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Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991–2006

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conceptualized not as essential and unchanging, but in terms of continuing processes of 'construction' and 'negotiation':

> Cultures, it seems, get constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed as people pursue their identities […] Identities are constructed and reconstructed through historical action.[4]

I would, however, contest Handler's notion that 'the concept of "identity" is peculiar to the modern western world'.[5] Since most of his counter-examples are set in the Far East or in periods before the twentieth century, his statement is acceptable only if it is expanded to include Russia (which partakes of both East and West).

As Michael Urban has aptly remarked, 'Politics in post-communist societies is in large measure a politics of identity.[6] Russian writers in the post-Soviet period have been engaged in a constant search for new values and new identities after the collapse of communism – at the individual, group, regional, ethnic and national levels. There is no exact equivalent of the English word 'identity' in the Russian language (indeed, the term normally used, *identichnost'* is simply a translation of the English), but its relevance to post-Soviet Russia was highlighted by the prominent writer Andrei Bitov, who in an interview of 1996 used the English term: 'Russia is going through a new historical phrase, again acquiring its "identity"'.[7] As Homi Bhabha has pointed out, the nation is 'a system of cultural signification';[8] and works of literature are often privileged bearers of a culture's history.[9] Post-Soviet literature has proved to be a natural

4 Ibid., pp.27, 29. See also Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: 1975); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: 1983); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: 1988).

5 Handler, 'Is Identity…?', p.27.

6 Michael Urban, 'The Politics of Identity in Russia's Postcommunist Transition: The Nation against Itself', *Slavic Review*, Vol.53 (1994), pp.733–65 (p.733).

7 Andrei Bitov: "Est' istoricheskoe vremia, cherez kotoroe ne pereprygnesh"', interview with Liliia Pann, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 13 March 1996, p.5.

8 Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London, 1990), p.2.

9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: 1991), p.2. This view has been developed in

medium both for the propagation of nationalist ideology, and for the expression of individual Russian writers' quest for personal and national identity.

My research on this subject began as an attempt to produce a second edition of my monograph *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia*, published in 1995. As I embarked on this project, however, it gradually became clear that it was not possible simply to update my previous book, which had focused on the reinterpretation of Soviet history in literature published in Russia during the Gorbachev period and its immediate aftermath, since by the mid-1990s so much had changed in Russian culture and society that a completely new approach to the subject was required. It will be helpful initially to explore some of these changes.

When I began my research into history and literature in contemporary Russia in the years 1986–1987, at the beginning of perestroika, this seemed like a unique and exhilarating period in both Russian history and culture. The press and literary journals were witnessing an unprecedented information explosion which was filling in the 'blank spots' of Soviet history, and a flood of fiction by writers both living and dead that had never before been published in Russia had suddenly burst upon the public. Whereas the re-examination of the past had begun as a cautious, party-sanctioned evaluation of the 'mistakes' that had hindered the development of the Soviet economic system and caused widespread 'stagnation', the torrent of new information and previously suppressed literature rapidly overwhelmed all official attempts to control it. In 1987–1988 the subscriptions of the major literary journals shot up to several million, and every month members of the cultural intelligentsia were scanning the journals to follow the new revelations and the breaking of new taboos.

By 1989, with the first publication of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in Russia, it had become evident that glasnost in literature now amounted to far more than the 'thaw' of the Khrushchev era – it had developed into nothing less than a cultural and spiritual revo-

the Russian context in Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire 1552–1917* (London: 1997), pp.286–314; Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (London: 2002).

lution. In recognition of this, Alec Nove characterized the period up to 1989 as one of 'cultural renaissance in Russia',[10] and Vitalii Shentalinsky, a member of the commission formed to investigate the cases of writers falsely condemned in Stalin's purges, spoke in 1990 of 'the formation of a new country and a new people'.[11] The momentous events of 1991, when the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was swept away after seventy-four years and the USSR collapsed, seemed to support this interpretation. My book *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia* (1995) was designed to analyse one important aspect of the cultural revolution in the period since Gorbachev's accession: the relationship between history and literature, and the contribution it had made to the process of political change in Russia in the years 1985–1993, as the newly published writings came to question the very origins of Soviet power.

