



Moscow State Historical Museum. Red Square Moscow

# LITERATURE OF CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

**F**or anyone over 30, November 9, 1989, was one of those “Where were you?” moments. Students, dissidents, and ordinary citizens from East and West converged on the Berlin Wall—a potent symbol of the repressive Soviet state—and demolished it with a gleeful urgency that captured the world’s attention and ushered in a new era of glasnost.

By 1991, the Cold War was officially over.

Or was it?

Two decades later, the former Soviet Union (now Russia and the Newly Independent States) is still experiencing sweeping cultural and economic change, and this has influenced the national literature and much contemporary history. Despite the introduction of capitalism and a seeming shift toward democracy, a sensational spy swap between Russia and the United States this past July compelled interested observers to wonder how much is *really* different. Tales of organized crime, Russian oligarchs made wealthy through the drug trade, and the exploitation of young women have become commonplace even as Russia works to rehabilitate itself in the eyes of the West.

The literature coming out of Russia, both from the Old Guard—including Andrei Bitov and Vasily Aksyonov, who remember well the brutal excesses of the Stalin regime, as well as the oppressive and censorious, if less violent, tenures

of Khrushchev and Brezhnev—and from the newest generation of writers, who are attempting to situate themselves in a changing world—reflects the complexities and the contradictions of the Russian spirit. This spirit is centuries old and yet just reborn in a global society where culture and identity are redefined daily.

## WHEN THE WALL CAME DOWN

### The Cold War

**A New History (2005)**

By John Lewis Gaddis

For the generations of Americans who grew up in the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War and its threat of mutually assured destruction loomed over the nation. Nine presidents and hundreds of millions of Americans came to fear and despise the Soviet Union and its leaders, Stalin and Khrushchev in particular.

The Cold War started to end when the Berlin Wall famously crumbled under the weight of democratic ideals and the efforts of “ordinary people” weary of dictatorial rule. But the driving forces behind that dissolution remain

vague at best. No one writes better on the Cold War than Gaddis, a historian at Yale who offers expert insight into the events that culminated in the rapid and surprising demise of a monolithic enemy. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2006)

## Lenin's Tomb

**The Last Days of the Soviet Empire (1993)**

By David Remnick

◆ PULITZER PRIZE

Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker* and former Moscow correspondent for the *Washington Post*, based *Lenin's Tomb*, in part, on his reportorial experiences between 1988 and 1991, the period bracketing the collapse of the Soviet Union. He tied those experiences to Soviet history, particularly to the lasting symbol of its first dictator, who still lies, apparently incorrupt, in a meticulously monitored room in Red Square. Remnick points out that the symbolism of Lenin's corpse and the idea of absolute Soviet control differ greatly from the perception.

Remnick's book is perhaps the most exhaustive first-hand study to come out of the period. "*Lenin's Tomb* is an extraordinary confluence of observation, hard work, knowledge, and reflection," writes John Lloyd in the *New York Times* (5/30/93). "A better book by a journalist on the withdrawing roar of the Soviet Union is hard to imagine." In 1997, Remnick published *Resurrection*, a study of Russia's successes and growing pains in the aftermath of its newfound freedom.

### Further Reading

## Russia's Bitter Path to Modernity

**A History of the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras (2001)**

By Alexander Chubarov

A study of Russia's "fitful but ineluctable advance toward modern ideological, political, social, and economic pat-

terns," Chubarov's follow-up to *Fragile Empire: A History of Imperial Russia* (1999), examines what the new Russia can learn from the mistakes of the old.

## The Fall of the Berlin Wall

**The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989 (2009)**

By Jeffrey A. Engel, ed.

Two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world has changed immeasurably. Using as his compass the four political giants which were vying for power—the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe, and China—Engel and a handful of respected historians weigh in on the significance of the events of 1989.

