Introduction

SIMON FRANKLIN, REBECCA REICH, AND EMMA WIDDIS

A new history of Russian literature cannot simply bring its story up to date. The story itself needs to be conceived and shaped differently. The last *Cambridge History of Russian Literature* was published in 1989 (two years before the collapse of the Soviet Union), and its narrative stopped in 1980.[1] Over the next three decades, it became clear that the study of Russian literature would have to change in fundamental ways to account for a wider range of voices and experiences, as well as for fundamental shifts in technologies. Efforts to push back against literary canons well beyond the Russian sphere highlighted the complexities of writing the 'history' of any literature. New theoretical frameworks transformed the critical lens through which scholars approached questions of gender, sexuality, and the colonial and postcolonial space. Electronic media generated new forms of expression and demanded reconsideration of literary works and practices. Over this period, studies of Russian literature have reflected and contributed to the wider debates. The field has become rich in diverse and destabilising analysis. We have shaped the *New Cambridge History of Russian Literature* to reflect this diversity, and to offer a new model of literary history writing.

Ideas of Russian literature, and of Russian culture more widely, have evolved with, and become integral elements of, ideas of Russia itself. As such, Russian literature has been a central component in the emergence and sustenance of a sense of distinctive community, of social and cultural belonging. At the same time, it has served both as a mechanism of cultural assimilation and domination within the empire, and as Russia's most successful and effective cultural export, profoundly influencing perceptions of Russia and Russianness far beyond the borders of empire. The imperial legacies of Russian literature were instrumentalised most evidently during Russia's

1 Charles A. Moser (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

incursions into Ukraine from 2014 onwards, and in particular its full-scale invasion in February 2022, which were officially underpinned by an extreme version of an exceptionalist Russian cultural master-narrative. The problems and questions raised by such a narrative were not new, but they became especially acute when transferred to the battlefield. For generations accustomed to assuming that history had entered a more stable post-imperial age, especially in Europe, the resurgence of Russia's colonial ambitions came as a shock. This volume was not designed to address explicitly the war and its impact on the field. Nevertheless, we believe that its conception and structure model a flexible approach that can contribute to some of these urgent debates.

The expression 'Russian literature' implies that the object of study is one thing, in the singular. This is unavoidable, but also misleading. Here we start from the premise that Russian literature is not a given, not an immutable canon, but a contested space with shifting boundaries and definitions. It is precisely because this space remains contested that Russian literature has functioned, and continues to function, as a concept with cultural valence and semiotic power. It has its own institutions and practices, its own codes of behaviour and understanding, its own constellation of ideas and key preoccupations. It alters and renews these ideas over time, while retaining certain themes and frameworks. No history of Russian literature can take its object of study for granted. However, it is the responsibility of such a history to engage with Russian literature as a lived and ever-evolving idea: to historicise it, to examine its mechanisms and meanings, to trace its modes of production, dissemination, and reception.

A second premise of this volume is that there should be many Histories of Russian Literature, because Russian literature has many histories. The range and diversity of any literature require that it be approached from multiple, complementary angles. The book therefore unfolds through four distinct strands: histories constructed according to different criteria. The first strand, Movements, follows the sequence of and tensions among the dominant '-isms' of literary fashion and production, from what we call the 'devotional age' of pre-modernity through to contemporary movements in the electronic age. This was the framework for the previous *Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, albeit minus the electronic and the postmodern. The second strand, Mechanisms, tells a history of Russian literature through its institutions and primary media of production. Such mechanisms include spatially located institutions such as monasteries, the imperial court, and literary salons or circles; media such as print journals, publishers, and the internet;

and structures of regulation and demand such as censorship and markets; or, more pervasively, empire itself. The third strand highlights the history of literary Forms such as verse, novels, or digital platforms. The fourth is dedicated to Heroes, in the sense of emblematic character types (positive or otherwise), as they have evolved across a chronological range, from saints to madmen.

In order to convey a sense of historical continuity as well as change, our contributors have been asked to do two things: to provide a brief overview that indicates the fuller scope of a topic across time; and to focus on a historical period in which expressions of that topic became particularly pronounced. The sequencing of these temporal centres of gravity situates each chapter within its own history's chronological progression, while the inclusion of a longue durée narrative highlights the synchronicities and persistent frameworks that link the chapters and, indeed, the histories as a whole. We therefore invite our readers to navigate the book laterally as well as chronologically – and we indicate where they might do so in parenthetical references to parallel chapters.