By 1995, however, when my book was about to appear, so much had happened that perestroika already seemed to have retreated rapidly into the past. The hopes of the 1980s had been replaced by growing disillusionment with the 'democracy' and market reforms of the new Yeltsin era. Some Russian liberals and democrats (the genuine variety – not just those ex-communists who had renamed themselves 'democrats') – had begun to look back at the Gorbachev era with great nostalgia (as had many western Slavists), while communists and nationalists had come to regard it as a tragic period marking the decline of Russia's greatness.

One major change which had taken place in the cultural field was that by 1990, with the introduction of multi-party politics and the 'Law on the Press and Other Media', the great political influence that Russian literature had wielded only a few years earlier was already on the wane. Another somewhat unexpected development was that the Russian public's previous fascination with historical fiction published in the 'thick journals' had also appeared to be transient: after Russians

10 Alec Nove, *Glasnost in Action: Cultural Renaissance in Russia* (London: 1989).

11 Vitalii Shentalinsky, meeting at St Antony's College, Oxford, October 1990. For a similar view, see T. Ivanova, 'Kto chem riskuet?', *Ogonek*, 11–18 June 1988, No.24, p.12.

had satisfied their immediate curiosity about the hidden pages of their own history, they seemed initially to have little inclination to delve into the finer aesthetic and historiographical points of interpretation. When several of Solzhenitsyn's major works appeared in 1990 – *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*, and the first three parts of his *Red Wheel* cycle – the popular response was disappointingly muted when compared to the enthusiastic reception of lesser writers only two or three years earlier.

If the Soviet state had crumbled more quickly than could previously have been imagined and had itself become part of history, Russian society seemed to tire equally quickly of the reserve of forbidden topics and repressed writing. Throughout the Yeltsin period, in the view of many commentators, interest in serious historical fiction – and serious literature in general – continued to peter out in exhaustion and indifference, compounded by people's daily struggle to survive in conditions of political and social upheaval and the new market conditions that confronted journals, book publishers and readers alike. Russian readers began to long for more escapist fare, and detective stories, thrillers and romances became the most popular reading matter in the 1990s. The people of Russia and the former USSR, to the great disappointment of the cultural intelligentsia, seemed to be more interested in developing a mass culture than in filling in the many remaining gaps in their knowledge of history and 'high culture'.

In the first decade of the new millennium, however, it is once again possible to re-evaluate the relationship between history and literature in contemporary Russia, examining the historical fiction published in the Yeltsin period and during Putin's first and second terms in a longer historical perspective. By 2006 it has become evident, with the benefit of hindsight, that Russian society's confrontation with its past has remained one of the main themes of Russian culture throughout the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, and that Russian writers' and readers' interest in history has by no means diminished, but simply developed and changed. Notwithstanding the gradual decline of the literature of sensational disclosure, a more oblique investigation of many aspects of Russian and Soviet history and an interest in the philosophy of history have

continued to be significant preoccupations of post-Soviet culture. Individual and family history continues to be explored in memoirs, diaries and autobiographical writings, while the historical origins of contemporary Russian society and thought have been hotly and persistently debated in literary journals and the media, as Russians search for a new 'national idea' to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of communism. It has also become apparent that certain long-standing attitudes to history in Russia have surfaced again, in different configurations, during both perestroika and the post-Soviet period. Indeed, questions of Russian history and Russian national identity have proved to be a constant feature of Russian culture, both before and after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and before and after the 'second Russian revolution' of 1991.

