

Beyond the USSR: Contemporary Russia in Fiction and Nonfiction

BY JESSICA TEISCH



Twenty-five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western readers still often associate Russian literature with Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Boris Pasternak, whose literary works top the 100 must-read lists.

But during the period stretching between those classic writers and the end of the Communist era reigned the Union of Soviet Writers. This union supported Communist Party policies, defended the single Soviet literary method, Socialist Realism (represented most prominently by Maxim Gorky), and punished—or at the very least did not publish—writers who failed to adhere to its artistic mandates. Certainly, some writers, including Nobel Prize-winning novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who wrote about life in the gulag camps, opposed Soviet ideology, but others, if they wanted to express anti-Soviet sentiments, had to self-publish or publish in the West or in exile.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, a new crop of literary voices emerged. Today, a blossoming Russian

literature is starting to reach worldwide audiences. Below we present some of Russia's most prominent contemporary literary voices, as well as offer some nonfiction selections that help elucidate the Russia of today.

FICTION

Omon Ra

By Victor Pelevin (1992; translated 1998)

Before publishing this slim first novel, Ra (1962–) gained acclaim for his short stories, for which he won the 1993 Russian Booker Prize. In this farcical, subversive account of the Soviet space program, Omon Krivomazov, a young cosmonaut born in Moscow in the post–World War II

years, realizes that only by traveling to space will he free himself from the Soviet Union's shackles. But once chosen to embark on the first Soviet moon landing, he must make the ultimate sacrifice in order to become a hero. "Everything in Russia turns out to be sham, fake, the twin product of media-manipulation and human sacrifice. ... Mr. Pelevin ... has a freshly jaundiced vision of a distorted world, and in this sense his book is a noteworthy and utterly unintended product of the defunct Soviet Union's striving for grandeur" (*New York Times*).



The Slynx

By Tatyana Tolstaya (2003)

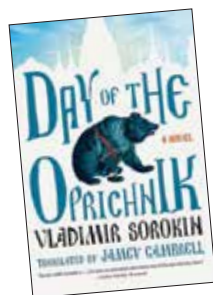
Tolstaya (1951–), a noteworthy essayist and short story writer, is a great-grandniece of the mighty Tolstoy, but this dark, comic postapocalyptic novel is worthy in its own right. Two centuries after “the Blast,” some of the people living in the primitive settlements on the site of old Moscow have various mutations (such as a tail or gills or a single eye). Others, the Oldeners, remember a lost culture, but all live in an era of serfs, government service, and regulation of the arts. “Poised between Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*,” commented the *New York Review of Books*, “*The Slynx* is a brilliantly inventive and shimmeringly ambiguous work of art: an account of a degraded world that is full of echoes of the sublime literature of Russia’s past; a grinning portrait of human inhumanity; a tribute to art in both its sovereignty and its helplessness; a vision of the past as the future in which the future is now.”



Day of the Oprichnik

By Vladimir Sorokin (2006)

Sorokin (1955–), who was awarded the People’s Booker Prize and the Andrei Bely Prize for outstanding contributions to Russian literature, is known as “the Tarantino of Russian literature.” In 2028, an isolationist Russia has reinstated the Tsar and the royal family and, among other measures, has instituted a security elite called the “oprichniks,” who repress dissent. Komiaga, one of these men, provides a rollicking, darkly satirical, 24-hour view of the regime’s brutality, injustices, and excesses. “The blend of antique and futuristic creates a fascinating literary estrangement, as well as symbolically representing our current global di-

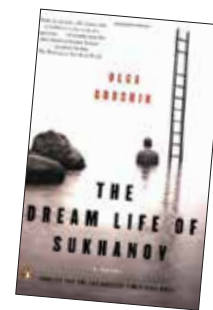


lemma: tied between retrograde and forward-facing horses of stasis and change,” noted the *Salon* critic. “The brilliant self-delivered portrait of Komiaga and his crowd is an achievement on a par with Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, a book that is certainly the model for *Oprichnik*.”