In addition to the histories, and cutting across their boundaries, are thirty much briefer essays that we have called Boxes. The Boxes are arranged within six thematic clusters, each consisting of five essays. Since they are formed thematically, these clusters can be regarded as fragments of further, parallel historical strands. One cluster gives close readings of paradigmatic texts (for instance, a micro-story or an internet form); a second focuses on exemplary genres (e.g. satire or children's literature); a third deals with literary locations, such as St Petersburg, the village, or the apartment; a fourth highlights different kinds of narrative voice (e.g. the omniscient narrator or the unreliable narrator); a fifth introduces influential Russian critical framers of literature such as Vissarion Belinskii or Mikhail Bakhtin; and a sixth looks at 'literature beyond literature', whether in mythologies (for instance, of Aleksandr Pushkin) or in dialogue with other cultural forms (film, music, art). This combination of synchronic and diachronic narratives, and the resulting multiplication of conceptual frames, offers a new approach to the field of study that is Russian literature and goes some way towards capturing its shifting forms and definitions. Some of our histories (Movements, Forms) may appear conventional; others (Mechanisms, Heroes) will seem less so. Our aim in refusing to privilege one set of disciplinary questions over another is to make available a more multifaceted picture of any given historical moment or phenomenon.

We draw particular attention here to the history of Mechanisms. The chapters in this strand seek to understand the social, physical, and discursive

structures and categories that generated and shaped Russian literature and its communities of production and reception. The role played by these mechanisms may have been limiting as well as enabling, as will be clearest in chapters on 'The Monastery' and 'The Censor'. Readers may find it more unexpected to think about 'Empire', 'Queerness', or 'The Voice' as mechanisms that have constrained or facilitated particular literary modes or forms, but all have functioned as such in Russian literature. For example, in practical terms, the formation of empire prompted the travel that stimulated the narratives of Romantic prose and verse, and it created frameworks through which Russian (and non-Russian) writers encountered the diverse peoples contained within the constantly changing borders of imperial space. Here, on a more conceptual and pervasive level, the chapter on 'Empire' explores 'imperiality' as a constructive mechanism in generating literature. Likewise, thinking about queerness as a mechanism facilitates an analysis of how sexuality, and in particular resistance to heteronormativity, has prompted distinct modes of literary production. Heteronormativity is itself a mechanism, but it may be taken for granted unless confronted with challenges to its naturalisation, and its constructive power in shaping Russian literature emerges most clearly through an examination of counter-mechanisms of resistance.

In offering these diverse perspectives on Russian literature, we neither consistently affirm nor consistently revise a literary canon, because literary canonicity – that is, the affirmation of great writers and great works – is not a structural principle of the volume. Thus, although the forty-three chapters and thirty Boxes include discussions of several hundred writers and works, we have invited contributors to determine the hierarchy of individual coverage according to the demands of their particular chapters. As a result, some writers and works inevitably receive less – or more – attention than readers may reckon is their due. Nor do we divide up writers according to any social, ideological, or personal characteristics. Our contributors address questions of sexuality and ethnicity as they shape particular works of literature, rather than as biographical elements that categorise writers within particular groups. Thus, for example, we have no single chapter on 'women writers', as our contributors have considered texts by female writers within the bounds of their relevant chapters. This approach does not entirely address what remains an imbalance in Russian literary studies, but for several periods it more adequately reflects a diversity of literary production and immediate reception, which has often been distorted in subsequent canon formation.

Just as 'history' and 'Russian' are complex terms, so the category of 'literature' defies firm delineation. In this volume, our resistance to

conventional canons expands to a consideration of varied forms under the broad heading of 'literature'. We have not been prescriptive in setting limits to what can be considered literary production, and our contributors address a wide variety of forms (including memes, self-writing, artist's books), as mediated by changing technologies of production.

The conceptual framework of this volume is not claimed as definitive or exhaustive. We offer four parallel histories. More are possible, even desirable, just as each of the histories could itself be augmented with additional chapters. Our histories mainly explore how literature has come into being, what it has looked like, what it has said or meant in relation to the culture of its times. We pay less attention to how it has been received and used. There is no sustained work here on readership, for example, whether as a chapter within the history of Mechanisms or as an independent strand.[2] Similarly, while such themes are of necessity raised, we do not systematically address a topic that could be developed into an important additional history: literature's instrumentalisation as an agent of imperial assimilation, of social integration through education, or indeed of opposition and protest.

Our histories, in their dialogues with each other and with other established narratives, offer a composite description of the multifaceted thing we call Russian literature. But what is that 'thing'? What are the parameters of the object of study? What is, and is not, included within this volume's understanding of Russian literature? We stated above, as a general premise of this volume, that Russian literature is not a given, but a contested space with shifting boundaries and definitions. What are the main contestable and shifting elements, and how do we approach them?

