

MODERN RUSSIAN PROSE ABROAD: PERCEPTION, TRANSLATIONS, RESEARCH

Современная русская проза за рубежом:
восприятие, переводы, исследования

Olga G Egorova
egorovs.mail@gmail.com
Moscow State Linguistic University (Moscow, Russia)

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to assessing the current state of contemporary Russian literature abroad in terms of interest from foreign readers, influence from the Russian emigrants, the volume of translations and topics of interest. The article analyzes the cultural aspects and periods of Russian history of literature that are of particular interest to foreigners, as well as their reflection in modern prose in Russian. The article also focuses on the centers for the promotion of Russian culture abroad, as well as centers/chairs for its research at universities.

Keywords: modern Russian literature, Russian language, Russian culture, translation, research centers.

PEZIOME

Статья посвящена оценке текущего состояния современной русской литературы за рубежом с точки зрения интереса со стороны иностранных читателей, влияния на эту оценку русских эмигрантов, объема переводов и интересующих тем. В статье анализируются культурные аспекты и периоды истории русской литературы, вызывающие особый интерес у иностранцев, а также их отражение в современной прозе на русском языке. В статье также уделено внимание центрам популяризации русской культуры за рубежом, а также центрам/кафедрам ее исследования в университетах.

Ключевые слова: современная русская литература, русский язык, русская культура, перевод, научные центры.

INTEREST IN MODERN RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE WEST

By the end of the 20th century, many researchers drew attention to the sharp decline in scientific interest in Russian literature in Europe. After an unprecedented rise among scientists, publishers, readers in the period 1945–1995, the time has come for a sharp (27%) decline, a decrease in publications, translations and discussions with regard to Russian literature (Sorokina 2019: 63). Svetlana Adzhubey, director of the Academia Rossica Foundation, says that translations of fiction from Russian into English make up less than 3% of the total number of translations (Adzhubey 2012). In addition, translations from Russian for many years have not been included in the lists of the Best Translated Books Award, which is awarded by the online literary magazine The Percent for the best original translation of a book into English.

The modern attitude towards Russian literature on the part of foreigners can be characterized as follows: the main contemporary Russian writers have to compete with the Russian classics of the 19th century. Many foreigners recognize Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, but they remain wary towards, for example, Sorokin or Makanin. Overcoming this “barrier” was not essential for a very long time. It has only recently been given attention. But it should be noted that the degree of interest in Russian literature, of course, is primarily associated with interest in Russia itself, and in recent years Russia has been less interesting to Western readers.

Taking into account modern Russian literature in the West, various works are in demand: from novels that explain what kind of life Russia actually has in general, what kind of life Russia has during the presidency of Vladimir Putin, to detective stories, spy thrillers and science fiction (Boris Akunin, Sergey Lukyanenko, Dmitry Glukhovsky, Sergei Kostin and others). The Russia of the nineties provokes great interest — foreigners perceive it as a kind of “a story about the fall of an angel.” In general, as it was the case in the 19th century, Russia is perceived in the paradigm of the eternal great test of the human spirit and is in many ways a country of intellectual literature and, accordingly, such authors as Mikhail Shishkin, Viktor Pelevin, Dmitry Bykov, Lyudmila Ulitskaya (Shiskov Altai Regional Universal Scientific Library, URL: <http://akunb.altlib.ru/abonement-hudozhestvennoy-literaturyi/sovremennyye-russkie-pisateli-i-zapad/>).

Historically Germany was one of the Western countries, which took biggest interest in Russian literature. So it is no wonder that before COVID-19 an ordinary German reader could find all possible works on the shelves of the bookstores: from all-time classics (Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy) to modern writers (Glukhovsky, Pelevin, Sorokin) (Pogoda-Kołodziejak 2018: 415). It is also notable that modern Russian authors, who dared to enter the Western market in the early 2000, managed to catch the interest of the local readers and stay for such a long time. “The image of a new Russian society, reflections on the era in which we live and postapocalyptic scenarios are the main themes that have emerged in Russian literature in the first two decades of the 21st century. They meet the interests of German readers in full” (Pogoda-Kołodziejak 2018: 417).

THE IMAGE OF THE RUSSIAN CULTURE IN THE WEST, FORMED BY THE RUSSIAN EMIGRANTS

The image of Russian literature was productively comprehended in foreign literature of the late 20th – early 21st centuries. One of the most intensively developing vectors of comprehension of Russia has become German-language prose.

