



A HISTORY OF

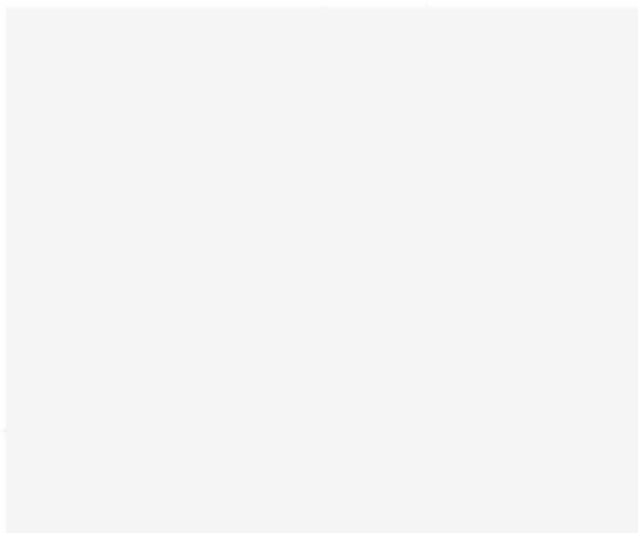
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USSIAN
LITERATURE

V i c t o r T e r r a s

*A
History
of
Russian Literature*

Victor Terras



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***A History of
Russian Literature***

Preface

Through much of its history, Russian society has been different from the societies of Western Europe, although never, except perhaps during the Soviet period, so different that the Russian institutions, social relations, and general way of life could not be explained in terms familiar to the Western reader. A translation of Russian facts into our own conceptual system will skew them somewhat. Serfdom in Russia was not the same as serfdom in Western Europe or slavery in America, but “serf” as a translation of Russian *krepostnoi* and “slave” as a translation of Russian *rab*, a word used by some serf-owners as its synonym, convey the idea well enough. Likewise, Russian literature in translation has spoken to Westerners—indeed, thrived in the West—despite the disparities of Russian and Western culture.

Addressed to Western readers, this history tries to present Russian literature as it was perceived by Russian readers. It also seeks to convey to a general reader a scholar’s view of the subject. The emphasis is on producing a maximum of information rather than on structuring that information to

support any particular conception of its meaning.

The method used in this history is eclectic and is based on several compromises. The presentation is conventionally chronological, but literary trends, authors, and works are viewed not only as they may have appeared to contemporaries, or as links in an ongoing evolution, but also in terms of the understanding and sensibility of later periods and even of our own age. Thus, Pushkin will be a ubiquitous presence in much of this history. Literature is seen as a collective effort, but important authors are singled out and discussed. Biographical data have been introduced insofar as they seemed relevant to an understanding of the author’s work or its impact.

This history concentrates on “serious” or “high literature,” authors and works appreciated by an educated elite in their own time and later, rather than literature serving to entertain or edify a mass audience (although some information concerning the latter has been introduced). A concentration on high literature seems appropriate

because it is this part of Russian literature that is of primary interest to the foreign reader. For the same reason, more attention was paid to the intrinsic aesthetic content of literature than to its social value and historical importance or to reader response at the time of a work's appearance.

If there is one trait of Russian literature that distinguishes it from the major literatures of the West, it is its persistent claim to a social function. Medieval literature, whenever it was not directly a part of religious life, tended to have a political function, as in the chronicles and war tales. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries literary activity was centered in the imperial court, serving it in various functions. After a generation of creative independence during the Golden Age of Russian poetry in the 1820s and 1830s, Russian literature became a forum of social and political debate. The novels of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoi, and their contemporaries were perceived by their readers as partisan statements on Russian society and its future. After a brief interval of emancipation from social and political concerns, provided by the Silver Age of Russian poetry at the turn of the twentieth century, literature became completely politicized during the Soviet period, and the history of literature was incorporated into political history. Russian critics and literary historians, with few exceptions (among whom the formalists of the 1920s were the most notable), have seen literature as inseparable from social history. Even those who did insist on its creative autonomy assumed that art, if true to its calling, would without fail serve the cause of social justice and progress. The facts of Russian literature as presented in this history disprove this conception.

Only directly observable reflections of

ideas, ideologies, and modes of thought on literature are dealt with. No attempt is made to find a "deep structure" or teleology beneath the surface of the literary facts presented.

