservative polemicists urged the preservation of Russia's special qualities and cautioned against the subversion and moral decay associated with modernity and exposure to the wider world. Others tended to favor inclusion rather than exclusion or separation, and those associated with the group of educated Russians known as the intelligentsia often promoted tolerance as well. As the Fool stands outside the community (but ultimately leads it), as the fox breaks through the borders of propriety, so the artists of the period recognized, struggled with, and breached boundaries themselves. These cultural debates over inclusion and boundaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries built a foundation that Soviet officials would later use, as they weaponized the arts to pursue internal enemies.

A third meta-theme is the era's focus on the relationship between reality and art. What is real, what is art, and how should the two relate? What are the roles, privileges, and responsibilities of writers and artists in their societies? These questions, perennial ones for artists everywhere, and connected, too, with the question of boundaries, took on great importance in Russia in the decades examined in this book. Debates on the roles and privileges of cultural representatives rose as old class categories and social strata weakened, and ordinary people increasingly understood themselves to be active participants in an emergent civil society. Individuals came to perceive their own interests distinct from those defined by class, place, and family.

As former serfs and their descendants assumed a greater share of agency over their own lives, Russia's higher classes, charged by tradition to act on behalf of the common people, found a dimension of liberation for themselves. Jettisoning traditions opened space for innovation in form and subject matter. The conception of the obligations of the intelligentsia evolved from a stance of paternalism regarding Russia's common people, and particularly the peasants, to one of more generalized political engagement in the interests of society as a whole, including their own. Some saw art as part of the new politics; others rejected the necessity of art to serve external ends, whether reform or revolution. Either way, in defending their own creative freedom, artists and writers often defended the freedom of others. The very notion of art easily became subversive, since great artists were inclined to privilege their visions over those of the country's leaders, whether tsars or Bolsheviks.

These three themes – freedom and order, boundaries of self and society, and the societal obligations of art and artists – generated an

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enormous body of creative work, from the sparks of popular ephemera to the lasting heat and light of what we now know as masterpieces of literature and art. In the environment of rapid cultural, social, and political change and confusion, the creative endeavor of those at the bottom of the social scale nourished experimentation and expression at the top. Innovation at the top percolated down to the popular media and then recirculated throughout the system. The era was replete with innovative paradox: the Realist novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy that are not entirely realistic, Anton Chekhov's invention of the short story that neither begins nor ends, avant-garde spoofs that became a transformative artistic movement, and the veneration for cultural giants that morphed into celebrity culture.

The treatment of core themes places these works in a shared tradition, illuminating not only their creative heritage but also their influence on subsequent art and artists. The advent of Soviet power did not immediately stop this cultural ferment, although it profoundly changed the dynamics. Some among the avant-garde of writers and artists enthusiastically embraced the revolutionary cause and created exciting new works intended to appeal to what they hoped were the tastes of newly empowered common readers and viewers. The post-revolutionary phase of artistic excitement met a mixed reception and was never really put to the test of congruence with popular tastes. Leninist and Stalinist political bosses became the most important consumers, or at least selectors, of cultural items on shelves and walls and stages, and the tastes of common people became less relevant. As the Stalinist era unfolded, cultural bureaucrats repressed and persecuted much of the creative elite, destroying along with them the vital environment in which art and culture had earlier flourished. Yet as the authorities closed parts of the old system, they also opened new niches – particularly those in which the foxes thrived. These cultural outlaws emerged again to cultivate the wiles not only of creative circles but of broad audiences.

The chapters that follow treat this vibrant century of cultural richness, with its recurring themes and characters, in three chronological parts.

In Part I, which covers the 1850s to the 1890s, I show how the greatest writers and artists, still producing largely for elite audiences, nonetheless drew inspiration from age-old traditions shared with Russians of common origin. A new generation of writers and artists tested their power as professionals and came to speak to and for the nation. This was the era of Emancipation and reform that brought civil identity and freedom to millions. For Russian writers and artists, it was a time of inspiring confusion. Great cultural figures were energized by the social change that they saw around them. Freedom was in the air, and they

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imagined it for themselves and for the nation. Writers and artists took inspiration from the changing experiences of people newly recognized as civil compatriots, and they spoke for and to widening constituencies.