First of all, it seems necessary to turn to the phenomenon of multicultural literature, the work of authors - representatives of the fourth wave of emigration, who assimilated in a new country and began to write literary texts in a non-native language, to recreate their pre-emigration experience in them, thus forming the image of Russia and Russian culture. Among these writers are Vladimir Kaminer (b. 1967) and Olga Gryaznova (b. 1984).

Vladimir Kaminer, a German author of Russian-Jewish origin who emigrated from the USSR in 1990, is a very curious figure in the German-speaking literary context. A

distinctive feature of his work, which brought him considerable fame in Germany, is the construction of national images and images of national cultures based on the principles of stereotyping and reductionism, as well as their constant comparison with each other in a picaresque and travesty way.

In terms of representing the image of Russian literature, the work of V. Kaminer is diverse. He owns books that tell about the life and work of individual Russian writers (“Tolstoy’s beard and Chekhov’s shoes: walks through Russian literature” / “Tolstois Bart und Tschechows Schuhe: Streifzüge durch die russische Literatur”, 2019 – a collection consisting of seven “short stories”, dedicated to F. Dostoevsky, L. Tolstoy, A. Chekhov, M. Bulgakov, V. Mayakovsky, V. Nabokov and D. Kharmis), as well as novels in which the author makes the phenomena of Russian and German culture collide, interweaves reflections on literature into everyday multicultural life (“Uncle Vanya is Coming” / “Onkel Wanja kommt: Eine Reise durch die Nacht”, 2014).

Kaminer’s favorite creative style involves emphasizing the personal experience of reading selected authors, referring to ridiculous details from the lives of the writers under analysis, which are delicately intertwined with general philosophical reflections.

The work of Olga Gryaznova, in its way, is perceived in a fundamentally different way, from the point of view of the formation of national and cultural images. Olga Gryaznova was a German writer of Russian-Jewish origin, who emigrated from the Azerbaijan SSR in 1996. In her debut novel “The Russian is the one who loves birches” (“Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt”, 2012), O. Gryaznova deals not so much with the “Russian theme”, images of Russia and Russian culture, but with the problem of an imaginary dichotomy of national identity.

O. Gryaznova does not use the stereotype as a means of forming a national image in a system of oppositions, but uses it to deconstruct the very phenomenon of the national stereotype, as well as the national image as such.

As an epigraph, the author cites a fragment from Chekhov’s drama “Three Sisters”. Thus, the image of Russian literature is present in the novel under consideration as a paratextual element and sets a number of contexts of both cultural-national and aesthetic-philosophical nature.

The work of the modern German writer Per Leo (born 1972) deserves special attention. In his novel “Flow and Soil” (“Flut und Boden”, 2014), based on a family history of 70–80 years ago, the author, among other things, touches upon the theme of the “Russian myth” based on fear and rejection, which dominates in the West German context. In Leo’s text, there is a very deep and nuanced picture, however not so much of the images of the USSR and Russia, but precisely of the elements of Russian culture and literature that had a significant impact on the formation of the national identity of East Germany – the space of new humanism. Per Leo repeatedly refers to Ch. Aitmatov, B. Pasternak, K. Paustovsky, A. Chekhov, I. Turgenev, L. Tolstoy, F. Dostoevsky. It is also worth noting Leo’s attention to modern Russian-language prose. In particular, he is the author of a review article about the life and work of the Russian prose writer Sergei Lebedev.

We cannot but mention the situation that established after February 2022. There were reports that Russian literature was widely cancelled in the West. Though there are certain incidents, we cannot speak about widespread cancellation. For example, Professor

David Gillespie, Honorary Research Fellow of Queen Mary University of London (UK) claims, that the West won't try too hard to cancel Russian literature. "I don't think it's widespread. I've heard of some cases. If I remember correctly, Dostoevsky was cancelled in the Czech Republic. But there is a big reaction against this. Mainly, from teachers and university professors. As far as I know, Departments of Russian language and literature at Western universities are not under threat" (Poberey 2022).

It is also hard to believe that Russian writers will simply disappear from foreign book shops. According to the Octagon Portal and Time Machine International Delivery service, Russian emigrants, who left Russia after February 2022, continued to read Russian books and create demand for them in the foreign markets. It is fair for both local book shops and international deliveries. According to Octagon data, the international book delivery sector from Russia grew by 10–15% over 2022-2023 (Lesovskikh 2023). Delivery services dispatch about 3000 book deliveries per month. The receivers are usually Russian emigrants that have now settled either in Europe or the CIS countries (Time Saving Machine 2023).