Russian literature originated from three sources, each of which retained its distinct identity within the mainstream of Russian life. What in modern times has been known as "folk culture" and "folk literature" (*narodnaya literatura*) has its roots in the pre-Christian culture of East Slavic tribes living in what in later times would be western Russia.¹ With the coming of Christianity in the tenth century, Russia joined *Slavia orthodoxa*, a group of South and East Slavic nations that were culturally dependent on Byzantium.

Medieval Russian literature was dominated by the religious and ritual needs of the Orthodox church. Byzantine in style as well as substance, it merged to some degree with secular literature, which began to develop in the seventeenth century, but its elements

1. The Russian Primary Chronicle presents this vivid picture of tribal life before the coming of Christianity: "The Radimichi, the Vyatichi, and the Sever all had the same customs, living in the woods like animals, eating all kinds of unclean food, and using foul language before their fathers and daughters-in-law; nor were there marriages among them, but games played halfway between their villages, where they would get together for these games, dancing, and all kinds of devilish songs; and here they would abduct wives for themselves, each taking the one with whom he had an agreement beforehand, and they would also have two and three wives. And when one of them would die, they would have a funeral feast for the deceased and make a huge pyre and lay him on it and burn the corpse, and then they would gather his bones in a small vessel which they would then place on a post by the roadside, which the Vyatichi are doing to this day." (*Povesti drevnei Rusi XI–XII veka* [Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1983], 28–29. My translation.)

remained ideologically and linguistically recognizable even after Russian literature had become thoroughly westernized.

Modern Russian literature got its start in the seventeenth century, from an effort of Orthodox churchmen in western Russia, then under Polish rule, to transplant the literary culture of the Polish Catholic baroque to Russian soil. But only in the early eighteenth century did Russian literature join the mainstream of Western literary life through translation and imitation of works then current in France, England, Germany, and other countries of Western Europe. Before the century was over, works had been produced whose intellectual and aesthetic value equaled anything produced in the West, and Russian literature began to be translated into the languages of Western Europe.²

Russian folk literature must be observed in the light of comparative folklore. Medieval Russian literature can be understood only in the context of its Byzantine origins. Modern Russian literature requires constant attention to the influence of Western ideas, trends, and styles. And a good deal of cross-referencing among the three branches of Russian literature is necessary.

The subject matter of this history is not homogeneous. Following standard practice, religious genres, such as the saint's life and the homily, are dealt with extensively in the chapters on the medieval period but are abandoned at the point when Peter the Great decreed that religious and secular literature should be separate. The reason for

2. Some translations of Russian poetry appeared in England and Germany even in the eighteenth century. But only Sir John Bowring's *Specimens of the Russian poets* (1821-23) created a genuine interest in Russian literature in the English-speaking countries.

this practice is that medieval Russia produced few secular works, hardly enough to form a "literature." For similar reasons the chapters on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature deal with some works that later descended to the level of folk literature or folklore, treated only marginally in subsequent chapters.

The literature of the early period arose mostly in regions that are today a part of the Ukraine and Belorussia. Much of seventeenth-century Muscovite literature was generated by Ukrainian and Belorussian immigrants to Muscovy. It stands to reason that Ukrainian and Belorussian literatures have as good a claim, or better, to some of the authors and works dealt with in the first four chapters of this history of Russian literature. The controversy over the beginning of Ukrainian and Belorussian as separate languages and literatures has not been broached in this history. Inclusion of such authors as Feofan Prokopovich, Saint Dimitry of Rostov, and Stefan Yavorsky does not necessarily imply that they were "Russian" authors. It suggests only that they were important for the development of Russian literature.

This history claims the traditional privilege of academic historians to stop a generation short of the present. A certain detachment and perspective are needed in a work that is meant to be in use for some years. Selection and assessment of authors and works to be included in a historical treatment is difficult without the help provided by the selection process of history. Distance from events protects the historian from the intrusion of developments that overturn his or her judgments. Dealing with authors who are still active is difficult. An academic historian is rarely equipped to make the intuitive judgments that are the

prerogative of the literary critic of contemporary literature.

The survey form of history takes a bird's-eye view of its subject and therefore has no eye for details. Since in literature the adage "God is in the detail" may well apply, this may cause a survey to miss the very essence of its subject. The best that can be done is to introduce an occasional highlight and to suggest that many more are there to reward the reader who will proceed from this survey to the literature itself.

