

The Great Russian Writers

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Annotation: Russian literature refers to the literature of Russia and its émigrés and to Russian-language literature. The roots of Russian literature can be traced to the Middle Ages, when epics and chronicles in Old East Slavic were composed. By the Age of Enlightenment, literature had grown in importance, and from the early 1830s, Russian literature underwent an astounding golden age in poetry, prose and drama. Romanticism permitted a flowering of poetic talent: Vasily Zhukovsky and later his protégé Alexander Pushkin came to the fore.

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Prose was flourishing as well. Mikhail Lermontov was one of the most important poets and novelists. The first great Russian novelist was Nikolai Gogol. Then came Ivan Turgenev, who mastered both short stories and novels. Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy soon became internationally renowned. Other important figures of Russian realism were Ivan Goncharov, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin and Nikolai Leskov. In the second half of the century Anton Chekhov excelled in short stories and became a leading dramatist. The beginning of the 20th century ranks as the Silver Age of Russian poetry. The poets most often associated with the "Silver Age" are Konstantin Balmont, Valery Bryusov, Alexander Blok, Anna Akhmatova, Nikolay Gumilyov, Sergei Yesenin, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Marina Tsvetaeva. This era produced some first-rate novelists and short-story writers, such as Aleksandr Kuprin, Nobel Prize winner Ivan Bunin, Leonid Andreyev, Fyodor Sologub, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Andrei Bely and Maxim Gorky.

After the Revolution of 1917, Russian literature split into Soviet and white émigré parts. While the Soviet Union assured universal literacy and a highly developed book printing industry, it also enforced ideological censorship. In the 1930s Socialist realism became the predominant trend in Russia. Its leading figures were Nikolay Ostrovsky, Alexander Fadeyev and other writers, who laid the foundations of this style. Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* has been among the most popular works of Russian Socialist literature. Some writers, such as Mikhail Bulgakov, Andrei Platonov and Daniil Kharms were criticized and wrote with little or no hope of being published. Various émigré writers, such as poets Vladislav Khodasevich, Georgy Ivanov and Vyacheslav Ivanov; novelists such as Gaito Gazdanov, Vladimir Nabokov and Bunin, continued to write in exile. Some writers dared to oppose Soviet ideology, like Nobel Prize-winning novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov, who wrote about life in the gulag camps. The Khrushchev Thaw brought some fresh wind to literature and poetry became a mass cultural phenomenon. This "thaw" did not last long; in the 1970s, some of the most prominent authors were banned from publishing and prosecuted for their anti-Soviet sentiments.

The end of the 20th century was a difficult period for Russian literature, with few distinct voices. Among the most discussed authors of this period were Victor Pelevin, who gained popularity with short stories and novels, novelist and playwright Vladimir Sorokin, and the poet Dmitri Prigov. In the 21st century, a new generation of Russian authors appeared, differing greatly from the postmodernist Russian prose of the late 20th century, which led critics to speak about "new realism".

Russian authors have significantly contributed to numerous literary genres. Russia has five Nobel Prize in literature laureates. As of 2011, Russia was the fourth largest book producer in the world in terms of published titles.[1] A popular folk saying claims Russians are "the world's most reading nation" Old Russian literature consists of several masterpieces written in the Old East Slavic (i.e. the language of Kievan Rus', not to be confused with the contemporaneous Church Slavonic nor with modern Ukrainian, Russian and Belarusian). The main type of Old Russian historical literature were chronicles, most of them anonymous.[4] Anonymous works also include *The Tale of Igor's Campaign and Praying of Daniel the Immured*. Hagiographies (Russian: жития святых, zhiitiyasvyatykh, "lives of the saints") formed a popular genre of the Old Russian literature. Life of Alexander Nevsky offers a well-known example. Other Russian literary monuments include *Zadonschina*, *Physiologist*, *Synopsis and A Journey Beyond the Three Seas*. Bylinas – oral folk epics – fused Christian and pagan traditions. Medieval Russian literature had an overwhelmingly

religious character and used an adapted form of the Church Slavonic language with many South Slavic elements. The first work in colloquial Russian, the autobiography of the archpriest Avvakum, emerged only in the mid-17th century. After taking the throne at the end of the 17th century, Peter the Great's influence on the Russian culture would extend far into the 18th century. Peter's reign during the beginning of the 18th century initiated a series of modernizing changes in Russian literature. The reforms he implemented encouraged Russian artists and scientists to make innovations in their crafts and fields with the intention of creating an economy and culture comparable. Peter's example set a precedent for the remainder of the 18th century as Russian writers began to form clear ideas about the proper use and progression of the Russian language. Through their debates regarding versification of the Russian language and tone of Russian literature, the writers in the first half of the 18th century were able to lay foundation for the more poignant, topical work of the late 18th century.

Satirist Antiokh Dmitrievich Kantemir, 1708–1744, was one of the earliest Russian writers not only to praise the ideals of Peter I's reforms but the ideals of the growing Enlightenment movement in Europe. Kantemir's works regularly expressed his admiration for Peter, most notably in his epic dedicated to the emperor entitled *Petrida*. More often, however, Kantemir indirectly praised Peter's influence through his satiric criticism of Russia's "superficiality and obscurantism," which he saw as manifestations of the backwardness Peter attempted to correct through his reforms.[5] Kantemir honored this tradition of reform not only through his support for Peter, but by initiating a decade-long debate on the proper syllabic versification using the Russian language.

Vasily Kirillovich Trediakovsky, a poet, playwright, essayist, translator and contemporary to Antiokh Kantemir, also found himself deeply entrenched in Enlightenment conventions in his work with the Russian Academy of Sciences and his groundbreaking translations of French and classical works to the Russian language. A turning point in the course of Russian literature, his translation of Paul Tallemant's work *Voyage to the Isle of Love*, was the first to use the Russian vernacular as opposed to the formal and outdated Church-Slavonic.[6] This introduction set a precedent for secular works to be composed in the vernacular, while sacred texts would remain in Church-Slavonic. However, his work was often incredibly theoretical and scholarly, focused on promoting the versification of the language with which he spoke.

While Trediakovsky's approach to writing is often described as highly erudite, the young writer and scholarly rival to Trediakovsky, Alexander Petrovich Sumarokov, 1717–1777, was dedicated to the styles of French classicism. Sumarokov's interest in the form of French literature mirrored his devotion to the westernizing spirit of Peter the Great's age. Although he often disagreed with Trediakovsky, Sumarokov also advocated the use of simple, natural language in order to diversify the audience and make more efficient use of the Russian language. Like his colleagues and counterparts, Sumarokov extolled the legacy of Peter I, writing in his manifesto *Epistle on Poetry*, "The great Peter hurls his thunder from the Baltic shores, the Russian sword glitters in all corners of the universe".[7] Peter the Great's policies of westernization and displays of military prowess naturally attracted Sumarokov and his contemporaries.

Mikhail Vasilyevich Lomonosov, in particular, expressed his gratitude for and dedication to Peter's legacy in his unfinished *Peter the Great*, Lomonosov's works often focused on themes of the awe-inspiring, grandeur nature, and was therefore drawn to Peter because of the magnitude of his military, architectural and cultural feats. In contrast to Sumarokov's devotion to simplicity, Lomonosov favored a belief in a hierarchy of literary styles divided into high, middle and low. This style facilitated Lomonosov's grandiose, high minded writing and use of both vernacular and Church-Slavonic.

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