## THE PRESENT DAY

### Kremlin Rising

**Vladimir Putin's Russia and the End of Revolution (2005)**

By Peter Baker and Susan Glasser

It seems like eons have passed since Mother Russia and Uncle Sam had fingers poised on launch buttons in their decades-long game of nuclear brinkmanship. First, there was the push towards perestroika and glasnost under Gorbachev. Then came the ursine bumbling of Yeltsin-era capitalism. If Putin has restored order to Russia with his brand of "managed democracy," it has come at a greater cost to democratic reform than many outsiders realize.

As he tries to rebuild his country into an economic and political power, Putin has turned the media into a personal public relations tool, has ignored a growing AIDS crisis, and has used the criminal justice system to squelch political rivals. It seems that, under Putin, the Russian people have traded freedom for order. (★★★★ **SELECTION** Nov/Dec 2005)

Moscow International Business Center under construction (Moscow-City), March 2008

## The Terminal Spy

**A True Story of Espionage, Betrayal, and Murder (2008)**

By Alan S. Cowell

When it broke in 2006, the story of the death of Russian intelligence officer Alexander Litvinenko seemed too bizarre even for today's jaded observers. In London's Millennium Hotel, Litvinenko drank tea laced with polonium-210. Three weeks later, he died. Cowell, a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*, uses Litvinenko's story to trace the fall and rise of Russia. Litvinenko, it turns out, was no fan of Putin's plan for Russia and became the squeaky wheel. The true motive for the spy's murder remains unknown, but "the evidence pointed in one very clear direction—toward Moscow." The consequences of Litvinenko's death are far-reaching. "[Cowell] argues that the West has become embroiled in a new cold war with Russia," Joseph Weisberg writes, "and that Mr. Litvinenko's poisoning, whether authorized at the very top or not, was the act of an angry, newly ascendant Russia" (*New York Times*, 8/11/08).

## A Russian Diary

**A Journalist's Final Account of Life, Corruption, and Death in Putin's Russia (2007)**

By Anna Politkovskaya

Politkovskaya was a journalist, an activist for human rights in Chechnya, and an outspoken critic of the Russian government, particularly the actions of Putin. "We are hurtling back into a Soviet abyss, into an information vacuum that spells death from our own ignorance," Politkovskaya wrote in a prescient 2004 article in the *Guardian*. "All we have left is the internet, where information is still freely available. For the rest, if you want to go on working as a journalist, it's total servility to Putin. Otherwise, it can be death, the bullet, poison, or trial—whatever our special services, Putin's guard dogs, see fit." The author was shot to death in front of her Moscow apartment in 2006. The perpetrators were never caught.

*A Russian Diary*, a posthumous collection of Politkovskaya's writings between 2003 and 2005, details "the death of Russian parliamentary democracy." The author's other work includes *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya* (2001), *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (2003), and *Putin's Russia* (2004).

### Further Reading

## The Taste of Dreams

**An Obsession with Russia and Caviar (2003)**

By Vanora Bennett

Sure, this book is about caviar. But it's also the story of an escape to the Russia that might have been (and still could be) in the aftermath of Soviet rule. Bennett, a former Moscow correspondent for Reuters, serves up a travelogue that is "sexy, intelligent, the best mix of facts and desire" (Jeanette Winterson).

## Casino Moscow

**A Tale of Greed and Adventure on Capitalism's Wildest Frontier (2002)**

By Matthew Brzezinski

*Casino Moscow* is gonzo journalism for the new millennium. Brzezinski, who worked in the Moscow bureau of the *Wall Street Journal*, reports on the confluence of history, culture, and violence in Russia's attempt to resurrect itself.

## Putin's Labyrinth

**Spies, Murder, and the Dark Heart of the New Russia (2008)**

By Steve LeVine

In *Putin's Labyrinth*, a "chronicle of violence in modern-day Russia, a place that seems unwilling or unable to escape its horrific past," the collapse of the Soviet Union did not necessarily mean the rise of a stable democratic state, suggests LeVine in his study of the underbelly of "the new Russia."