The Dream Life of Sukhanov

By Olga Grushin (2006)

In her first novel, Grushin (1971–), who was born in Moscow and now lives in the United States, explores the life of promising Surrealist-artist-turned-apparatchik Anatoly Sukhanov. The successful editor of the Soviet Union’s leading art magazine (which parrots the party line), he lives in mid-1980s Moscow, with Gorbachev newly at the helm. But at age 56, after his great sellout, his seemingly perfect life begins to crumble. Dark and satirical, this morality play explores memory and paranoia in a totalitarian regime where the price of survival is collective, selective amnesia about the nation’s past. “The reader does not always know whether events are ‘true’ or ‘imagined,’” wrote the *Washington Post*, “but this merely intensifies the novel’s pleasures, taking the reader into what is at once a Moscow almost palpably faithful to historical fact and a place wholly inside the mind and heart of Sukhanov.”



The Big Green Tent

By Ludmila Ulitskaya (2010; translated 2015)

One of Russia’s most acclaimed novelists and short story writers, Ulitskaya (1943–), who worked as a geneticist until she was accused of dissident activity in the 1960s, made her American debut with *The Funeral Party* (1997). Stretching across half a century, from the 1950s Soviet Union to life in Putin’s Russia, *The Big Green Tent* features three childhood friends in 1950s Moscow who form the “Lovers of Russian Letters” group: a radical photographer who becomes involved in the dissemination of *samizdat*, or banned literature; an orphaned Jewish poet; and a gifted pianist. But the story also includes other dissidents, fugitives, and ordinary people. What binds these lives together are love, friendship, heroism, integrity, and betrayal—as well as questions about the power of literature and music inside a surveillance state. “*The Big Green Tent*, for all its grand ambition, manages an intimacy that can leave a reader reeling,” reported NPR. “... *The Big Green Tent* is a masterpiece of massive ambition.” (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2016)



Maidenhair

By Mikhail Shishkin (2005; translated 2012)

◆ BIG BOOK AWARD, INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE AWARD

Born in Moscow in 1961 and now living in Zurich, Shishkin—who openly opposes Putin’s regime—has been compared to Chekhov and Nabokov. His fourth novel weaves together three main story lines and various textual sources: that of a Russian interpreter working with Swiss immigration officials interviewing political asylum seekers, whose stories build upon stories (“Since you can’t clarify the truth, you at least need to clarify the lie”); the interpreter’s letters to his son; and the journals of an early 20th-century Russian singer. Throughout, ancient Greek histories and Chechen histories collide. As the *Dallas Morning News* concluded, “Shishkin has spoken of a desire to return Russian literature to its place in world culture, and he addresses themes that affect everyone—love, loss, war, illness, guilt, fear, death—without ever becoming trite or banal. In short, *Maidenhair* is the best post-Soviet Russian novel I have read.”



Further Reading

THE MOUNTAIN AND THE WALL | ALISA GANIEVA (2013)

METRO 2033 | DMITRY GLUKHOVSKY (2005; TRANSLATED 2010)

THE GRAY HOUSE | MARIAM PETROSYAN (2009)

NIGHT WATCH CRIME SERIES | SERGEY LUKYANENKO (1998–)

ERAST FANDORIN MYSTERY SERIES | BORIS AKUNIN (1998–2012)

THE TIME: NIGHT | LUDMILLA PETRUSHEVSKAYA (1992; TRANSLATED 1994)

THERE ONCE LIVED A WOMAN WHO TRIED TO KILL HER NEIGHBOR’S BABY: SCARY FAIRY TALES (2009); THERE ONCE LIVED A GIRL WHO SEDUCED HER SISTER’S HUSBAND, AND HE HANGED HIMSELF: LOVE STORIES (2013); THERE ONCE LIVED A MOTHER WHO LOVED HER CHILDREN, UNTIL THEY MOVED BACK: THREE NOVELLAS ABOUT FAMILY (2014) | LYUDMILA PETRUSHEVSKAYA

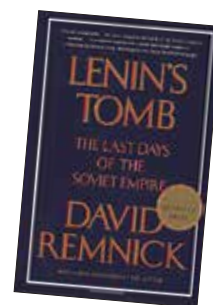
THE SECRET HISTORY OF MOSCOW (2007); THE ALCHEMY OF STONE (2008) | EKATERINA SEDIA

WE | EVGENY ZAMYATIN (1993)