Language

According to one criterion, Russian literature might be defined as literature written in the Russian language. Yet the Russian language is a language of empire, and it is also a global language. There are well-established distinctions between, for example, English and other Anglophone literatures, French and Francophone, Portuguese and Lusophone, Spanish and Hispanic. By analogy it might initially seem reasonable to distinguish Russian literature from broader Russophone literature or literatures.

2 See, however, the monumental study: Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena (eds.), *Reading Russia: A History of Reading in Modern Russia*, 3 vols. (Milan: Di/Segni, 2020).

Analogies, however, are rarely precise. English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish are now the dominant national and/or administrative languages in many countries separate from the imperial homelands from which they were exported. The international Russophone presence is less transparently anchored. Russian has been the dominant national or official language only within the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and most markedly, the Russian Federation. In former imperial or Soviet territories, it often co-exists with other national languages in a diverse set of relationships. The global Russophone presence, for long periods concentrated in a few traditional centres of emigration, has expanded hugely since the fall of the Soviet Union. Current Russian state ideology posits a 'Russian world' to which all Russophone culture can or should belong. In international scholarship there is a fairly strong consensus that global Russophone literature should not automatically be appropriated in this way: that not all literature written in Russian should be counted as Russian literature. The parallel with Anglophone/English, or Francophone/French, makes this ostensible paradox straightforward in principle. American literature or the Anglophone literature of India are routinely differentiated from English literature, even though all are in English (and may even be taught alongside each other in faculties of English). This may be lexically inconsistent, but in practice it is not confusing, and the concepts have become habitual.

The previous *Cambridge History of Russian Literature* declared that one of its objectives was to 'promote the healing of the division' caused by emigration.[3] By contrast, at the outset our policy was that the present volume should *not* attempt systematically to incorporate or appropriate émigré or wider Russophone and diasporic literature. However, the geographies and identities of global Russophone writing are in flux, Russophone studies are at an early stage of development, and conventions for differentiation are still emerging.[4] Some kinds of guideline seem reasonably clear: for example, that modern Russophone writing in Ukraine should not be claimed for a history of Russian literature on grounds of language alone. More broadly, however, we have not imposed fixed boundaries or definitions, especially where the theme of a chapter demands a wider field of vision. For example, in the Heroes history, the chapter on 'The Émigré' traces the representation of

3 Moser (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, p. viii.

4 See the survey by Marco Puleri, 'Russophonia as an epistemic challenge', *Ab Imperio* 1 (2023), 76–98; also Kevin M. F. Platt (ed.), *Global Russian Cultures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019); Andy Byford, Connor Doak, and Stephen Hutchings (eds.), *Transnational Russian Studies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

its protagonist across Russophone writing by non-Russian as well as Russian authors, some of whom have also produced works on the theme in other languages. While the chapter excludes diaspora authors who have written exclusively in languages other than Russian, it does make reference to non-Russian language works by authors who have also explored the theme in Russian. In such cases, bilingualism may be seen as a generative framework for the Russian-language works.

An equivalent issue of boundaries and definition arises with respect to literature rendered *into* Russian from other languages. It is not enough to say that Russian literature has been profoundly influenced by translations; at times, translations and adaptations can (arguably) be reckoned integral components of Russian literature. Through most of the pre-modern centuries, when much high-prestige writing was anonymous, texts that were translated and what we would call 'original' – that is, initially produced in a form of the Russian language – mingled freely in the manuscripts without consistent differentiation of provenance or status. Moreover, in manuscript transmission the texts of translations could be and were recast in ways that might be reckoned to convert them into original works. In post-medieval times, too, the line between translation and creative adaptation could be blurred. Literary translation has often been regarded as a high-prestige creative activity, and some translations and adaptations have come to be treated as significant works of Russian literature. Thus, versions of the Horatian *Exegi monumentum* by Gavriil Derzhavin (1795) and Aleksandr Pushkin (1836) are routinely included among their authorial works. In the twentieth century, generations of Soviet children enjoyed the verses of Samuil Marshak, which were inspired by but only very loosely adapted from the English originals that they ostensibly translate.

Like the distinction between Russian and Russophone, so the distinction between translated and original is both obvious and obscure, both necessary and resistant to definition.

Language is a prerequisite for determining Russian literature, but it is a highly problematic marker that cannot be applied automatically.