## The Natashas

**Inside the New Global Sex Trade (2004)**

By Victor Malarek

"Virtually every city, town and village in Eastern and Central Europe has seen some of its girls and women disappear," Malarek writes in the introduction to his exposé on the exploitation of young women in an increasingly insatiable and expanding global sex market. "They have become expendable pawns in the burgeoning business of money, lust and sex."

# CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE ABOUT RUSSIA

Written in English or  
Published in English Translation

## Boris Akunin (1956–)

Akunin (the pen name of Grigory Chkhartishvili) is the Russian Umberto Eco of Russia. A philologist, critic, and translator, Akunin gained international acclaim after hitting best-seller lists in his homeland with *The Winter Queen* (1998), *The Death of Achilles* (2005), and the *Turkish Gambit* (1998), among others. Now containing 11 installments and as popular in Russia as Harry Potter is in the United States, the Erast Fandorin mystery series evokes pre-Revolution Czarist Russia and Europe. Akunin has also penned a trilogy featuring the crime-solving Russian Orthodox nun and provincial school teacher Sister Pelagia: *Sister Pelagia and the Black Monk* (2007), *Sister Pelagia and the Red Cockerel* (2007), and *Sister Pelagia and the White Bulldog* (2007). Both Fandorin and Pelagia are quirky and engaging characters, and Akunin has a keen eye for the affected manners of 19th-century Russia. Particularly strong in the Fandorin series is the sense of the imminent collapse of the monarchy and a Russia hurtling toward revolution.

## Andrei Bitov (1937-)

The latest book-length translation of the work of Bitov, a lion of Russian literature in the second half of the twentieth century, came in 1995 with *The Monkey Link* (1995), which secured the writer's legacy as one of the remaining stalwarts of the "youth-prose movement" of the 1950s and 1960s. Combining three highly original tales written between 1971 and 1993 and describing the slide of the Soviet Union from peace to war to collapse to disintegration, the publishing history of the *The Monkey Link* mirrors Bitov's own controversial career. The first of the three novellas was published in 1976, while the second was banned in the Soviet Union. The final installment never could have been written until after glasnost.

The book is a triumph, Russian literary scholar Marina von Hirsch points out, for a writer who gained a little artistic freedom during Khrushchev's short-lived "Thaw," only to fall victim to censorship as his career bloomed, particularly with his first—and most famous—novel. "Bitov's *Pushkin House*, which he completed in 1968, was published for the first time in Russian not in Russia, where it was banned for twenty years," von Hirsch says, "but by Carl Proffer in Ann Arbor, Michigan." Bitov's other work includes *Flying-Away Monakhov*, *Life in Windy Weather*, and *Captive of the Caucasus*.

## Olga Grushin (1971-)

In her 2006 debut novel, the *New York Times* notable book *The Dream Life of Sukhanov*, the Soviet-born Grushin (who has since become a naturalized American citizen) limns the life of Anatoly Pavlovich Sukhanov, editor of the respected journal *Art of the World*. Sukhanov has risen to the pinnacle of Soviet society by holding the party line, "going through other people's texts as through dirty laundry, deleting every avoidable reference to God and lowercasing all the unavoidable ones, ferreting out names of all the blacklisted artists, always sticking these Lenin quotes everywhere." What appears to be a comfortable, safe existence for Sukhanov, however, is anything but.

Grushin deftly mixes memory and dream, fantasy and reality into a literary feast worthy of the Russian masters. Her latest effort, *The Line* (2010), a homage to Vladimir Sorokin's 1983 novel *The Queue*, examines the mind-set that allows citizens to wait in line for a year for concert tickets. "Grushin writes movingly of transcendent moments," notes the *Boston Globe*, and *The Line* cements her

reputation as one of the best young writers working today (4/27/10).

## Ellen Litman (1973-)

Set amid the brick houses, delicatessens, and kosher butcher shops of Pittsburgh's largely Jewish Squirrel Hill neighborhood, the dozen interconnected stories that make up *The Last Chicken in America* (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2008) reveal the awe, curiosity, confusion, frustration, and disappointment experienced by Russian-Jewish immigrants struggling to adapt to a new culture while coming to terms with the lives they've left behind.

