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“Brooks brings a lifetime of learning to bear in his new interpretation of Russian and Soviet culture in its most creative century. He is able to suggest how a variety of cultural fields over time grappled with the same set of recurring Russian dilemmas, distilling the powerful motifs that writers, artists, and intellectuals repeatedly embroidered into their works. No one who studies or loves Russian culture can afford to ignore this book.”

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“This immensely enjoyable and marvelously informative book places the visual arts within the context of wider cultural developments, illuminating inter-relationships between creative individuals working in different media, and revealing the playfulness, humor, and political dissidence of artists operating under the Tsars and the Bolsheviks. An education and a joy to read.”

Christina Lodder, *University of Kent*

“Monumental in scope and rigor, gentle in its approach to the fragility of the new material it uncovers, and written with irresistible force and mischievous wit – Brooks tells us the stories of his explorations of Russian culture. The reader will no longer wonder why we love it and could not do without its magic. Brooks reminds us of why the humanities are unthinkable and useless without fundamentally good scholarly books.”

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“Brooks introduces the reader to wondrous dimensions of Russian cultural creativity. By breaching the distinction between low and high culture, he reveals how popular themes and imagery permeated great works of literature and the arts, leavening their serious minded discourse with doses of magical thinking and imagination.”

Richard Wortman, *Columbia University*

The Firebird and the Fox

Showcasing the genius of Russian literature, art, music, and dance over a century of turmoil, within the dynamic cultural ecosystem that shaped it, *The Firebird and the Fox* explores the shared traditions, mutual influences, and enduring themes that recur in these art forms. The book uses two emblematic characters from Russian culture – the Firebird, symbol of the transcendent power of art in defiance of circumstance and the efforts of censors to contain creativity, and the fox, usually female and representing wit, cleverness, and the agency of artists and everyone who triumphs over adversity – to explore how Russian cultural life changed between 1850 and 1950. Jeffrey Brooks reveals how high culture drew on folk and popular genres and then, in turn, influenced an expanding commercial culture. Richly illustrated, *The Firebird and the Fox* assuredly and imaginatively navigates the complex terrain of this eventful century.

JEFFREY BROOKS is Professor in the Department of History at Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of *When Russia Learned to Read* (1985), which was awarded the 1986 Wayne S. Vucinich Prize; *Thank You, Comrade Stalin* (2000); and *Lenin and the Making of the Soviet State* (2007), with Georgiy Chernyavskiy.

The Firebird and the Fox

Russian Culture under Tsars and Bolsheviks

Jeffrey Brooks

Johns Hopkins University



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The pages that follow immerse readers in an extraordinary period of creativity in Russian literature, art, music, dance, and other media in the roughly hundred years after 1850. What explains the artistic intensity of this period, and why did it take the shape that it did? These questions are for students of culture, but for me they are also highly personal and have connected closely with my life and influenced my half-century of professional experience.

I was ten years old when my father died, and thirteen when my mother remarried and brought Joseph Follmann into our lives. Joe, a businessman, was an accomplished jazz pianist who as a young man had played with Jack Teagarden, “King of the Blues Trombone,” performing among other places at the *Folies Bergère* cabaret in Paris. Joe also composed, including a piece once performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, as well as musicals and plays for Philadelphia’s Hedgerow Theater. Our dinner table hosted, among many others, various down-and-out actors, painters, writers, and musicians who knew that, thanks to Joe’s continuing enthusiasm for the arts and his day job that could put ample food on the table, they would find a welcome. My stepfather’s connection with cultural events and people, not to mention his huge collection of old 78 rpm records, introduced the arts to me as a living and changing enterprise.

In addition to this artistic milieu, Joe brought into our home his bookshelves of Russian classics. I was fascinated by these works and the idea that, exotic and impenetrable as they were, they were part of my own history. My family’s origin myth (from somewhere between Minsk and Pinsk, and heavy on the pogroms) had not encouraged revisiting the past. Indeed, my uncles quite explicitly cautioned distance from anything Russian. My version of teenage rebellion was to delve deeply into Russian literature. In the years that followed, I never lost the rare and valuable insight Joe helped me to attain: that culture is the creation of real people, reacting to the constraints and serendipities of their personal and social circumstances, and ultimately connecting humanity’s past to our present and future.