INTEREST TOWARDS CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN CHINA

Contemporary Russian literature is of interest to China primarily from the point of view of a new vector of development. The trend became clear in the 1980s, as since that time the number of research works in this sphere has gradually been growing in number. It can partially be explained by the fact that Chinese experts date the emergence of Russian modern literature back to 1985 (Li 2020: 102). However, the interest truly shaped in the 1990s. - a time of unprecedented freedom of speech. Many historians call this time the "reckless decade", but there were no forbidden topics for the creator. Contemporary Russian literature, including frankly postmodern literature, was released into the world primarily as an indicator of some destruction of the cultural code of classics and socialist realism. China was very sensitive to these new trends coming from its western neighbor.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, numerous exhibitions of foreign literature have been held in China, Chinese publishing houses (Kunlun, Zhenmin wenxue chubanshe, etc.) actively publish Russian literature (the following novels were translated into Chinese and published: "Do not die before death" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko, "Night hunting" by Yuri Kozlov, "The Sign of the Beast" by Oleg Ermakov, works by Lyudmila Ulitskaya and others) (Petukhov 2015: 112).

In 2002, China's largest publishing house Zhenmin wenxue chubanshe (Folk Literature) and the Chinese Society of the Study of Foreign Literature established the Best Foreign Novel of the Year award, and over the past decade, a total of ten authors from Russia have been awarded this prize.

Among the topics that attract the attention of Chinese readers are terrorism, conspiracy against the authorities, the modern Russian revolution, radical youth, refugees from Russia, the fate of the intellectuals and post-Soviet culture, violence and cruelty reigning in society, the destruction of the family, the degradation of the Russian spirit, the problems of the Russian business in the 1990s and others (Petukhov 2015: 112).

For example, the book “Sincerely Yours Shurik” by L. Ulitskaya, the following themes and images seem significant for the Chinese: a young man raised by his mother and grandmother, a complex relationship between a mother and a son. Shurik is a spoiled son typical of modern China: wordless and subject to a sense of duty and experiencing the losses associated with this. Also, judging by the success of the book, the details of the life of the 1970s also turned out to be very recognizable for the Chinese population.

THE RESEARCH CENTERS OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE ABROAD

Universities and university departments became the centers, which started to spread Russian cultural influence and provided acquaintance with Russian literature. They lay the foundation for the centers and institutions engaged in the study of Russia and its neighbors. You can find them on every continent.

In the US, we can name the Ellison Center for Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies (REECAS) at the University of Washington. Through research and teaching programs, the Center seeks to understand the legacy of the imperial and communist past and analyze the emerging institutions and identities that will shape the future of Eurasia. Professor Herbert Ellison himself during his lifetime did not hide his desire to establish stable ties with the diverse peoples of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The center offers undergraduate and graduate educational programs covering various cultural aspects of Russia, Eastern Europe and Asia (geography, history, cinema, art, literature, international relations, etc.). Teaching is also possible in Russian.

Another center worth mentioning is the Institute for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1957, the Center for Slavic Studies was founded, which in 2000 became the current Institute. The Institute aims to support research, graduate student training and a wide range of scientific and social programs (conferences, lectures, seminars for teachers and graduate students), publications and weekly lunch talks on specialized topics. The Institute also hosts numerous scientists and public figures from all over the world. The Institute actively supports the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, which allows students to obtain a specialized diploma. Besides, in addition to the main program, one can obtain a special Certificate at any faculty (Russia and Eastern Europe). The certificate is designed for masters and PhD students.

Historically, Russia seemed most interesting to its neighboring countries. So, within the framework of the University of Helsinki in the capital of Finland, the Aleksanteri Institute was established. Its activities cover scientific research, specialized training and expertise in Russia and Eastern Europe, especially in the field of social sciences and humanities. The Institute coordinates and develops cooperation and dialogue between the academic world, administration, business representatives and civil society in Finland and abroad.

We should also mention the Center for Eurasian and Russian Studies at the University of Tartu in Estonia. It is a multidisciplinary center for research, education and public relations at the University of Tartu, which brings together scientists, students and members of the public who share an interest in the past, present and future of

the Eurasian space, where historically the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were situated. The Center serves as a source of expert knowledge about Russia and Eurasia for the media, educational institutions and the general public in Estonia itself, the Baltic Sea region and beyond.