This book will, therefore, aim to set the historical fiction published both during perestroika and the post-Soviet era in a wider historical context, exploring the continuities and discontinuities between literature published in these two periods and the literature of the former Soviet underground. An attempt will also be made to situate literature on historical themes published since 1991 against a much broader backdrop of earlier periods of Russian history and culture, in order to assess how far the concerns of contemporary writers and cultural figures represent a break with, or a continuation of, traditional attitudes to literature and history in Russia.

The literature of history in the Russian tradition

History and literature are closely related in every culture. A society's representation of its past is central to that society's understanding and definition of itself; and literature set in a historical context is one of the aesthetic forms best suited to an exploration of the complexities of past experience and to conveying these perceptions to a wide audience. In Russia the link between history and literature has always been particularly close; historical fiction is not, as in the West, regarded as

just one specific literary genre practised by only a few select authors such as Walter Scott. One US scholar has gone so far as to call this Russian approach 'an obsession with history'.[12]

Writers in Russia have rarely accepted the Western European concept of the necessary segregation between history and imaginative literature; the close connection between history and fiction has been a widely held view in Russia, challenged only recently by poststructuralist theory and postmodernist literary texts. For a long time, Russians have learnt their history through literature, not just through the works of historians. Many nineteenth-century Russian writers regarded themselves as the chroniclers and conscience of their nation;[13] and this tradition has been inherited by many twentieth-century Russian writers. In Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, for example, the writer Galakhov says, speaking for the author: 'For a country to have a great writer is like having a second government'.

Throughout most of the period 1917–1985, and particularly after Stalin's rise to power in the late 1920s, the Soviet political leaders established control over all aspects of culture, including history and literature. They appropriated history and historical fiction, since they regarded control over the past as a key to their control over the present. History was to be used not merely to establish the truth about the past, but for the purpose of social engineering in the present. Together, history and literature served the Communist Party, distorting the past and corrupting people's understanding of the present.

History and literature during perestroika

At no time has the relationship between history and literature in Russia been more significant than during the Gorbachev era (1985–1991). Initially, the main focus of the Russian cultural revival under

12 Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *An Obsession with History: Russian Writers Confront the Past* (Stanford: 1994). See also Gary Saul Morson (ed.), *Literature and History: Theoretical Problems and Russian Case Studies* (Stanford: 1986).

13 For discussion of Tolstoi's view, see Isaiah Berlin, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: 1978), p.30.

glasnost was a widespread re-examination of Soviet and pre-revolutionary history, far surpassing the earlier reassessment which had taken place under Khrushchev in the years 1956–1963. Literature played a very important part in this process, opening up new subjects for historical enquiry and challenging historians to produce a deeper analysis of their country's past. From 1987–1988 millions of Soviet people became actively involved in studying their country's history, and this led to a far-reaching re-evaluation of the theoretical principles and the political practice of the Soviet state. Such a profound reassessment of the values officially propagated and privately cherished in the USSR since 1917 in turn radically altered Soviet people's understanding of their own history and paved the way for the dramatic political changes of the 1990s.

Studies of Gorbachev's USSR by political scientists and economists sometimes underestimate or even totally omit the cultural and spiritual factors which helped to transform the consciousness of the Russian people since 1985. I would, however, contend that literature and cultural debate played a more significant role than either political science or historiography in 'preparing perestroika in the minds of the people'.[14] The historical fiction published in the Gorbachev period contributed to the transformation of public opinion, and hence to the gradual disintegration of Soviet ideology and the dismantling of the old political and social system.

The post-Soviet period[15]

After the collapse of the USSR, history has continued to preoccupy both political leaders and the cultural intelligentsia. Influenced by their recent experience of perestroika, when fiction and *publitsistika* (social and political journalism) on historical themes had played a

14 This phrase was used by the literary scholar Aron Lur'e at a lecture at the Central Lecture Theatre (Leningrad: March 1991).