Place

For the present purposes of outlining the field of Russian literature, writing in Russian is a minimum requirement. It is not, however, a sufficient one. No less problematic is the question of place. Any attempt to draw an apparently straightforward distinction between literature written in Russia and literature

written outside Russia founders on at least three obstacles: the mutations of political geography; the variety of authorial biographies; and, particularly in contemporary culture, the dislocations that are enabled by technologies.

Where is Russia, over time? State borders have expanded and contracted dramatically over the centuries: from the compact Muscovite principality of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the massive multilingual, multi-ethnic empire that eventually stretched from the Carpathians to the Pacific (and on to Alaska), from the Arctic Circle to the borders of Iran, and east across Central Asia. In one sense, little of that imperial space can properly be designated Russia or Russian. The Russian language, unlike English, in principle (though inconsistently) distinguishes the geopolitical (*rossiiskii*) from the ethno-cultural and linguistic (*russkii*). That is, it has separate words to denote that which relates to Russia, and that which relates to the Russian language itself. This lexical differentiation is convenient, but it does not solve the problem of how the two spheres of meaning should map onto each other in the case of literature. The implosion of imperial space with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 left very substantial Russophone communities outside geopolitical Russia and created culturally and ethnically mixed populations of many freshly independent states. Many of these people do not consider themselves to be part of any imagined space of Russian letters.

The movement of borders is just one of the mechanisms that may dislocate literary production. Another is the movement of peoples, whether by emigration, exile, or simply travel. For instance, the apparently 'classic' Russian writer Ivan Turgenev drafted his most famous novel, *Fathers and Children*, while in England and France. The poet Fedor Tiutchev spent much of his life in Germany and Italy. The upheavals of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have produced further waves of dislocation, including by authors who continued to produce literature in the Russian language while temporarily abroad. Such peregrinations are biographically interesting but are not seen as putting the works themselves in a special category. These are Russian writers writing works of Russian literature while they happen to be out of the country.

A thornier set of questions arises when it comes to emigration, exile, and the post-imperial space. Some histories of Russian literature have pointed to a distinction between literature produced in Russia (usually meaning the Empire and, in particular, the Soviet Union) and literature produced outside it (meaning, in particular, 'émigré' literature of the twentieth century). Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, and hence of large segments of the former

Russian Empire, émigré literature has become only a small subset of the linguistically fluid space of global Russophone and diasporic literatures.[5] The (in)significance of location is further complicated or undermined by the impact of electronic media, through which words can be produced and distributed anywhere instantly. To what extent does it matter whether those words happen to be entered into a device in Omsk or in Oregon?

A writer's own sense of identity and belonging cannot always be retrieved in retrospect. It may be hybrid, and not necessarily linked to place, or to just one place. The received canon of nineteenth-century Russian literature is almost inconceivable without the works of Nikolai Gogol, who was born and educated in rural Ukraine and moved to St Petersburg in 1828. His first collection of stories is set in Ukraine and written in a Russian language inflected with Ukrainian phrasing and folklore. His later tales, set in the imperial capital, crystallised one of the central tropes of Russian literature: the image of St Petersburg itself. Accounts of Ukrainian literature justifiably feature Mykola Hohol, yet his work is reducible to neither culture. Gogol was both a subject and a citizen of the Russian Empire, formed within the spaces of Ukrainian and Russian letters, and shaping both in turn. Or, in a later period, take the writer Chingiz Aitmatov. Until 1966 Aitmatov published simultaneously in Kyrgyz and in Russian, but subsequently almost exclusively in Russian. The supra-national, imperial identity was Soviet and the linguistic medium became fully Russian, yet Aitmatov is also treated as a major figure in the literary history of Kyrgyzstan.

In this volume, we understand Russian literature as an imagined community of letters, a set of practices and affiliations, contested and debated. According to this framework, language and place need not necessarily coincide. Instead, the focus shifts towards whether and how a writer writes *within* that imagined community. This may not be a question of conscious affiliation; indeed, it may be a case of coercion, or rejection, or of how the writer's work is received. All of those practices play out within what might be broadly construed as Russian literature, a discursive space which is emphatically not coterminous with the fixed and normative 'Russian world' that is instrumentalised by the Russian state. We do not claim to be comprehensive, whether with respect to any (putative) entirety of Russian literature, or with respect to a (putative) plurality of Russian literatures. Rather, we deliberately diminish some conventional assumptions about the subject, signalling Russian

5 On diaspora as a field of investigation, see Maria Rubins (ed.), *Redefining Russian Literary Diaspora, 1920–2020* (London: UCL Press, 2021).

literature as a contested space, refuting its claims of totalising inclusivity, while also recognising how it has encouraged and imposed categories of belonging.