The manuscript of this book was completed in the fall of 1989, at a time when developments in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe made it clear to me that an attempt to integrate a historical treatment of Russian literature with an analysis of its present condition would be futile. Subsequent events, which indicate that the situation in the Soviet Union is still very much in flux, have confirmed me in this view. Regretfully, therefore, I refrain in these pages from reacting as much as I might have to the stimulation that I received from exchanges of ideas,

understandably relating to the contemporary scene for the most part, with scholars from all over the world, including many from the Soviet Union, during my association with the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies as a fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 1988–89. But then, the progress of my work owes much to the ready access to the riches of the Library of Congress that my fellowship entailed.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Edward Tripp of Yale University Press, Frank R. Silbajoris of Ohio State University, and my colleagues at Brown University, Sam Driver, Alexander Levitsky, and Robert Mathiesen, who read the manuscript, made corrections in it, and provided me with valuable suggestions. Richard Miller, the manuscript editor, patiently smoothed out the rough edges and many solecisms of the text. I also thank my students and colleagues, many of whom will recognize their own ideas in this book, for the fruitful discussions we have had over the years. Of course, I alone am responsible for the shortcomings of this book.

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Russian Literature***

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Chapter

1

Russian Folklore

Early records of Russian folklore are rare, because the Russian Orthodox church, well aware of its pagan origins, was inveterately opposed to it. The church recognized that the illiterate peasantry persisted in a dual faith (*dvoeverie*), embracing elements of Christianity and observing its ritual yet continuing to practice an animistic religion. Throughout the Middle Ages we are limited to occasional hostile mention of what was clearly a vigorous strain of Russian culture, especially among the lower classes. Abbot Panphilius (Panfily), an early sixteenth-century churchman, for example, complains about the pagan celebration of Saint John's Eve with indecent songs as well as provocative dancing and gestures by women, "a grave temptation to married men and youths." He also reports that on this night people gathered herbs that they believed had magical properties. Panphilius denounces these goings-on as thoroughly pernicious and diabolic.¹ A pastoral letter by

1. *A sermon of instruction on the day of John the Baptist, to the Christ-loving city of Pskov and all Orthodox Christendom, by Panphilius, abbot of Elizarov Hermitage.*

Daniel (Daniil), metropolitan of all Russia (1522–39), directed against worldly temptations that distract not only laymen but even the clergy from a godly life, contains a catalog of diabolic pastimes indulged in by the Russian people: attending to minstrels (*skomorokhi*) and dancers, playing chess and checkers, indulging in irreverent jests, "devilish songs, and huge and inordinate drinking bouts," and consulting soothsayers and astrologers as well as "so-called cloud-chasers, wizards, charmers, and magicians."²

Nevertheless, occasional themes and phrases from Russian folklore entered medieval literature, the chronicles in particular. In some instances local legends and traditions found their way into saints' lives, such as the fifteenth-century life of Saint Mercurius (Merkury) of Smolensk, who walked home from a battle against the invading Tatars carrying his severed head under his arm.

Only since the seventeenth century do we have texts that are either outright tran-

2. *Instruction of Daniel, Metropolitan of All Russia.*

scriptions of works from oral tradition or fairly close paraphrases. Richard James, chaplain of the British embassy in Moscow, recorded a number of songs in 1619–20. Samuel Collins, a British physician to Tsar Alexis in the 1660s, recorded ten folktales (published in 1671). Prose paraphrases of several epic songs (*The Tale of Sukhan*, *Mikhail Potok*, *The Tale of the Seven Heroes of Kiev*) found in seventeenth-century manuscripts suggest that the epic tradition that had started in Kiev had by then established itself in Muscovy. A modest number of satirical tales and fables reflect Russia's developing connections with the West, as many of the themes featured here seem to have come to Russia from such Western sources as the *Facetiae* of Poggio Bracciolini.

The first major manuscript collection of epic songs dates from the mid-eighteenth century. These songs, attributed to a Cossack named Kirsha Danilov, were apparently recorded in western Siberia. By the 1770s and 1780s printed songbooks (which contained old as well as recently composed songs) and collections of Russian folktales were a commercial commodity. Parallel to the westernized literature of the elite, there now developed a popular literature of chapbooks (*lubochnaya literatura*), which became a receptacle for folk traditions mixed with elements of traditional religious literature and of high literature. Chapbooks were directed at the growing number of literate members of the lower classes, mostly in the cities. Sold at fairs and in the marketplace, they represented a flourishing industry until the revolution of 1917. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century Russian folk songs and dances, as well as other elements of Russian folklore, began to appear onstage, used by authors of comic operas and vaudevilles, which were otherwise close imitations of French and Italian

examples. This practice continued in the nineteenth century.