15 In this book the term 'post-Soviet' will generally be preferred to 'post-communist', since the latter implies that communism was actually achieved in the USSR.

major part in reassessing the past and changing social attitudes,[16] Yeltsin, Putin and their advisers have continued to pay attention to symbolic cultural and historical factors in their attempts to create a new Russia. The result has been a constantly changing, sometimes abortive attempt at cultural revolution in contemporary Russia, which has not always been sufficiently accentuated by historians and political scientists.[17]

At the same time, although the political influence of Russian culture has diminished in the post-Soviet period, many Russian writers and film-makers have continued to regard it as part of their role to treat questions of history and identity, to make a contribution to contemporary intellectual debate, and even, in some cases, to attempt to educate the public. It is still important for historians of contemporary Russia to take account of cultural developments and public debates among the intelligentsia, since many Russian intellectuals, like their counterparts in East-Central Europe, are prominent public figures, and their ideas have exerted considerable influence on the political leaders and the population at large. Moreover, the way in which Russian intellectuals have dealt with the aftermath of the traumatic fall of the USSR (which President Putin called in 2005 'one of the greatest geopolitical catastrophes of the twentieth century') is an important subject in itself. This study may also be of some interest to those with a comparative perspective: it would be instructive to compare the Russian experience with the rethinking of history undertaken in Germany after the fall of the Third Reich and, subsequently, after German reunification, as well as by the intellectual elites in the countries of East-Central Europe and the other independent states of the former USSR.

This book will explore a variety of attitudes to history and national identity expressed in the post-Soviet period by politicians, historians and cultural figures, while also seeking to investigate why, by the first decade of the new millennium, the role of the Russian

16 Nove, *Glasnost in Action*; R.W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Revolution* (London: 1989).

17 Notable exceptions are Robert Service, *Russia: Experiment with a People* (London: 2003); Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks!*

cultural intelligentsia – and the intelligentsia as a whole – has significantly declined.

Subject matter

Following Bourdieu, my aim is, first, in Part One, to explore the relationship between the 'cultural field' and the socio-political context; secondly, to establish the 'habitus' and 'position-taking' of different writers and works;[18] and finally, in Parts Two and Three, to attempt an interpretation of a wide variety of contemporary literary and cultural texts.

This book will be concerned predominantly with literary works on historical themes which first appeared in Russia in the post-Soviet period. It will be concerned not only with literary and cultural texts themselves, but also with the debates they engendered in the media. These include both discussions about the historical accuracy of the facts or the validity of the interpretations presented in works of fiction, and the political and aesthetic debates they provoked among different sections of Russian society. Cultural criticism has traditionally been an influential battleground for public ideological and social debate in Russia, and in the post-Soviet period, just as during perestroika, history and historical fiction have continued to be used as political weapons in the bitter and continuing conflict between communists, nationalists, reformists and radical democrats. Literary works reassessing Russian history have been used by Russian liberals to create a climate of opinion which helped to change the Soviet political system and which, it was hoped, might eventually lead to the establishment of a genuinely democratic society and functioning market economy in Russia. Conservative critics, however, have often interpreted the same literary works in a different way, using them to propound alternative, nationalist views which have also exerted considerable influence in

18 See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. and introduced by Randal Johnson (London: 2004).

contemporary Russia, helping to engender such significant events as the conflict between president and parliament in October 1993, the two Chechen wars, and the accession of President Putin.

From late 1989, as political transformation became more rapid, Russians started to show more interest in the present than the past, and, although analogies with the past were still regarded as instructive, the genre of historical fiction began to be less important than before to the general public. Whereas in 1987–1988 commentators had welcomed an exhilarating new period in Soviet culture,[19] by 1989 critics were remarking on the 'chaos and uncertainty' of the Russian political and cultural scene;[20] and by 1991 it had become common to hear predictions of the 'death' of Soviet literature, or even of Russian literature as a whole.[21] This book will therefore attempt to analyse why the condition of both history and literature in Russia changed so radically after the euphoric early days of glasnost, while also surveying the treatment of historical themes in literature of the post-Soviet period, viewed from the perspective of the Putin era. The conclusion will evaluate the achievements and limitations of the newly-published historical fiction and discuss some of the difficulties and challenges faced by Russian writers and historians under Presidents Yeltsin and Putin.

