East, West, and In-Between: My Journey through Russia in Books

It is a strange thing, to have lived somewhere and have no memories of it. Due to my mother's work with Coca-Cola, I spent the first half of my life moving every few years, and so my earliest memories are not of my native Canada, but rather of rental homes and airplanes. Memories begin to crystallize at around 3 to 3 ½ , when we were living in South Africa, but the first place we lived after I was born was Moscow, Russia. It was the end of the Yeltsin era, Russia's economy was in free fall, it was a historic time that laid the groundwork for the modern Russia we know today. And for me, it is a blank slate.

I believe it is because of this that Russia has always held a deep fascination for me. In my family's library, carted around with us until it was finally purged after the last child left for university and my parents could finally do the infamous "downsizing", the collection of Russian fairy tales was my preferred bedtime story. Baba Yaga, the Golden Fish, the Seven Knights, I couldn't get enough. As I got older, I took every opportunity to dive into this enormous country and learn about it. While other pet obsessions came and went with the seasons, this one remained. It came in different flavors– as a child the glitter of Catherine the Great's jewels was irresistible, while as an insufferable high-schooler in an economics class, the Soviet Union seemed to be the most fascinating place on earth. My interest reached a new level when, during the pandemic and faced with large amounts of free time, I started taking Russian lessons. A language like none I'd studied before, it was a chance to access the world of Pushkin and Chekhov on their terms. While undoubtedly still a beginner, it is a journey I look forward to taking over the course of my adulthood. A few of the books in my collection represent my start and current status with the language.

Fascination can blind you, and there is an undeniable risk of letting a love for something cover the flaws. Russia's actions have been at once complicated and simple– the war in the Ukraine is a catastrophe, the Iron Curtain a limit to freedom. These things are all too true. But it remains the fact that a country is not its politicians. The West and Russia have been opposed now for the better part of a century, and caused strife the world over. Countries like Korea, Nicaragua, Afghanistan suffered at the hands of the imperial power jostling. Today, the renewed fears about World War 3, and the use of atomic weapons brings us back to the darkest days of the Cold War. Digging into our trenches and returning to our echo chambers, however, is the furthest thing from helpful. At times of dissonance and tension, more understanding is needed.

Books can be a starting point, and while not a replacement for person-to-person interaction, they can help pave the way. The books in my collection represent my own efforts to understand the intricacies of Russia's history and culture, language and politics. Beyond purely education, the books represent a straight line through my own life and intellectual development. I have yet to return to Russia, the only evidence of my time there is a small collection of photos

and a beaten up samovar, and with current events it seems more likely than not a return will take longer than I hope. But until then, I have my exer-expanding collection of works.

References

Alexievich, Svetlana. 2017. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Translated by Bela Shayevich. New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group.

This book was referenced in a review for another I read, not included in this collection, as a superior telling of the same story. From the first few pages, I was hooked, and the story returned me to the days of childhood, where hours would pass by as you fell completely into a book. It was the first example of nonfiction oral history that I read, and one that set me on a journey to read the rest of Aleievich's bibliography and as much oral history as I could find. The work reminds me that, when reading history, all too often we distrust personal recollections and replace them with a hunt for data. Alexievich takes the opposite approach, and puts human memories, with all their faults and opinions, right at the center of her work.

Bulgakov, Mikhail. 2016. *The Master and Margarita: 50th-Anniversary Edition (Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition)*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Penguin Publishing Group.

This book made me laugh out loud. Beach vacations are always wonderful, and I always bring two types of reads– something heavy and classic, that I've been wanting to tackle for a long time, and something light and fluffy, to enjoy and pass the time. Normally, the classic remains in the bag while the light one is devoured. Last beach trip, I took no chances, and forced myself to at least start this book. I was inseparable for the rest of the trip, and the absurdity of Soviet censorship and politics entertained me as the sun burnt me to a tomato red.

Chekhov, Anton. 1991. *The Cherry Orchard*. New York, NY: Dover Publications.

Bought as part of a pack of Chekhov's plays, it is far and away my favorite. The work dances the line between a comedy of manners and a tragedy, never fully committing to one or the other. The story of the aristocracy's faded glory can be a celebration or cause for weeping. Having read his four great plays, it is now a goal of mine to see at least one.

DEMENEVA, K. A. 2019. *ILLYUSTRIRROVANNYJ SLOVAR INOSTRANNOGO STUDENTA: illyustrirovannyj slovar inostr*. Moscow, Russia: RUSSKIJ YAZY'K KURSY'.

This was a gift given to me by my first Russian teacher. A picture dictionary for children, its simple black and white cartoons are at one cute and informative. The use of the dictionary is secondary, as I much more often use an online source, but occasionally I flip through, to look at the declensions and drawings and feel immersed.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 1989. *Notes from underground : a new translation, backgrounds and sources, responses, criticism*. Edited by Michael R. Katz. Translated by Michael R. Katz. New York, NY: Norton.

A confession– a lifelong Russophile, a lifelong bibliophile, it was only in 2022 that I finally took a stab at the classics of Russian literature. Too intimidated by the big names, I decided to start small, with the shortest Dostoevsky book I could find in the used bookstore. A book from 1864, I found shades of the modern world in it, a proto-incel in a way. The novella went down easily, and helped build my confidence in tackling some of the larger classics in the Russian canon.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. 1994. *Demons, Formerly Translated as The Possessed*. Edited by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

The newest addition to my collection, I am in the process of reading this right now for a preceptorial at St. John's. As excited as I was to join the GI, a disappointment was at the fact that, due to the shortened time frame of the MALA, it looked like I would not have the chance to discuss any Russian classics with tutors and classmates. When I saw that this was an option for the Spring 2023 schedule, I jumped at the opportunity. Referencing *Notes from Underground*, it represents my first time reading one of the tomes of Russian literature.