They also expressed ambivalence about what people freed from the constraints of traditional order might do and what literature they might value. Dostoevsky espoused the instructive power of Russian Orthodoxy and imbued his works with it. Tolstoy (at least until his conversion in the mid-1880s) and Chekhov embraced a more secular vision of humanity, and each approached audiences beyond the traditional elites. They and other writers dreamed of a time when ordinary people would read their works. Early on, most of the newly emancipated could not yet read; as literacy spread, writers and artists reached out to the new public in innovative ways. New cheap "kopeck" prints and fiction catered to peasants and the poor. Rising numbers of middle-class readers bought new magazines brightened by new types of illustration. Tolstoy and Chekhov made notable efforts to reach these new Russian publics. The final chapter of Part I examines their emergence as admired civic heroes and the parallel secular canonization of the Russian classics.[12]

Part II of the book views the changing cultural and political scene that carried Russia through to the end of the Old Regime, a period of revolutionary and cultural fervor. A growing audience for cultural expression fueled demand for new works, including popular commercial literature and art – an expansion of market-based culture that reinforced the professionalization of the arts at all levels. Yet in the aftermath of the failed Revolution of 1905, many disillusioned writers and artists rejected Russia's big new cultural market for a smaller public of cognoscenti; other cultural figures turned their eyes to artistic opportunities abroad. The role of Russian culture beyond Russia's borders grew. Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* achieved success in the great capitals of Europe, a success that drew on funding from a tsarist regime desperate to raise its international profile, affirm its legitimacy, and sustain the inflow of foreign capital. Across the cultural spectrum, writers and artists experimented with new roles, new notions of the public, and new ideas of what freedom meant for themselves and the nation. Avant-garde artists used humor and publicity to overleap a hostile press, in the process introducing Russia to a new melding of art and publicity.

The October Revolution in 1917 profoundly shocked the cultural ecosystem. Part III of this book focuses on how the changed realities brought by the Soviet regime both redirected interactions among cultural players and stimulated new forms of expression. The new authorities, together with cooperative elements of creative society, recast notions of freedom, of the arts, and of the public. The links between and among

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audiences at different levels, which had thrived in the active prerevolutionary cultural market, began to be dismantled. Over time, the government imposed increasingly tight strictures requiring cultural creators to align their work with political directives. By 1934, the official policy of Socialist Realism was mandatory across the cultural community, and compliance was enforced by powerful cultural bodies as well as by the regime's mechanisms of terror. To the always high stakes of aesthetic appraisal by one's peers were added political risks with lethal consequences – but also, for some, unprecedented access to power and influence.

The early years of revolutionary ferment had yielded aesthetic innovation of the highest order – still celebrated in the works of writers Mikhail Bulgakov, Isaac Babel, Yevgeny Zamiatin, Andrei Platonov, Ilya Ilf, and Evgeny Petrov; poets Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, and Marina Tsvetaeva; and artists Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, and others. Yet the pressures of persecution, demands from above, and simply the dangers of life under an unpredictable dictatorship took their toll on creativity. The initial hopes and enthusiasm of many writers, artists, and performers mutated into other responses: flight, withdrawal, ironic accommodation, resigned co-optation, and resistance.

Some creative spirits took cover in the (somewhat) safer terrain of children's literature. Writers who did so include Andrei Platonov, Daniil Kharms, Alexei Tolstoy, and the most famous Soviet children's author, Kornei Chukovsky. Among the artists, Vladimir Tatlin, Vladimir Lebedev, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Lidiia V. Popova, and a few others followed suit. At one level, the move to children's literature helped its creators escape the censorship and surveillance that the regime trained on works intended for adults (even as, ironically, children's literature reached a broad audience of adults as well). At another level, by seeding children's literature with values counter to those practiced by Soviet officialdom, writers and artists might hope to spread those countervalues to a new generation. It is not too much to suggest that theirs was the guile of the fox, the flight of the firebird, and, perhaps, the recklessness of the Fool.

These very figures are celebrated in the most appreciated Soviet-era works for children. By keeping alive Russian stories of wise Fools, sentient animals, and magical powers, their creators carried forward folkloric traditions barred from the reigning Socialist Realism. In doing so, they protected limited space for artistic innovation.

It is partly on the strength of the continued production of brilliant children's literature that the century of Russian creative genius – celebrated in this book – was able to continue, despite the closing down of so many avenues of expression in the 1930s and 1940s. And the

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