Having emigrated from Moscow as a teenager in 1992, Litman has lived the life she so vividly describes in her debut, and she adroitly depicts the stress, underemployment, isolation, and sense of loss commonly suffered by new immigrants. Though English is her second language, Litman's writing style is graceful and clever. She paints a colorful portrait of a vibrant community, and Masha makes a charming, observant narrator whose subtle appreciation of the ironies of the American Dream provides a cohesive filament throughout the book.

## Sofi Oksanen (1977-)

Although technically Finnish, Oksanen has ties to the former Soviet satellite Estonia: her mother was born there, and her fiction is redolent with the history of the region. Her latest novel, *Purge* (2007), quickly became an international

best seller. *Purge* tells the story of two women: Aliide Truu, caught up in the brutality of 1940s war-torn Estonia during the Soviet occupation; and Zara, the victim of human trafficking in the same country half a century later. When the women are thrown together in an unlikely relationship, their stories transcend history, revealing the strength of the spirit—and the sometimes incalculable cost of survival.

"A truly stunning novel, both heartbreaking and optimistic," Lara Vapnyar writes. "Sofi Oksanen shows us the history of a country that has been repeatedly violated by the Russians, by the West, and by history itself, yet managed to stand strong." The book won the Finlandia Award, Finland's highest literary honor, making Oksanen the youngest winner ever. Her previous novels include *Stalin's Cows* (2003) and *Baby Jane* (2005).

## Irina Reyn (1974-)

Reyn, who teaches English at the University of Pittsburgh, emigrated from Moscow to the United States as a child. In



Andrei Bitov, 2008

*What Happened to Anna K* (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2008), Reyn's first novel, Russian literature's most tragic heroine converts to Judaism and immigrates to the boroughs of New York City in a modern take on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. A great deal of the fun in this sort of reimagining is seeing how the author converts staid, old elements into rowdy, new 21st-century ones, so mum's the word on specific plot points.

But for those who have never read the original: Anna, a young woman married to a wealthy aristocrat, feels stifled. She has material happiness—but little else. Then she meets The Other Man (less rich and more intellectual) and falls desperately in love with him. Reyn's version, which features the Russian-Jewish immigrant community in Manhattan and Rego Park, follows along these same rails (a train metaphor—ironists, take note) and ultimately ends up at the same station. But getting there in the 21st century is, of course, half the fun.

### Vladimir Sorokin (1954-)

Sorokin is the driving force in Russian postmodern fiction, having developed his artistic tastes in the Moscow underground of the 1970s and 1980s. His first novel, *The Queue* (1985), is a day-in-the-life snapshot worthy of Samuel Beckett told in snippets of conversation as Muscovites wait in line for ... anything. The novel "reduces to delightful absurdity the rough democracy of the long lines that Soviet people-in-the-street endure in order to buy 'luxury' goods. Sorokin is an innovative young writer, never published officially in the USSR, who draws on two great Russian traditions sorely missing from Soviet literature: avant-garde experiment and a flair for nonsense" (*Library Journal*).

*Ice* (2002), the first installment of a trilogy, is a trippy tale bordering on SF that involves the deaths of blonde-haired, blue-eyed Muscovites, the Tunguska explosion, long interludes into the Stalinist regime, and the awakening of a transcendent being. The remaining two books in the trilogy, *Bro* and *23,000*, will be published in English along with *Ice* in a one-volume set in early 2011.

### Gary Shteyngart (1972-)

In *Absurdistan* (★★★ July/Aug 2006), a cultural and political satire and a rambunctious follow-up to *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002), Shteyngart explores the disillusionment surrounding the creation of sudden democracy.