Only with the advent of romanticism in the 1820s was a real effort to collect Russian folklore launched and its scholarly study initiated. Since the romantic period Russian poets have occasionally written poetry in the manner of the folk song. Pushkin's "Tale of the She-Bear" (1830) and Lermontov's "Song of the Merchant Kalashnikov" (1837) are early examples. Starting with Aleksei Koltsov (1809–42), Russian poets have often written in the style and meter of the folk song. Some, such as Nikolai Nekrasov (1821–77) and Nikolai Klyuev (1887–1937), developed a style that combined a popular ethos and elements peculiar to the folk song with the formal structure and sensibility of *Kunstdichtung*. Similarly, the Russian folktale has found a reflection in Russian high literature, both in the form of direct imitation, as in some of Lev Tolstoi's "tales for the people," and in combination with literary forms, as in Pushkin's fairy tales in verse or the folkloristic novels of Aleksandr Veltman (1800–1870).

The populist mystique that affected the conservative Russian Slavophiles no less than progressive circles of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia produced the side effect of an active interest in folk culture. A lively collecting effort by dedicated amateurs in the educated public led to the establishment of a large corpus of recorded songs, tales, legends, proverbs, riddles, and other forms of folklore. The most important collections were, for lyric songs, *Songs*, collected by Pyotr Kireevsky (10 vol., 1860–74); for epic songs, *Songs*, collected by Pavel Rybnikov (4 vol., 1861–67), and *Byliny of the Onega Region*, by Aleksandr Hilferding (3 vol., 1873); for prose tales, *Russian Folktales*, collected by Aleksandr Afanasyev (1855–64); for legends, *Itiner-*

ant Beggars,³ by Pyotr Bessonov (2 vol., 1861–63); and for proverbs, *Proverbs of the Russian People*, by Vladimir Dahl (1862). Much further work was later done by academic as well as amateur collectors.

Russian folklorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries followed trends in international folklore studies. The mythological school, developed in Germany by the brothers Grimm, sought to reduce the plots of folk songs and folktales to primeval cosmological myths. The Russian folklorist Fyodor Buslaev (1818–97), an adherent of this school, saw for example in the feats of Ilya of Murom, the great hero of the Russian folk epic, vestiges of ancient myths of Perun, the Slavic god of thunder. The mythological school was superseded by a historical school, which strove to link a given theme or plot to a specific historical event or period, and a comparative school, which followed the migrations of themes, plots, and other elements of folklore across cultural and linguistic boundaries to their source. A leading exponent of the historical school was Vsevolod Miller (1848–1913) and of the comparative school Aleksandr Veselovsky (1838–1906).

After the Revolution of 1917 the study of Russian folklore soon became politicized, as Soviet scholars tried to see folklore in terms of social relations and class struggle. Attention was now devoted to contemporary forms, such as urban and workers' folklore, to satirical songs and tales, and to epic songs about outlaws and rebels, such as Stepan Razin (seventeenth century) and Emelyan Pugachov (eighteenth century). Interest in traditional forms like religious legends dwindled. Soviet folklorists made a point of

crediting the simple Russian people, rather than the minstrels of medieval princely courts, with the creation of the heroic epic.⁴ Twentieth-century Russian folklorists have done some important theoretical work. Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), concluded that all Russian magic tales, however different their dramatis personae and plots, have an identical basic mechanics readily reduced to a limited number of functions, such as "obstacle" and "helper," which unfold in predictable sequences. Propp's insights in this and other studies have had an impact on international folklore studies, as has the work of Russian structuralists including Vladimir Toporov (b. 1928) and Vyacheslav Ivanov (b. 1929).