The permanent 'mental revolution' (to use R.W. Davies's term) in Russia and the former USSR since the late 1980s has created considerable difficulties for western Slavists, who for a long time had regarded themselves as privileged guardians of some arcane, though essentially static mystery. After Gorbachev's accession the USSR – and subsequently the Russian Federation – became a dynamically evolving society, and western Slavists too were forced to undergo their own personal perestroika, to rethink all their past views on Soviet

19 Julian Graffy, 'The Literary Press', in Graffy and Geoffrey Hosking (eds), *Culture and the Media in the USSR Today* (Basingstoke and London: 1989), pp.107–57; Deming Brown, 'Literature and Perestroika', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Vol.28, No.4 (Fall 1989).

20 Helena Goscilo, 'Introduction: A Nation in Search of its Authors', in Goscilo and Byron Lindsey (eds), *Glasnost: an Anthology of Russian Literature under Gorbachev* (Ann Arbor, 1990), p.xv.

21 V. Erofeev, 'Pominki po sovetskoi literature', *Aprel'*, 1991, No.1, pp.274–82.

history and culture. This book demonstrates how far my own thinking about the role of modern Russian literature has changed since the heady early days of Gorbachev's glasnost and has had to be continually revised under the pressure of changing events.

Although western 'outsiders' may enjoy the advantages of a more objective view of Russian society than 'insiders' (whether living in the Russian Federation or in emigration), this complex process of mental evolution is still under way for many western academics (including myself). It is more difficult for literary scholars than for political scientists to re-evaluate the last fifteen years in Russia, since it takes time to read and assimilate works of literature, evaluate their importance, and set them in historical perspective. For that reason, any conclusions offered in this book can only be tentative.

Review of previous literature

In the years 1991–2006 an enormous amount of both historical fiction and new materials on Russian culture and history has appeared in Russia – far too much to be encompassed by any one person. The development of historical thought in Russia by historians and publicists under Gorbachev and Yeltsin has been ably documented by R.W. Davies,[22] while valuable additional material has been provided by many other scholars,[23] notably Robert Service and Kathleen E.

22 Davies, *Soviet History in the Gorbachev Era*; R.W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era* (London: 1997).

23 On the rethinking of history under Gorbachev, see also Stephen Wheatcroft, 'Unleashing the Energy of History', *Australian Slavic and East European Studies* (*ASEES*), Vol.1, No.1 (1987), pp.85–132; idem, 'Steadying the Energy of History', *ASEES*, Vol.1, No.2 (1987), pp.57–114; Pierre Broué, 'Gorbachev and History', in Stephen White (ed.), *New Directions in Soviet History* (Cambridge: 1992), pp.3–23; Judith Shapiro, 'The perestroika of Soviet history', *Slovo*, Vol.2, No.1 (May 1989), pp.5–13; Shapiro, 'The prophet returned?', *Revolutionary History*, Vol.2, No.1 (Summer 1989), pp.54–6; J. Scherrer, 'History Reclaimed', in Abram Brumberg (ed.), *Chronicle of a*

Smith, who have explored the creation of new historical myths in the post-Soviet period,[24] and Peter Duncan, Kathleen Parthé and Vera Tolz, who have investigated changing approaches to Russian national identity.[25]

However, in contrast with the many surveys of Russian literature and cultural politics under perestroika that were produced by western scholars,[26] relatively few works have focused specifically on cultural developments in the post-Soviet period. Although some scholars have offered interim assessments of certain periods of Russian culture in the post-Soviet years,[27] a comprehensive new history of contemporary

Revolution (New York: 1990), pp.90–107; Davies, 'History and perestroika', in E.A. Rees (ed.), *The Soviet Communist Party in Disarray: the XXVIII Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (London, 1991), pp.119–147; and the collection of essays in 'Perestroika, current trends and Soviet history', *Survey*, Vol.30, No.4 (June 1990).