Misha Vainberg, the obese, 30-year-old son of the 1,238th-richest man in Russia, describes himself as "an American impounded in a Russian body." After attending Accidental College and living in New York City, he returns to Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. His father, a Russian Jewish dissident, has possibly murdered an Oklahoma businessman, which removes the possibility of a visa back to the United States and a reunion with his South Bronx Latina girlfriend. Stuck in Russia, Misha sojourns to Absurdistan, a new, oil-rich country. Greased by corruption and torn by ethnic strife (yet always on the brink of market democracy), Absurdistan wages a fake civil war in an effort

to solicit U.S. aid. And Misha can't seem to steer clear of the mayhem.

### Elif Batuman (1977-)

The daughter of Turkish immigrants, Batuman, who immigrated to America in 1992, studied at Harvard and Stanford, where she now teaches comparative literature. *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (★★★★ May/June 2010) is her first book. In these engaging and quirky essays, Batuman chronicles her academic misadventures in the field of Russian literature.

A conference on Isaac Babel that she helps organize at Stanford University goes hilariously awry in "Babel in California." In "Who Killed Tolstoy?" she concocts a theory that Tolstoy was murdered in order to secure the grant funds necessary to attend a conference at his estate.

### Tatyana Tolstaya (1951-)

Tolstaya went from university to working in a publishing house to writing short fiction to becoming the conscience of a nation—and her timing couldn't have been better. In her late 30s when the Soviet Union collapsed, Tolstaya recorded her responses to the aftermath in *Pushkin's Children: Writings on Russia and Russians*, ten pieces published between 1990 and 2000 in the *New York Review of Books* and other journals. "Collectively," Richard Eder writes of the essays in *Pushkin's Children*, "they become one of the great political and cultural documents of our time, its continuity supplied by the wit and ardor of the writer, its freshness by the many disjunctions" (*New York Times*, 1/26/03).

Tolstaya's first novel in translation, *The Slynx* (2007), posits a dystopian regression to the Stone Age, leaving three groups of people (who, not coincidentally, recall the Soviet Union under totalitarian rule) to fight over what little remains. *White Walls: Collected Stories* (2007) offers 23 of the author's short pieces, which illustrate her range and anticipate the subjects of her later work. Critics made the lofty comparison of Tolstaya's stories to those of Nabokov and Chekhov.

### Further Reading

#### Generations of Winter (1994)

By Vassily Aksyonov

A victim of the gulags, Aksyonov, who died in 2009 at the age of 76, cut his political teeth as a liberal dissident following Stalin's death in 1953. Along with Andrei Bitov (*Pushkin House*) and others, Aksyonov was a strong dissident voice in Soviet letters. He is known to English-language audiences for *Generations of Winter*, his expansive novel of Soviet life between 1925 and 1945, as well *The Burn* (1975) and *The Island of Crimea* (1979).

#### The World to Come (2006)

By Dara Horn

Inspired by the true story of a Chagall painting that was stolen from the Jewish Museum in New York in 2001 (and

that later turned up), *The World to Come* weaves together stories about Stalinist Russia and Yiddish literature. It is at once a mystery, Jewish history and folklore, biography, philosophical treatise, love story, and fantastical adventure. (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2006)

### **Our Post-Soviet History Unfolds** (2005)

By Eleanor Lerman

These poems about Russian immigrants in New York and the fall of the Soviet Union (meet the new boss, same as the old boss) find Lerman “as sly as a pool hustler, mapping complex constellations on the dark felt, setting gleaming images into spinning motion, then sinking each whirling sphere into a corner pocket” (*Booklist*).

### **The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight** (2010)

By Gina Ochsner

Oregon native Ochsner’s long-form debut (she previously penned two short fiction collections) featuring the down-at-the-mouth Russian city Perm in the post-Soviet reconstruction combines a healthy dose of bleak reality with magical realism to reveal a world “soaked in baleful authenticity, with laundry boiling on the stove and perfume doubling as an intoxicant” (*New York Times Book Review*, 3/5/10).