Erades, Guillermo. 2017. *Back to Moscow: A Novel*. New York, NY: Picador.

The story here is one of letting literature take over your life. A young man moves to Moscow for a PhD in Russian literature, and falls into a nihilistic cycle of women, drinking, and nightlife. In the book, Putin and the Chechnyan war hover over the story, always just out of sight but affecting everything that happens. The book was my first introduction to the true horrors of Chechnya and prompted me to look at my own country's politics and literature with a discerning eye.

Khemlin, Margarita. 2019. *Klotsvog*. Translated by Lisa C. Hayden. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

A novel in monologue is the best way I can describe this book. It tells the story of an objectively terrible woman, selfish, vain, and controlling. It also creates such sympathy for her, and seeing her life rise and fall, you wish you could just jump in and shake Maya Klotsvog, tell her to be happy for just once in her life. Most importantly for me, it broadens the story of the Soviet Union beyond simply the "authoritarian" label we all too often assign to works of the era.

Lingo Mastery. 2019. *Russian Short Stories for Beginners: 20 Captivating Short Stories to Learn Russian & Grow Your Vocabulary the Fun Way!* N.p.: Lingo Mastery.

To read, comfortably and ably, is the goal for learning any language for me, above even speaking. This purchase I made, far too early in my Russian language journey, was intimidating at first. Despite the inclusion of "for beginners" in the title, reading it was above my level for a long time. To read in another language is a humbling experience, but one that reminds me to be mindful and deliberate.

Montefiore, Simon S. 2017. *The Romanovs: 1613-1918*. New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.

In the summer of 2017, I had to get major back surgery. The recovery process would consist of long days in bed, with only small walks to build strength back up. I remember the day before I was due in the hospital, looking through the local independent bookstore in Vail, Colorado, searching for something that could entertain me. This book got me through that frustrating time– exhaustive, educational, but above all, readable, the book transported me from a hospital bed to the palaces of the Romanov family. It has formed the comparison point for all dynastic histories I've read since and, sadly, most have come up lacking. The book took pains to remind the reader that, behind the glitter and glamor, the cruelty of absolutism was never far behind.

Pomerantsev, Peter. 2017. *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: Adventures in Modern Russia*. London, England: Faber & Faber.

This book actually left and came back into my life. I read it for a university interview back in high school, sure that the recent Crimean invasion would come up, and wanting to sound intelligent on modern Russia (the interview dealt with the Japanese economy, a subject I had not even fathomed). I loved the book; Pomerantsev's background in magazines made the anecdotes and stories easily read and digested. In university I leant it to a friend who was similarly fascinated by Russia. I never got it back, and I made my peace with the loss. Flashforward to July of 2022, and a friend of a friend who crashed on my couch brought out a book as a thank-you gift. The book was Pomerantsev's work, and re-reading it brought me back to highschool. The book is more grandiose than I remember, but the writing is just as punchy.

Pushkin, Aleksandr S. 1979. *Eugene Onegin*. Translated by Charles Johnston and Aleksandr S. Pushkin. London, England: Penguin.

Visiting a friend in New York in 2022, we decided to try something new and go to the opera. The cheapest tickets we could find were for Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, and so we spent an afternoon, dressed up and rubbing shoulders with people far classier than ourselves, listening to the love story and the origin of Russian literature. The work itself I read after, and the tragic love story of Eugene and Tatiana captivated me. Translations always imply the loss of something, and a novel in verse even moreso. A goal of mine, hopefully to be accomplished one day, is to read the work in its original language.

Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. 1963. *One Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovich*. Translated by Ralph Parker. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton & Co.

While you can quibble and argue about Solzhenitsyn's utility as a historian, his novel about the Gulag system is an undeniable success in humanizing the prisoners of the prison camp. The book reminds me of looking for hope, even in the darkest of situations. If Ivan Denisovich can rejoice over a second helping at lunch, it helps put my problems into perspective.

Sorokin, Vladimir. 2011. *Day of the Oprichnik: A Novel*. Translated by Jamey Gambrell. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

I love to read imagined futures, soft sci-fi– worlds that could come to be in the near future, while still retaining a resemblance to our current world. This work, written in 2011, paints a picture of 2028, with a neo-medieval Tsardom of Russia re-established. A wall surrounds the country and the state is a petro-state, pumping out oil to the rest of the world. The story is of an oprichnik, a political policeman and confidante of the tsar. Brutal, violent, and at times gross, the story builds a world of terror and luxury. A modern update of *Ivan Denisovich*, Sorokin reminded me that dystopia can change its shape, but never fully goes away.

Wood, Tony. 2018. *Russia Without Putin: Money, Power and the Myths of the New Cold War*. New York, NY: Verso Books.

A book that accomplishes exactly what the title says– talks about modern Russia without giving into the temptation to obsess over Putin. It introduced readers to a large cast of characters, and reminds us that Russia is not one man, and like any country, relies on a complex web of power structures and individuals to run. Reading a book about Russian politics published prior to the Ukrainian invasion was interesting, and I found myself looking for hints at the larger war that we see happening now.