Time

A third structuring question relates to chronology. What is the timespan of Russian literature as represented in this volume? The endpoint is arbitrary, for purely practical reasons: this is a history of Russian literature up to approximately 2021, when the drafts of most of the chapters were completed, though with sporadic reference to material up to early 2023. In the final stages of editing, contributors were given the opportunity to reflect on the possible implications, for their respective chapters, of any shifts of perspective prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But more reflexive, retrospective assimilation of currently unfolding events will be a matter for future histories of Russian literature.

The period of early Rus – from the turn of the eleventh century until roughly the Mongol conquest of the mid-thirteenth century – is the shared prehistory of the three modern East Slavic languages and cultures: Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian. It belongs to none and all of them. Historically, this is straightforward. Ideologically and lexically, it is not. It is complicated or contaminated by the fact that, in the Russian political and cultural tradition, there is a deeply embedded story of exclusive succession from early Rus to Russia. This is a myth of identity and can lead to a claim to retrospective ownership of the past, as has been the case with Vladimir Putin's assertions of the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine. The heritage of early Rus is not exclusive to Russia, or indeed to Ukraine, or Belarus.

One might reasonably choose to ignore early Rus and start with the literature of the principality of Moscow in, say, the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. This solves one problem but creates others. In the first place, by an equivalent logic early Rus could be omitted from *any* national literary history, including Ukrainian or Belarusian. This would be a pity. Second, and perhaps more pertinent for the history of culture, the continuities of East Slav textual or artistic culture cannot be reduced to Russo-centric political teleology. Almost all the high-prestige writings of early Rus have reached us in later – Muscovite and Russian – manuscripts, through the culture of mutable textuality that typifies what we have called the 'age of devotion'. It would be misleading to exclude discussion of texts across that span, including, in some instances, their early Rus versions. While in this volume the temporal

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focus of the pre-modern chapters is mostly in the Muscovite period, we do not abandon important textual continuities from the earlier period. However, by contrast with most histories of Russian literature, we do not tell a continuous story from the eleventh century.

Just as the beginnings of Russia as a geopolitical entity are vague, so too are the temporal beginnings of Russian as a language. The modern language, Contemporary Standard Russian – or, as it tends to be labelled in Russian textbooks, the 'Russian Literary Language' – emerged as a set of codified norms over the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. If the history of Russian literature is the history of literature in modern Russian, then there would be a case for starting in the eighteenth century, or at best in the late seventeenth century. The language of cultural prestige in Muscovy, as in early Rus, drew heavily on Church Slavonic, interacting in varying degrees with East Slav vernaculars. Though recognisably related, this is not the modern vernacular. On linguistic grounds it is justifiable to start with pre-modern texts, but one should be aware that today, even in editions aimed at native speakers, most such texts are printed along with translations into Contemporary Standard Russian.

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Moments of separation can spur contact and exchange. When we began this project in 2017, our intention was to discuss the drafts with contributors at a single workshop in Cambridge. The Covid pandemic derailed that plan; instead, we held a series of online workshops dedicated to each of the histories. Drafts of all chapters were circulated to contributors, who attended and participated in higher numbers than would likely have been possible had we met in person. These virtual discussions not only provided valuable feedback as the authors prepared the next versions of their own chapters but also gave everyone a clearer sense of the volume as a whole, of the genre, of parallel chapters in other histories, of what fitted and what did not, and of what was still lacking. In short, the *New Cambridge History of Russian Literature* is more than a collage of separately written chapters. It may properly be said to be a work of collective authorship.

The connectedness that our community of contributors achieved despite the pandemic faces a different kind of challenge today. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sharpened awareness of urgent questions about what the Russian literary tradition consists of, what it represents, and what it means to study it. The debates that have opened up in our field are difficult, but they are also essential. It is premature at a time of war to determine a decolonised

vision of Russian literature. But it is essential that such a vision be discussed; and this discussion begins by acknowledging the many ways of narrating Russian literary history. In its organisation, this volume contests the idea that a history of literature can be told in one way. It invites a multiplicity of readings, both within and across its chapters, and in the juxtaposing of its separate strands. It mobilises connections but also underscores debate. It reveals the rich and complex field of Russian literature without seeking to resolve it. We do not claim, then, that the *New Cambridge History of Russian Literature* is a definitive account. Rather, it seeks to frame the subject in ways that will engage and provoke still other framings by the communities that constitute our field.

Further Reading

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