SANKYA | ZAKHAR PRILEPIN (2006; ◆ EVRIKA-PRIZE, YASNAYA POLYANA AWARD)

the 70-year period of Communist rule leading to the Soviet Union’s collapse. He argues that the most important factor in its fall was the insurgence of memories of Stalin’s terror into public life, which destroyed the legitimacy of the regime. From his own travels and interviews with collective farm workers, dissidents, miners, Politburo leaders, Holocaust survivors, and more, Remnick conveys the tragic impact

of that history from the 1980s to the abortive putsch of August 1991. “*Lenin’s Tomb* is an extraordinary confluence of observation, hard work, knowledge and reflection; a better book by a journalist on the withdrawing roar of the Soviet Union is hard to imagine,” wrote the *New York Times*. “Mr. Remnick has given us portraits of the collapse of empire as vivid as those of the 19th-century Russian painter Verashchagin on his tours around British India.” See also *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia* (1997).



Putin Country

A Journey into the Real Russia

By Anne Garrels (2016)

For Garrels, a former *NPR* foreign correspondent, Chelyabinsk, a city on the southern edge of the Ural Mountains that formerly housed the USSR’s nuclear program, provides a microcosmic view of the evolution of modern Russia and the rise of Putin. Garrels first visited in 1993, and, through various residents—young professionals, single mothers, LGBT residents, religious fundamentalists, drug addicts, and more—she began charting the economic chaos following the Soviet Union’s collapse and the region’s embrace of Western

consumerism. Throughout, Garrels finds that “in the absence of a national idea,” Russians have “fallen into blaming outsiders [mainly the United States] instead of dealing with the issues at hand”—corruption at all levels of Russian life, poverty, alcoholism, low birth rates, failing infrastructure, and more. Garrels writes “with sensitivity, and her reporting is driven by a highly intelligent curiosity,” wrote *Foreign Affairs*. “In the end, one comes away with a portrait of contemporary Russian society that is deeper and more vivid than the ones often presented by data-laden sociological studies.”



NONFICTION

Lenin’s Tomb

The Last Days of the Soviet Empire

By David Remnick (1993)

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

Remnick, a former *Washington Post* correspondent who reported from Moscow through the Gorbachev era, explores

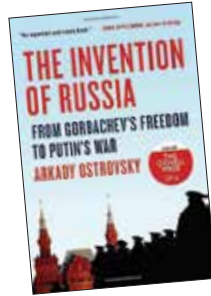
The Invention of Russia

From Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War

By Arkady Ostrovsky (2015)

◆ ORWELL PRIZE

Ostrovsky, a native of the Soviet Union and the former Moscow bureau chief of the *Economist*, details the changes that took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Outlining the social, political, and economic upheavals, he argues that under both Yeltsin and Putin, control over the media—and the formation of state-run propaganda—was crucial to consolidating power in Russia and destabilizing its enemies. The West and internal Russian politics play but minor roles. Ostrovsky provides an insider's tale of how Russia's invented myths and histories shaped the nation, its police state, and its demagogic populism. "He fills his book with anecdotes, conversations and a delightful cast of Russian characters, all of whom he seems to have known and interviewed at some point," commented the *New York Times*. "... His is a personal journey through a Russia that was once his, to understand what happened on the way from 1991 to 2016."

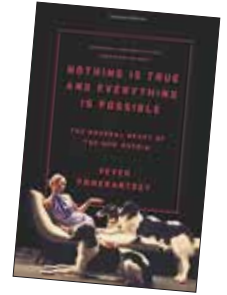


Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible

The Surreal Heart of the New Russia

By Peter Pomerantsev (2014)

Pomerantsev, a British journalist of Russian heritage and a reality television producer, explores Putin's manipulation of the Russian media. "TV is the only force that can unify and rule and bind this country," he writes. "It's the central mechanism of a new type of authoritarianism far subtler than 20th-century strains." After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Pomerantsev returned to Russia as a film and television consultant. He explores the country's post-Soviet transformations, as well as exposes today's "glittering masquerade, where every role and any position or belief is mutable." "Reality" is scripted inside the Kremlin (Pomerantsev focuses on gangsters, former prostitutes, models, lawyers, and others playing the Kremlin's script rather than Putin himself). Fake opposition parties engage in fake opposition to those in power; a fake justice system and fake television



news shape what Russia's 143 million people see. "Via a series of short vignettes, some humorous, others tragic, the author tells of those who successfully manipulated the iniquitous justice system and others who were exploited and penalized by it," wrote the *Washington Post*. "This is a gripping and unsettling account of life in grim post-Soviet Russia."