24 Service, *Russia: Experiment with a People*; Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca: 2002).

25 Peter J.S. Duncan, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, revolution, Communism and after* (London, 2000); Kathleen Parthé, *Russia's Dangerous Texts: Politics Between the Llines* (New Haven: 2004); Vera Tolz, *Russia: Inventing the Nation* (London: 2001).

26 See, for example, Deming Brown, *The Last Years of Soviet Russian Literature: Prose Fiction 1975–1991* (Cambridge: 1993); Goscilo and Lindsey, *Glasnost*; Graffy, 'The Literary Press'; Julian Graffy, 'The Arts', in Martin McCauley (ed.), *Gorbachev and Perestroika* (London: 1990), pp.70–102; Walter Laqueur, *The Long Road to Freedom: Russia and Glasnost* (Boston and London: 1989), pp.48–77; Rosalind Marsh, 'Glasnost and Russian Literature', *ASEES*, Vol.6, No.2, 1992, pp.21–39; Nove, *Glasnost in Action*, pp.15–102; Riitta Pittman, 'Perestroika and Soviet Cultural Politics: the Case of the Major Literary Journals', *Soviet Studies*, Vol.42, No.1 (January 1990), pp.111–32; N.N. Shneidman, *Soviet Literature in the 1980s: decade of transition* (Toronto: 1989).

27 See, for example, Marina Abasheva, *Literatura v poiskakh litsa (Russkaia proza kontsa XX veka: stanovlenie avtorskoi identichnosti)* (Perm', 2001); Mark Lipovetsky, 'Literature on the Margins: Russian Fiction in the Nineties', in Helena Goscilo (ed.), *Russian Culture of the 1990s, Studies in 20th Century Literature*, Vol.24, No.1 (Winter 2000), pp.139–68. Hitherto the only western work to focus exclusively on the first five years of the 21st century is Hélène Mélat (ed.), *Le premier quinquennat de la prose russe du XXIe siècle* (Paris, 2006).

Russian literature remains to be written (or several histories, since any claims to produce one definitive cultural history are inappropriate in a postmodern age).

Those works on contemporary Russian literature which have hitherto appeared either provide a brief overview of recently published texts,[28] or select certain works of literature for detailed consideration,[29] but are not primarily concerned with literature on historical themes. Among the few works concerned specifically with Russian historical fiction in the contemporary period, my own studies of the image of Stalin in literature focus on the depiction of Stalin as an individual rather than on wider historical issues,[30] while Margaret Ziolkovski concentrates on the legacy of Stalinism, as reflected in the literature of perestroika.[31] Deming Brown's overview of the last fifteen years of Soviet Russian prose includes one short chapter on the reassessment of Stalinism, but is primarily concerned with individual writers and literary trends rather than the political context or reception of historical fiction.[32] Along with many useful studies of specific contemporary writers or texts, some interesting critical responses to particular

28 Surveys in English include Martin Dewhirst and Alla Latynina, 'Post-Soviet Russian Literature', in Neil Cornwell (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* (London and New York: 2001), pp.234–50; Shneidman, *Russian Literature, 1988–1994: The End of an Era* (Toronto: 1995). Hitherto the fullest survey of contemporary Russian literature is N.C. Leiderman and M.N. Lipovetskii, *Sovremennaia russkaia literature, 1950–1990-e gody*, 2 vols (Moscow: 2003).

29 Rajendra A. Chitnis, *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak Fiction of the Changes, 1988–1998* (London: 2005); Ian K. Lilly and Henrietta Mondry (eds), *Russian Literature in Transition* (Nottingham: 1999); Robert Porter, *Russia's Alternative Prose* (Oxford, 1994); Leiderman and Lipovetskii, *Sovremennaia russkaia literature*, 3 vols (Moscow, 2001).

