

Book Watch

MOTHER RUSSIA

by Alex Moore



Peter the Great initiated a cultural revolution: out with the Muscovite *boyar* clans—an old aristocratic order—in with Western European culture. He built a new capital, St. Petersburg, and initiated a new era: Imperial Russia. He directed noblemen to shave their beards and speak French.

In the nineteenth century, however, the Russian literati reacted against this “disease of France,” and began to take pride in their own heritage. Because of Russian censorship this new identity was developed not through expository prose, but fiction—a new national literature of moral and philosophical concerns. Through subtext and intertext it carried on a “dialog” with the literature of other countries, writes Priscilla Meyer professor of Russian at Wesleyan University in *How the Russians Read the French: Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 978-0-299-22930-6).

Anna Karenina, for example, was a moral antidote to *Madam Bovary*. The heroines of these adultery novels had similarities: both women imagined the decline of their lovers’ ardor, both became demanding thus increasing their lover’s alienation, and both committed suicide. Flaubert’s imaginative narrative dealt with decadence using romantic “clichés drawn from a hodgepodge of literature,” but Tolstoy explored matters of the soul.

In another book about Russian authors and identity, *Theatre and Identity in Imperial Russia* (University of Iowa Press, 978-1-58729-799-1), Catherine Schuler, associate professor in the Department of Theatre at the University of Maryland and author of *Women in Russian Theatre: The Actresses in the Silver Age*, discusses the theatre’s role in asserting Russia’s new identity by satirizing “the superficiality of French manners and their adoption by the Russian gentry.” The playwright Aleksandr Shakhovskoi is one example; in his play *A Lesson for Coquettes*, the “father of Russian comedy” makes fun of the pretensions of “Frenchified” salon society.

Likewise, associate professor of Russian and comparative literature at the University of South Carolina and coeditor of *Russian Writers of the Silver Age, 1890-1925*, Judith E. Kalb discusses identity with a classical civilization in *Russia’s Rome: Imperial Visions, Messianic Dreams, 1890-1940* (University of Wisconsin Press, 978-0-299-22920-7). An example of “asserting the relevance of Rome’s past to Russia’s present and future” is Aleksandr Blok’s “Catiline,” which glorifies the man, “a Roman Bolshevik,” who rebelled against Rome’s aristocracy.

In addition, a book from the University of Wisconsin Press (978-0-299-22950-4), which is part of their Slavic Studies series, is *Beyond the Flesh: Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius, and the Symbolist Sublimation of Sex*. Here, Jenifer Presto, associate professor of comparative literature and Russian at the University of Oregon, discusses the difficulties encountered in studying two of the most important Russian Symbolists in the context of their peculiarities and “salon theatrics.” Gippius wore “purplish, death-like face powder” and a monocle that dangled from her ear.

The expatriate who identified with his beloved country and returned after twenty years in exile is the subject of *The Soul and Barbed Wire: An Introduction to Solzhenitsyn* (Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 978-1-933859-57-6). Professor Emeritus of English at Calvin College, Edward E. Ericson Jr., and professor of Russian literature and culture at Vassar, Alexis Klimoff, present a short biography with textual criticisms of the author’s works. Included is *Cancer Ward* where Oleg demonstrates that, “a hard life improves the vision.”

University presses continue to challenge and inspire intellects regarding Mother Russia. To celebrate continuance and the deciphering of the above texts, a bottle of Stolichnaya and Caviar Rus are just rewards. **F**

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