In Italy, where historically Russian culture and history have aroused great interest, we can note the University of Venice and the Center for Studies in Russian Art located in it. It was established in 2011 and since then the Center has been organizing various exhibitions, showing Russian films in the original, publishing Russian translations of books and has been a center of attraction for those who are interested in Russia and its culture. University of Granada (Spain) has the Russian Center as well. It was created with the support of the Russkiy Mir Foundation and became the first such center dedicated to Russia in Spain. The Center promotes the dissemination of the Russian language, Russian culture among interested students and supports Russian migrants in Spain. The center also organizes Russian language courses, passing Russian as a foreign language exam. It is also a center for cooperation with Russian universities and organizations. We must mention the Department of Russian and East European Studies at Charles University in Prague (Czech Republic). The department is engaged in research dedicated to Russia and the countries of the former Soviet bloc (the Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus, etc.). The department offers bachelor's programs with the Russian language and promotes the spread of the Russian language and culture. The same is also being done, in particular, by the Institute of Russian Studies at the University of Warsaw (Poland). The Institute offers bachelor's and master's programs, including those taught in Russian.

As for Asia, there are such major centers for the study of Russian culture as the Center for Slavic Studies at the Dalian University of Foreign Studies, China (an active partner of Russian universities within the USCO), the Institute of Russian Studies at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, South Korea, and the Center for Russian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, India. All these centers look at the multifaceted Russian culture, national character, Russian history and, last but not least, contemporary Russian literature from different angles.

Of course, this list is far from being complete, and almost every country in the world offers programs and centers of various levels dedicated to the study of Russian literature.

AUTHORS AND TOPICS POPULAR ABROAD

Speaking about the decline in interest in Russia on the part of foreign readers in general, one more fact cannot be ignored: modern Russian literature is produced mainly for “domestic consumption” and practically does not reach the foreign reader. Yet Russian society and life in and around Russia still attract the attention of foreigners. For example, the book by the Belarusian writer Svetlana Aleksievich “Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets”, written in Russian, became a New York Times bestseller (Five Russian writers who became popular abroad. URL: <https://mybook.ru/sets/10223-pyat-russkih-pisatelej-stavshih-populyarnymi-za-ru/>). This is not surprising. The book became the fifth and final in the sensational cycle “Voices of Utopia”. The book tells us about the painful

stage of perestroika after the collapse of the USSR, about nationalism, xenophobia, racism, problems with refugees and much more. As noted earlier, it is this period and these topics that are of interest to foreigners in modern Russian literature. Moreover, this interest is manifested not only among foreign readers, but also among authors. In particular, the detective story by the American writer Julia Phillips “Disappearing Earth” about the abduction of two girls in Kamchatka made it to the final of the US National Book Award in 2019.

But why does modern Russian literature so rarely go beyond the borders of Russia? Many experts and writers have long noticed that Russian writers are not good at “working with modernity.” But it is impossible not to note the trends common to the entire market: the share of translated works in the portfolio of American publishers is less than 1% in total (in Italy, for example, more than half of the published books are translations), and 40% of them are translations of books by authors from Western Europe (Five Russian writers who became popular abroad. URL: <https://mybook.ru/sets/10223-pyat-russkih-pisatelej-stavshih-populyarnymi-za-ru/>).

Nevertheless, some books do arouse interest abroad. In 2021, Mybook, a large subscription based electronic library, published a list of the most popular works of Russian authors abroad. This list looked as follows:

1. Dmitry Glukhovsky: “Metro 2033”;
2. Maria Stepanova “In Memory of Memory”;
3. Boris Akunin “The Winter Queen”;
4. Vladimir Sorokin “Day of the Oprichnik”;
5. Lyudmila Ulitskaya “Jacob’s Ladder”.

All these books, one way or another, touch upon the very topics that foreigners are looking for in Russian-language works: post-Soviet Russia, issues of xenophobia and nationalism, post-memory (war and perestroika), problems of the Russian people, etc. All these texts interact with modernity, tune in to a conversation with a modern reader, regardless of what blood flows in him or her and on what land he or she was born. The willingness to open up to new experience (and not only about national specifics), the fundamental openness of the communication channel – this is exactly what distinguishes these authors from many of their compatriots. That is why these books managed to attract a foreign reader (Five Russian writers who have become popular abroad URL: <https://mybook.ru/sets/10223-pyat-russkih-pisatelej-stavshih-populyarnymi-za-ru/>).