30 Marsh, *Images of Dictatorship: Stalin in Literature* (London: 1989), pp.70–102; Marsh, 'Literary Representations of Stalin and Stalinism as Demonic', in Pamela Davidson (ed.), *Russian Literature and its Demons* (Oxford: 2000), pp.473–511.

31 Margaret Ziolkowski, *Literary Exorcisms of Stalinism: Russian Writers and the Soviet Past* (Columbia, SC: 1998).

32 Brown, *The Last Years of Soviet Russian Literature*.

themes and literary genres have also appeared;[33] but while literary scholars have generally avoided the socio-political or philosophical debates these works have engendered, devoting more attention to detailed textual analysis and a theoretical examination of literary trends, the majority of historians and social scientists have tended to concentrate on the political and historical implications of Russian culture, to the exclusion of aesthetic considerations. My book will attempt to combine these two approaches, paying more attention to the socio-political and historical dimensions of post-Soviet literature than most works by western literary scholars. However, it goes without saying that my aim is to complement previous studies, not to replace them.

It is necessary to acknowledge that in the post-Soviet period, especially among the younger generation of Russians, print culture has, to a great extent, been superseded by visual culture, whether in the form of art, television, cinema or the Internet. Several recent books by scholars in the fields of cultural studies,[34] cinema[35] and media

33 See, for example, Ewa M. Thompson (ed.), *The Search for Self-Definition in Russian Literature* (Houston: 1991); Ewa M. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, CT: 2000); Edith W. Clowes, *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia* (Princeton, 1993); Nadya L. Peterson, *Subversive Imaginations: Fantastic Prose and the End of Soviet Literature, 1970s–1990s* (Boulder, CO: 1997).

34 See, for example, Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: 1994); Nancy Condee (ed.), *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-Century Russia* (Bloomington: 1995); Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (eds), *Russian Cultural Studies: an introduction* (Oxford: 1998); Adele Marie Barker (ed.), *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev* (Durham, NC: 1999); Marina Balina, Nancy Condee, and Evgeny Dobrenko (eds), *Endquote: Sots-Art Literature and Soviet Grand Style* (Evanston, IL: 2000); Goscilo, *Russian Culture of the 1990s*.

35 For a fuller discussion of film in the Gorbachev era, see Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: 1992); on post-Soviet cinema, see Birgit Beumers (ed.), *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema* (London: 1999); David Gillespie, *Russian Cinema* (Harlow: 2003); Anna Lawton, *Imaging Russia 2000: Film and Facts* (Washington, DC: 2004).

studies[36] have afforded illuminating snapshots of post-Soviet culture and society in the consumer age, although historical themes are not the main focus of their work.[37] Such specialized studies of cinema, the media and the visual arts in the post-Soviet period have, however, made it unnecessary for me to deal in detail with these aspects of contemporary Russian culture.

Two books which have been of particular value in my discussion of post-Soviet literature are Norman Shneidman's survey of the literary and cultural scene in the years 1988–1994 and Mark Lipovetsky's analysis of Russian postmodernism, although each of these volumes devotes only one chapter to fiction on historical themes.[38] Reference will also be made to two useful articles by Boris Lanin and Angela Brintlinger which focus on certain post-Soviet historical texts of the 1990s.[39]

Two recent works – Shneidman's overview of Russian literature in the years 1995–2002, and the edited volume by Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel, which are devoted to elite and mass literature respectively – hitherto the only general surveys in English including discussion of the early twenty-first century, appeared too late to have

36 On the importance of television, see Ellen Mickiewicz, *Changing Channels: Television and the Struggle for Power in Russia*, revised and expanded edition (Durham, NC: 1999); Ivan Zassoursky, *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia* (Armonk, NY: 2004). For a detailed analysis of recent television series, including historical series, see David MacFadyen, 'Literature Has Left the Building: Russian Romance and Today's TV Drama', KinoKultura, No.8 (April 2005), http://www.kinokultura.com/apr05.macfadyen.html, 38 pages (esp. pp.6–12).