### **The Sacred Book of the Werewolf** (2008)

By Victor Pelevin

As close as literature gets to the New Weird in Russia, Pelevin’s latest novel introduces a 2,000-year-old Chinese werefox with a penchant for classic Russian literature on the loose in Moscow. “Whether he is commenting on supernatural sex, Taoist philosophy or the new Russian consumerism,” Richard Wallace writes, “Pelevin is a satirist with X-ray vision.” See also *The Life of Insects* (1993), *Buddha’s Little Finger* (1996), *Omon Ra* (1991), and *The Helmet of Horror* (2005).

### **There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor’s Baby**

**Scary Fairy Tales** (2009)

By Ludmilla Petrushevskaya

Sometimes, a title says it all. In this collection of 19 stories—the author deems her flights of fancy “Orchards of Unusual Possibilities”—Petrushevskaya, no stranger to Stalin as a girl growing up in the 1950s, examines fear, cruelty, vengeance, and grace. “Timeless and troubling,” Liesl Schlinger writes, “these ‘scary fairy tales’ grapple with accidents of fate and weaknesses of human nature that exact a heavy penance” (*New York Times Book Review*, 11/20/09).

### **Ludmila’s Broken English** (2006)

By DBC Pierre

After 33 years as conjoined twins, Blair and Gordon Heath are each eager to go their own ways. Their surgical separation spurs Blair’s raging libido and Gordon’s timidity.

Set adrift in a not-so-futuristic London astir with fears of terrorism, the brothers find the emotional separation much more difficult than the physical. Further east, in the Russian Caucasus, beautiful Ludmila Barov violently wrests herself from an incestuous grandfather while struggling to support the rest of her family. (★★★ Sep/Oct 2006)

### **Moscow Rules** (2008)

By Daniel Silva

Art restorer and secret agent Gabriel Allon returns in fine form in *Moscow Rules*, the eighth book in the series, as he tries to avert one of the deadliest attacks the world will have ever seen. Silva’s portrayal of the new Moscow ruled by the same iron fist as the old Soviet regime fascinated critics, who also praised his gift for setting, suspense, and action. (★★★★ Sep/Oct 2008)

### **2017** (2006)

By Olga Slavnikova

Slavnikova’s *2017*, set a century after the Russian Revolution and focused on Russia’s new capitalism, features Krylov, a gem cutter, who is involved in an ill-fated affair with a stranger. A magical-realistic political thriller graced with more than a hint of satire, the novel won a Russian Booker Prize in 2006. “The strongest passages in *2017* preserve the qualities of Slavnikova’s earlier work,” Oliver Ready writes in the *Times Literary Supplement* (2/7/10), “while transposing them to the more marketable type of fiction—filled with local lore, criminal intrigue and dramatic landscapes—to which Russian writers have recently been gravitating in search of lost readers.” Slavnikova’s remaining work—two additional novels—has yet to be translated into English.

### **Petropolis** (2007)

By Anya Ulinich

In Moscow native Ulinich’s eclectic debut, Sasha Goldberg, a “child of the intelligentsia” stuck in Asbestos 2, a dreary Siberian town, leaves Russia to become a mail-order bride in Arizona. Once there, she undertakes a cross-country search for her long-lost father. Part social satire, part bittersweet love story, *Petropolis* “offers a moving account of a perpetual outsider’s desire to belong, both to her family and to the wide, weird world she encounters with a sometimes weary heart and plenty of chutzpah” (*USA Today*, 3/8/07).

### **Memoirs of a Muse** (2006)

By Lara Vapnyar

Vapnyar emigrated from Russia to the United States—Brooklyn, specifically—in 1994 and learned English by reading romance novels and watching television. On one level a love story, *Memoirs of a Muse* (don’t be fooled by the title—it’s a novel) is carried by the author’s “poignant grasp of her character’s Russian root and family” (*Boston Globe*, 3/7/06). Vapnyar’s other work includes *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* (2008) and *There Are Jews in My House* (2003). ■