INTERNET RESOURCES ABOUT RUSSIAN LITERATURE ABROAD

Despite the already mentioned decline in interest in Russian literature abroad, various portals are being created in English and other languages about works written in Russian. In 2012, the Read Russia portal was created, which virtually united three cities - New York, London and Moscow. It was a new initiative designed to promote Russian literature and Russian book culture outside of Russia, mainly in English-speaking countries. Thanks to innovative programs, projects and events that support the English

translation and publication of Russian works, Read Russia provides international audience with new opportunities to connect — in person, on screen and online — with prominent representatives of Russian literature. The portal has The Russian Library – a resource through which you can track the new books and translated editions. There you can also see links to stores where these books can be purchased.

In 2011, the Russian Art + Culture portal was created. Since the very beginning it has become the most popular and comprehensive international guide to the world of Russian art and culture. It is a portal with a selection of the best events related to Russia, exclusive interviews with world-famous professionals of the Russian culture, reviews of the latest books, exhibitions and performances, research and author articles, the latest reports on the art market. Throughout the year, the portal holds seminars, lectures, film screenings, conferences and organizes private art tours. In 2014, Russian Art + Culture published the Year of Culture of Great Britain and Russia magazine, and in 2015 commissioned the first-ever in-depth analysis of the Russian auction market.

There are also Russian resources that are designed to promote Russian culture abroad. For example, the Institute of Translation at the State Library for Foreign Literature (Russia). It is an autonomous non-profit organization promoting the development of the theory and practice of literary translation. The main mission of the Institute is the promotion of Russian literature throughout the world, the support of foreign translators and publishers who deal with Russian literature. The Institute of Translation has developed an annual grant program for them. A grant may be allocated for the translation into foreign languages of one work of Russian literature. One of the main projects of the Institute is a unique database of translations and translators of Russian literature into foreign languages. By the beginning of 2021, it covered data on 40000 translated books, 3 thousand authors, 4,5 thousand translators and 3,6 thousand publishers.

As mentioned above, researchers pay special interest to the literature, one way or another evaluating the path of Russia in the 20th century, the Soviet legacy, etc. 80% of research papers in one context or another raise the question of Russia in the 20th century, its cultural memory and the cultural experience of several Soviet generations. This is what the Institute for Translation does. Among the studied works, the following can be cited as an example: Vladimir Sharov “Return to Egypt” (Big Book award, 2013, Russian Booker award, 2014); Leonid Yuzefovich “Winter Road” (Big Book award, 2015, National Bestseller award, 2016); Alexander Terekhov “The Germans” (National Bestseller award, 2012, Book of the Year award, 2012); Ksenia Buksha “Freedom Plant” (National Bestseller award, 2014, Book of the Year award, 2014); Svetlana Aleksievich “Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets” (Big Book award, 2014, Book of the Year award, 2014, Nobel Prize in Literature, 2015), etc.

A portal called ReadRussia based in the USA publishes resources, dedicated to Russian literature and folklore. It provides links to numerous online libraries and useful resources, that promote Russian literature abroad. Before COVID-19 pandemic the portal also organized Russian literature weeks - a series of conversations featuring Russia’s acclaimed new authors, famed translators of Russian fiction, and leading Russian literature scholars and critics.

Academic Studies Press, a publishing house founded in 2007 by Igor Nemirovsky, a graduate of the Institute of Russian Literature who moved to America, publishes the Contemporary Western Rusistica book series in collaboration with Bibliorossica (St.

Petersburg, Russia). Modern Western Russian studies include outstanding scientific monographs in this area. The volumes, written by leading American and European scholars, are presented in Russian translation for the first time. (Academic Studies Press. URL: <https://www.academicstudiespress.com/contemporary-american-studies>). The mission of the book series is to introduce Russian readers to the Western scientific view of Russian history, literature, culture, sociology, politics and economics. It revives the spirit of the previous series “Modern Western Rusistica”, published in the 1990s by the publishing house “Academic Project” (St. Petersburg, Russia). The volumes are an analysis of modern and other kind of Russian literature by Western researchers.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can also be noted that since interest in contemporary Russian literature is being observed, it can and should be expanded. This direction could become extremely promising for modern universities related to languages and literature. Projects dedicated to the translation of modern works of Russian literature devoted to the most interesting topics for foreign viewers could be successful. Such projects could be primarily of interest to students, since we are talking about modern Russian literature, which current students are most likely familiar with to some extent. Projects could also be implemented by young teachers or researchers in the field of translation, who are keen to study contemporary literature in Russia. Such initiatives could contribute to a more successful promotion of contemporary Russian works abroad, where it can be introduced not only to the connoisseurs of the Russian language and culture, but also to non-Russian-speaking readers.

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