37 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: 2001) deals with attitudes to history in post-socialist societies, but is not primarily concerned with literature. Boym's theoretical insights have, however, been found very useful in this study: see below, Chapter 4.

38 Shneidman, *Russian Literature, 1988–1994*; Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, NY: 1999).

39 Angela Brintlinger, 'The Hero in the Madhouse: The Post-Soviet Novel Confronts the Soviet Past', *Slavic Review*, Vol.63, No.1 (Spring 2004), pp.43–65 deals specifically with Makanin's *Andegraund* and Pelevin's *Chapaev i Pustota*; Boris Lanin, 'Transformatsiia istorii v sovremennoi literature', in Tetsuo Mochizuki (ed.), *Russkaia kul'tura na poroge novogo veka* (Sapporo: 2001), pp.47–59.

played a major part in the preparation of this study, but Shneidman too focuses on individual authors rather than the historical novel as a genre.[40]

Limitations of the subject matter

Because of the sheer quantity and diversity of literary works touching on themes of history and identity and the critical responses to them which have appeared in Russia since 1991, no hope can be entertained of encompassing all the available material in its totality. This book therefore has no pretensions to comprehensiveness, but will be confined to a discussion of some of the most interesting and significant historical issues covered in literature, the media and popular culture, and to some of the most memorable debates engendered by literature, film, memoirs, popular history and *publitsistika* in the post-Soviet period. Inevitably, it will be highly selective and may omit works which others consider of primary importance, although it is hoped that such omissions will not affect the general thrust of the argument. Whereas the time period covered in the general discussion of cultural and political developments in Part One will extend from the fall of the USSR in January 1991 to the end of 2006, the textual discussion in Parts Two and Three will focus more on literature and culture of the 1990s than the 2000s, as additional time will be needed to assimilate the literature published in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Since, in the post-Soviet period, there was a significant divergence between literature and professional history (and the latter has already received detailed scholarly attention), consideration of post-

40 N.N. Shneidman, *Russian literature, 1995–2002: on the threshold of the new millennium* (Toronto: 2004); Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (eds), *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective* (Munich: 2005). Shneidman's view of the contemporary Russian literary scene and the quality of individual texts is generally more harshly critical than my own.

Soviet history has been limited to a brief overview of what R.W. Davies calls 'the politics of history' after 1991 in order to provide essential background to the literary material. Although the ideas expressed in literary texts and the historical, political and moral debates they have provoked will be the main focus of this book, it will not totally eschew aesthetic comment and judgement. In any case, the absence of detailed discussion of the literary merits of the works under consideration does not mean to imply that the literature is worthless from the aesthetic point of view, although, obviously, the literary qualities of the works vary considerably (and some which have aroused heated debate raise complex questions of individual taste and literary judgement). My concentration on themes and ideas is by no means intended to imply that this aspect of contemporary Russian literary and cultural texts is the only, or even the most significant, feature of any individual work under consideration; hence frequent reference will be made in footnotes to critical works that provide a more extensive aesthetic analysis of these texts.

This new book differs significantly from my previous studies of contemporary Russian historical fiction. In *History and Literature in Contemporary Russia*, my main aim was to demonstrate how the subject matter of fiction published in Russia gradually widened after Gorbachev's accession, moving from an analysis of Stalin and the Stalin era to a reassessment of the New Economic Policy, the Civil War and the 1920s, a discussion of the role of Lenin, and ultimately to a reconsideration of the February and October revolutions and the fall of Tsarism. By contrast, the exploration of post-Soviet historical fiction in Part Two of this book will place no chronological limitations on the periods of history covered, but feature a wide, free-ranging discussion of the general treatment of historical themes in post-Soviet culture. An attempt will be made to analyse new genres and approaches to history in contemporary Russia, as well as fresh twists on traditional Russian themes. While the main focus of attention will be literature dealing with aspects of Soviet history since 1917 (especially the 1920s and the Stalin period), reference will also be made to texts dealing with pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet Russian history.