Most forms of Russian folklore were vigorous in the eighteenth century, as a part of a peasant culture that existed independently of the culture of the Westernized upper classes. But in the course of the nineteenth century all folk song genres gradually became crystallized—that is, their tradition came to rely on mechanical memory instead of creative improvisation. The only genre remaining alive was the *chastushka*, a rhymed ditty of recent origin. In the 1930s some futile efforts were made to revive the old folk song and press it into the service of communist propaganda and the glorification of Stalin. With universal literacy there was no longer a *raison d'être* for an oral tradition. Moreover, since the old peasant culture, with its architecture, art, and music, fell victim to urbanization and the collectivization of agriculture, the traditions of folk song and folktale lacked a proper cultural setting.

3. The Russian title is *Kaliki perekhozhie*, referring to blind or lame wanderers who spread legends from town to town.

4. See Felix J. Oinas, "The Problem of the Aristocratic Origin of Russian *Byliny*," *Slavic Review* 30 (1971): 513–22.

The Folk Song

The formal structure of the Russian folk song is different from anything found in Russian literary poetry, except in the instances when poetry imitates the folk song. It has been observed that the rhythm of a Russian folk song disintegrates in spoken recitation, suggesting that a folk song's natural rendition is musical. Nevertheless, certain persistent rhythmical patterns appear, especially in the epic songs. Russian, a stress-timing language (like English) rather than a syllable-counting language (like French), lacks the equisyllabic lines found in the folk song in other Slavic languages, such as Serbian, but tends to favor a trochaic rhythm (xx) with a constant number of stresses (often three) per line and a dactylic clausula (xxx).

The old folk song has no rhyme whether it is sung (lyric songs) or recited (epic songs and laments). Only so-called spoken verse (*skazovyy stikh*, also *rayoshny stikh*), used in short forms—proverbs, sayings, wise-cracks, riddles, speeches of the master of ceremonies at a folk wedding, cries of hucksters and traders—has rhyme, as does the *chastushka* (from *chasty*, “fast”), a short (usually four-line) lyric or satirical song performed to the accompaniment of an accordion or balalaika. The *chastushka*, apparently a young genre (dating from no earlier than the eighteenth century), may have developed under foreign or literary influence.

The singer of songs is basically an improviser. Folk singers have at their disposal certain traditional themes, plots, and images, a large number of formulaic expressions, and a certain style of performance. The language of the folk song and folktale is distinct from normal speech lexically, morphologically, and syntactically. It features many

archaisms, standard epithets (Duke Vladimir of Kiev, for example, is routinely called Vladimir the Fair Sun), and formulaic noun-adjective combinations: the sea is always blue, the steppe clear, the earth always damp Mother Earth. The language of the folk song is fond of pleonasm, such as tautological compounds (“plight-misfortune”), emphatic reduplication (“she cried-cried”), and paronomasia (“living a life”). It includes many compounds which in ordinary speech are perceived as quotations from poetry or fairy tales: copulative compounds (“father-mother” instead of “father and mother”), determinative compounds (“woe-peasant” meaning “luckless peasant”), and descriptive compounds (“first daughter, serve-a-cake, second daughter, close-your-fist”). The language of folk poetry seeks out parallelism, sometimes enhancing it by grammatical rhyme (“he took to drinking, took to thinking”) and often against normal usage, as when a preposition is pleonastically repeated (“in the capital city, in Kiev” instead of “in the capital city of Kiev”). A simile or metaphor is often presented in several (ordinarily three) parallel images: “It wasn’t a hawk that fluttered by, it wasn’t a stoat that leaped by, it wasn’t a falcon that flew by, it was a valiant good lad that rode by.” The negative simile seen in this example is very common. Russian folk poetry uses tropes and figures sparingly, and they are always formulaic—the mark of oral improvisation. Some literary attempts at re-creating folk poetry have failed precisely because they were overladen with imagery and poetic devices.

Lyric Genres

Musically, a song is either fast (*chastaya*) or drawn out (*protyazhnaya*). Its function determines whether it is ritual (ceremonial) or

nonritual. Depending on the singer's persona, it is a soldier song, a robber song, a barge hauler song, and so on. It may be a "male" or a "female" song. Each division has its genres.

Russian folk culture was highly ritualized, and most rituals were accompanied by appropriate songs. There were work songs, seasonal songs for Christmas, Shrovetide, spring, and harvest, and songs for important family occasions, such as weddings and funerals.