Secondhand Time

By Svetlana Alexievich (2016)

Alexievich won the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." In her works (including *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* [2005]), she compiles Studs Terkel-like volumes of oral history about postwar Russia. Here, interviewing people from various parts of the former USSR, she captures the reality of life under Communism and post-Communism. "I asked everyone I met what 'freedom' meant," she writes. "Fathers and children had very different answers." Parents born in the USSR and children raised after its collapse "do not share a common experience—it's like they're from different planets." Delving into the Soviet psyche as well as into the ethnic wars that emerged post-USSR, Alexievich puts human faces—former Kremlin apparatchiks, doctors, waitresses, and more—on the radically different sides of the Russian experience. As the *Christian Science Monitor* contended, *Secondhand Time* is "the most ambitious Russian literary work of art of the century." (★★★★ **SELECTION** Sept/Oct 2016)



The Girl from the Metropol Hotel

Growing Up in Communist Russia

By Ludmilla Petrushevskaya (2017)

Petrushevskaya, one of Russia's most famous living writers, has only recently had her books published in the United States. In this piercing, darkly humorous memoir, she writes about growing up in Stalinist Russia—first as part of an elite Bolshevik family, and then, when their fortunes changed, as "enemies of the people." During the war, she scavenged food from garbage cans, begged on the streets, and missed school because she lacked proper clothing; she also lived, for a while, under someone else's dining room table. Returning to Moscow at age nine, the wild Petrushevskaya, with her indomitable spirit, overcame her privations. "Petrushevskaya's slender, fragmentary memoir ... is strangely much closer in tone and craft to Soviet absurdist poetry than it is to these



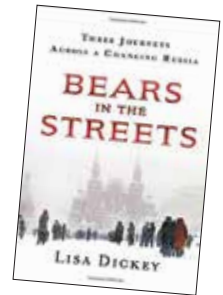
classic memoirs [by Tolstoy or Nabokov]," wrote the *New York Times*. "... If this memoir of growing up on the streets of the Soviet Union follows a logic, it is the violent, chaotic logic of Soviet history itself."

Bears in the Streets

Three Journeys Across a Changing Russia
By Lisa Dickey (2017)

Over three visits that started in 1995, each spanning a decade, Los Angeles writer Dickey paired up with photographer Gary Matoso, traveled to the same dozen Russian cities, and interviewed the same eclectic people for years. Originating as a blog, Dickey's resulting account paints a nuanced picture of Russia through the eyes of ordinary people—and the changes they have endured over 20 years.

The rise of tourism and consumer goods, the regeneration of a once-vilified Jewish community, the rise of entrepreneurs, the underground gay scene, the tradition of farming—all reveal the evolution of modern Russia as people's attitudes and beliefs have changed over time. "Dickey is a flippant writer, more a storyteller than a scholar, and while her book is amusing it does not delve into politics or even very deeply into anyone's life," noted the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. "But her observations are keen, and it is poignant to read how swiftly and profoundly this fascinating country has changed."



Further Reading

ALL THE KREMLIN'S MEN: INSIDE THE COURT OF VLADIMIR PUTIN | MIKHAIL ZYGAR (2016)

A HISTORY OF RUSSIA | NICHOLAS RIASANOVSKY AND MARK STEINBERG (1999)

THE NEW NOBILITY: THE RESTORATION OF RUSSIA'S SECURITY STATE AND THE ENDURING LEGACY OF THE KGB | ANDREI SOLDATOV AND IRINA BOROGAN (2011)

A SMALL CORNER OF HELL: DISPATCHES FROM CHECHNYA | ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA (2007)

THE LIMITS OF PARTNERSHIP | U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY | ANGELA STENT (2013)

THE MAN WITHOUT A FACE: THE UNLIKELY RISE OF VLADIMIR PUTIN | MASHA GESSEN (2012)

RED NOTICE: A TRUE STORY OF HIGH FINANCE, MURDER, AND ONE MAN'S FIGHT FOR JUSTICE | BILL BROWDER (★★★★ May/June 2015)

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