My subsequent professional interest in the social and historical context of cultural development took me to Russia's literacy revolution in the late nineteenth century and the works created for that era's millions of new readers. Soviet officialdom had come to deem many of these works insufficiently edifying, and in the 1970s, access to them was restricted. But my research for *When Russia Learned to Read* (Northwestern University Press, 1985, 2003) endeared me to the librarians at the Lenin Library, who eagerly read along with me episodes of *The Bandit Churkin* and *Sonia of the Golden Hand*.

Similar interests and inquiries carried my work on into the Soviet period, with *Thank You Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2000). Both it and *When Russia Learned to Read* touched on the interplay of high and low culture, and how context influenced each. Now, in *The Firebird and the Fox*, I attend more specifically to this crucial source of creativity. This book examines the shared Russian traditions and circumstances that shaped both high and low culture during a critical century – about 1850–1950 – recognizing the distinct ways in which tradition was manifested and tracing clear outlines of commonality up and down the creative ladder. It also explores how Russian culture at all levels began to be shaped by new interactions – not only the growing interplay among multiple audiences but also new, multilayered relationships among writers, publishers, artists, critics, and public officials. The interplay of the people, the forces, and the shared traditions yielded a century of extraordinary creativity, many of the products of which we continue to enjoy.

Since this work draws on an entire career of research, all those thanked in my earlier books deserve another round of recognition. Several colleagues have read the current manuscript in its entirety or in part and have steered me back on track when I went astray. Georgiy Chernyavskiy read and commented wisely on several versions. Boris Dralyuk provided helpful input on substance, style, and translations. Nikolay Koposov read the entire manuscript and inspired me with his scholarship. I turned repeatedly to Dina Khapaeva to clarify issues of language and interpretation. Christina Lodder guided me in my treatment of the fine arts. William Mills Todd read an early draft of my first four chapters and has encouraged me from the start of my career. I also thank Richard Wortman for his reflections on early drafts of several chapters and his later comments on the more fully developed text. Inessa Medzhibovskaya shared her deep knowledge of Tolstoy. Catriona Kelly read the manuscript very promptly and provided both encouragement and insightful suggestions. I also thank Olga Velikanova for sharing her knowledge

xvi Acknowledgments

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The early readers recognized here have been helpful in their comments and probing in their questions. One that has required the most thought on my part is the book's larger approach and methods. Questions about method in cultural history can be challenging. I have at times in the past used a soft version of quantitative methods – for example, in reviewing the content of written works and drawing out recurrent metaphors, topics, and themes in the Soviet press. Such quantitative knowledge is encompassed in the present work. But what is presented overall is primarily qualitative, reflecting my six decades of reading the works of this creative century and interpreting them in context.

Clearly the range of material produced over the century in question is broad and the quantity vast. To show the interlinkage of developments in high and low culture and even individual works, I have been selective. Some material that is already well addressed in the literature is skipped; some well-studied works are looked at again but from different perspectives. Lacunae that I consider to have been overlooked are filled in or, I hope, raised as more important areas for understanding. For example,

Acknowledgments

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Soviet children's literature as read by adults warrants attention, as does the linkage between visual and literary references to certain cultural themes.

Though I try not to work it too hard, I develop the metaphor of a cultural ecosystem, one in which multiple forces interact in mutuality. This approach reveals the connectivity and exchange among the constituent parts of the system; the culture's shared exposure to evolving social, political, and economic circumstances; and the interactiveness of innovation in form and content. Because I have been intentionally selective, I consider this a work of interpretation rather than a comprehensive treatment of the century.

I thank my wife, Karen McConnell Brooks, for her thoughtful contributions to all of my professional projects and her detailed input into this one. Our wonderful daughters, Elizabeth McConnell Brooks and Emily Margaret Brooks, have developed tolerance for large doses of conversation about Russian culture and have been invariably encouraging. Their fine husbands, Abbas Jaffer and Zachary Zill, respectively, enrich our lives and have mirrored spousal enthusiasm for the project. I am thankful for the extraordinary level of family support that I have enjoyed over my entire life.

I dedicate the work to the memory of Joseph F. Follmann, my late stepfather.