A Russian peasant wedding was, to borrow Aleksandr Veselovsky's term, a free mystery play—a sequence of choral and mimetic actions integrated by their subject, the battle and ultimate reconciliation of the sexes. At the bridegroom's house a martial atmosphere is created, as a raiding party under the leadership of a colonel or flag bearer prepares to abduct the bride. The bridegroom, called "duke," and his friends, called "warriors," all carrying wooden swords, set out for the bride's house. The bride's party places gates or roadblocks in their way. All of this action follows a fixed pattern; the words and songs are traditional, though used in free variations. In the end the storming of the bride's home is enacted, and peace is made. Gifts are exchanged and the feast begins. After the meal the bride says farewell to her bridesmaids, as laments are sung and tears shed. The whole party now moves on to the groom's house. As the feast continues, the couple's bed is made in the barn or stable, often with a sack of corn as a pillow—all for fertility. The bride is dressed in a white shirt as her bridesmaids sing love songs. The bride and groom retire while the guests continue the feast. Immediate defloration of the bride is expected of the groom, and the bloody shirt is displayed triumphantly by the bride's mother. If the bride turns out not to be a virgin, she and

her parents suffer ribald jests and songs (formulaic like the rest).

The lament (*plach*) expressed grief in a conventional, socially approved form. There were formulas for every occasion: a funeral lament for a breadwinner would of course be different from one for a mother or a child. Laments of the bride about her loss of a happy maidenhood in the bosom of a loving family were a part of the wedding ceremony. Other laments were recited when a young man was leaving the village for military service. There were laments occasioned by calamities that affected the community, such as fires or floods. Laments were often recited by professional wailers, usually older women who were paid for their services. The formal structure of the lament resembles that of the epic song. Like the epic song, the lament was performed as a recitative and was improvised from a set of formulaic expressions, following an established sequence of images appropriate to the progress of the funeral or other occasion.

Nonritual songs display a variety of topics and moods. They were often performed by a chorus with a lead singer, particularly game and dance songs. Game songs (*khorovodnye pesni*) are stylized vignettes of the joys and sorrows of village life. Dance songs (*plyasovye pesni*) typically present brief dramatized pictures of the battle of the sexes. A common genre is that of songs of grief, such as those about an orphan's hard lot or a young wife who dreams of the easy life at her parents' house. There are also love songs and lullabies. At the other end of the emotional scale are satirical songs, humorous songs (sometimes with a fine sense of the absurd), and so-called daring songs (*udalye pesni*), boasting of an outlaw's free and happy life. In robber songs (*razboinich'i pesni*) the outlaw finds himself in

prison, awaiting execution, and likens himself to a captive eagle or falcon dreaming of happiness and freedom.

Epic Genres

The Russian epic song (*bylina*) was chanted to a simple melody. There were more songs than melodies, so that the same melody would be used for different songs. Some performers would insert brief spoken comments between chanted lines. Performers, male or female, had extensive repertoires which they could vary and recombine. No song would ever appear in exactly the same form twice. An epic song can vary in length from less than a hundred to several hundred lines. It features a formulaic prelude (*zachin*) and a formulaic close (*kontsovka*). There is no stanzaic structure. Lines are of uneven length but are made to fit the basic rhythm of the recitative through insertion of filler particles, shifting stress, syncope, and other devices. The plot of a *bylina* unfolds slowly. There is a great deal of descriptive detail but little narrative strategy. Episodes are often developed triadically (for example, the hero may have to overcome three successive obstacles), and the climax is sudden. Psychological motivation is absent: the heroes speak and act but do not think.

There are two types of *byliny*, historical and mythical. Historical *byliny* deal with the exploits of such historical personages as Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, Stepan Razin, and Emelyan Pugachov and reflect the people's reaction to events associated with these figures. The image of Ivan the Terrible is positive, whereas Peter the Great comes off rather badly. The singer unequivocally sides with the outlaws Razin and Pugachov. Historical *byliny* may be likened to folk ballads of the English-speaking world.

Mythical songs form several distinct cycles. Some *byliny* are apparent vestiges of Slavic cosmological and totemic myths, celebrating culture heroes rather than warriors. In this group are several songs about Svyatogor (Holy Mount), a giant so huge that Mother Earth cannot bear him. In one of these songs Svyatogor boasts that he could lift the whole world if only he could find a point of support. As he rides through the steppe, he comes across a small bag, which he finds too heavy to lift from the saddle. When he dismounts and tries to lift the bag, it will not budge even though the giant has strained so mightily that he is up to his knees in the ground. He makes one more frantic effort and is swallowed by Mother Earth. Mikula Selyaninovich (Nicholas, the Peasant's Son) is a mighty plowman who plows so fast that Duke Volga Svyatoslavovich (probably an allusion to Duke Oleg of Kiev) can barely overtake him on horseback. Volkh Vseslavovich (from *volkhv*, "sorcerer," and Vseslav, an eleventh-century duke of Polotsk whom the Russian Primary Chronicle reports to have had a werewolf's magical powers) can change himself into a variety of animals at will and performs incredible feats of magic and cunning.

By far the most important set of mythical songs is the Kiev cycle, in which Vladimir the Fair Sun, clearly identical with Vladimir I, grand duke of Kiev (979–1015), plays the role that King Arthur or Charlemagne play in the epic tradition of the West. At least one of the main heroes of this cycle, Dobrynya Nikitich, may have an identifiable historical prototype in Dobrynya, an uncle and general of Vladimir's. There is also a Novgorod cycle, in which the wealth and unruly freedom of the great northern trading city are well remembered.

The heroes (*bogatyri*) of the Kiev cycle are engaged in constant battles against the

infidel Tatars, a substitute for the historical Pechenegs and Polovetzians. Contrary to historical truth, the Russian heroes are always victorious. Many byliny feature familiar international themes. Dobrynya Nikitich, accomplished in all the knightly arts and in music, clearly the aristocrat among the bogatyri, is the Russian dragon slayer. He also appears in the familiar role of guest at his wife's wedding. Alyosha Popovich (the Parson's Son), another popular hero, has persuaded Dobrynya's wife to marry him after her husband has not been heard from in six years. But Dobrynya appears at the wedding disguised as a minstrel and claims his wife. Alyosha, a crafty sort, talks his way out of this tight spot. Yet Alyosha has his heroic exploits, too. It is he who slays the formidable Tatar prince Tugarin Zmeevich (echoing the historical Tugorkan, a Polovetzian khan; Zmeevich is from *zmei*, "dragon").

The hero of heroes is Ilya of Murom, who is featured in many byliny, alone and with other heroes. Like the other bogatyri, he fights the Tatars, but he also appears in a number of plots found in epic tales throughout the world. In one bylina, for example, Ilya is captured by the giant Svyatogor, who ties him up and sticks him in his pocket. On his belt the giant carries a glass cage in which he keeps a beautiful princess whom he has kidnapped. When Svyatogor lies down to sleep, the princess promises Ilya that she will let him flee if he will make love to her. After it is done, she demands that he give her his ring, which she puts on a string on which she already has thirty-three other rings. The Russian folk epic and folktale tend to be quite negative about feminine virtue.

Ilya of Murom is the son of a peasant (Cossack singers make him a Cossack), a simple soul whose straightforward manner often gets him in trouble with Duke Vladi-

mir and his court. Ilya spent the first thirty-three years of his life immobile, without the use of his legs, until miraculously healed and given prodigious strength by two holy pilgrims. They come to his house and ask for a drink of water. When Ilya responds that he cannot move, they order him to get up. He does and immediately feels great strength rising through his body. He sets out for Kiev to serve Duke Vladimir. Along the way Ilya defeats and captures the terrible highwayman Solovei (Nightingale), whose shrill whistle alone can kill a man.

The bogatyri of the Kievan cycle, but especially Ilya of Murom, have been and still are a part of the Russian national consciousness. When in *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky calls a boy hero Ilya, he is pointing at Ilya of Murom.

The epics of the Kievan cycle present a heroic world through peasant eyes. (This is reflected in the language of the epic, which mixes highly stylized poetic diction with crude vulgarisms.) A sense of the tragic, which may have played a greater role in earlier versions (there is evidence for this in the case of *The Tale of Sukhan*, of which there exists a seventeenth-century paraphrase), is generally absent. The bylina as sung by the peasant singers of the Russian north is basically optimistic and materialistic. It has been assumed that the heroic epic originated at the princely courts of the Kievan era. (These courts probably employed minstrels.) When Kievan Russia collapsed in the thirteenth century, the epic songs moved north with the *skomorokhi*, traveling entertainers at whose hands the songs were adjusted to a new, Muscovite ethos, though they retained their Kievan setting. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the *skomorokhi* periodically suffered persecution by ecclesiastical and secular authorities and gradually drifted to the