

Russian¹ Literature through Diaspora, Exile, and Translation²

The history of Russian literature is replete with conversations around the center-periphery axis, but what exactly makes a center or periphery when we are dealing with sprawling, colonial empires,³ when those empires transfer populations internally, or when they repeatedly experience waves of mass emigration? There are, of course, grand historical points of departure—the Russian Revolution of 1917, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991—which have certainly produced massive diasporas. But it is also the case that diaspora and exile have been inherent to Russian history, and the development of Russian literature, from the outset. In this course we will explore the many branches of Russian literature that have emerged out of this history—perhaps even a tradition—of diaspora and exile, tracing those journeys from the medieval period to the present; from Russia to Ukraine, France, Germany, Israel, and the United States;⁴ through literary, philosophical, religious, and journalistic texts; and we will engage with themes such as cultural hybridity, identity formation, assimilation, decolonization,

¹ A word imbued with lots of baggage, especially given the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine and the general relationship of the US and Russia over the last couple of decades. I also considered "Russophone", "Russian and Soviet Imperial", "Slavic", and "East European" (since I was initially considering including both Russian-language and Ukrainian-language texts) but ultimately decided on "Russian" because 1) given a majority of Russian-language literature in this syllabus, it would be difficult to do justice to non-Russian texts without having them subsumed, and 2) whether in the Empire or in the Soviet Union, Russia is the cultural and political hegemon and any escape from it—via emigration or exile—requires this central pole from which one can move outwards.

² The theme of this course, which is something that came partly out of my dissatisfaction over the lack of diverse, non-canonical readings and lenses in my own undergraduate and graduate courses, relates pretty directly to the Global Learning VALUE Rubric, namely by promoting global self-awareness (students thinking about, and having the option of creating a final project on, their own relationship with diasporic cultures), thinking about cultural diversity (recognizing the multivalent meaning of "Russian" or "Russophone" cultures and communities), and engaging with the global systems that contribute to the creation and maintenance of diasporic cultures and communities (politics and ideologies, historical events, human geography, literary and artistic movements, etc.). To this I would add that I'm thinking about Ben Rifkin's relation of intercultural competence to a pedagogy of compassion, and how in a class with themes like the ones here, students will naturally have opportunities to build cultural bridges with each other and exercise empathy for a diverse range of experiences with diaspora, exile, and multilingualism.

³ I wanted students to understand from the very outset, especially if they are unfamiliar with Russian history, that Russia's entire modern period (1700-present) is an exercise in imperialism (and not only that, but centralized absolutism unlike anything in Britain, France, or the US), and it is that condition which 1) produces diasporas and exiles and 2) affects the forms, styles, and very existence of literature. Also, I want students who have either engaged with postcolonial literature and theory, or those who are interested in it, to feel that they can engage with those ideas in the Russian context, not only in the more common British, French, and Spanish contexts.

⁴ I would have loved to include Russian-speaking diasporic communities in the Global South, but I just don't know anything about them (or have ever encountered anything about them in my previous readings and coursework). I know that there are decently sized communities in Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil (as well as small ones in India, Egypt, and South Africa), so that could be a productive direction for a subsequent iteration of this course. Because of the Russian Empire's and Soviet Union's own complex and problematic histories with the Global South (racism, orientalism, resource exploitation, geopolitical influence, etc.) it would be fascinating to spend time with students looking at how those countries in the present 1) read Russian literature in translation and 2) support or suppress the literary and cultural activities of local Russian-speaking communities. I owe a debt as well to Alex Moshkin, through his work with CDIPS as well as my knowing him over the past several years, for exposing me to new scholarship (including his own) on the Russian and Soviet diaspora in Israel, which is often not highlighted as much in the North American Slavic world because of the sheer size of those diasporas in the US and Canada.

canon construction, transnationalism and translanguaging, translation and self-translation, censorship, dissidence, readership, formal and informal networks, and new types of media.⁵

Course Policies

The course is open to undergraduate and graduate students.⁶ Graduate students are expected to read and engage with *all* of the scholarly literature (as I may ask them to facilitate certain discussions throughout the semester); and to write a 15-20-page final paper (if that option is chosen over the creative project).

All texts will be provided in English, although you are welcome to read texts in the original Russian if you are able.⁷ A separate Russian section can be set up if there are enough interested students.

Attendance, participation,⁸ and preparation for all classes is required. Most classes will consist of a very short background lecture followed by discussion, which should give you plenty of opportunities to participate, pose questions, and engage with your fellow students.

⁵ These are just a sample of themes that came to mind as I was working on this syllabus, but I think they do well to connect this course to other humanities courses that students may have taken. For many of these, I also want the students to be reflecting on their personal biographies and experiences with migration, displacement, and multilingualism; and with the help of the assigned primary and secondary literature, to bring those experiences into class discussions and/or the creative final project. I'd considered including race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation in the description, but felt that each of these is so big that they probably deserve their own class in the context of Russian literature (although some of the assigned texts definitely address class and gender). Race/ethnicity was a bit more complicated because the vast majority of emigrants from Russia and the Soviet Union would be considered white in the US (whether Eastern Slavic, Jewish, Tatar, or Caucasian), but I could imagine a unit on immigration to the "near abroad", namely Russian-speaking people from the multiethnic Russia/RSFSR who migrated to (and stayed in) the peripheries of the non-Russian peripheries of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.

⁶ An additional benefit to this, beyond grad students' expected engagement with the secondary literature and ability to lead discussions with the undergrads, is that diaspora, migration, and multilingualism have significant but distinct personal meanings for different people, so having more of that in a single classroom would hopefully deepen the quality of conversation and cross-cultural understanding among the students.

⁷ So as not to create a hierarchy between reading in translation vs. the original language, I have only included texts in the syllabus which exist in English translation (or which I can easily translate into English myself) or were written in English originally. I have experienced plenty of times, especially in courses on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Pushkin, the fetishization of the Russian original over the English translation (and concurrent conversations, especially among grad students, about the inherent flaws of translation), and I think that with the goal of inclusivity in mind, it would be best to not set languages against each other, but rather accept that students can read texts in whichever languages they are most comfortable in. Even with that, productive conversations on the role of translation (especially self-translation) in diasporic/multilingual communities should be possible!

⁸ To address issues of equity and promote our classroom as a space where each participant, regardless of differences in background knowledge, is an equal and welcome participant, I'd want to devote a good part of the 1st class meeting to having an open discussion with the students about what classroom participation might look like. The idea of a "classroom contract" is something that I've discussed at length in my pedagogy seminars at Harvard's Bok Center for Teaching and Learning (though I don't necessarily agree with the word "contract" for it), and having tested it out in a couple of my classes so far, I've found that it's especially helpful when there's a wide

As you read, please *take notes, identify patterns, prepare questions*; and think about how the material ties in with previous course material, things you've learned in other courses, and your own personal or familial experience with diaspora.⁹

For certain sessions and texts, I will provide *discussion questions* ahead of time, so please take a look at those before you start the assignment.

Please also *bring your texts and notes to class* so that you may refer to them during discussion. *You may bring laptops and tablets to class* for taking notes or having the assigned texts open, but I ask that *phones be put away*.¹⁰

All submitted work for this course must be your own, so please read the statement of academic integrity, and if you have any questions, please speak with me (*before* turning work in) about plagiarism and academic standards. In the spirit of building a collaborative and collegial space together, I encourage you to discuss assignments and readings with each other outside of class or in my office hours; and to share and edit each other's outlines and drafts (just make sure to give credit for any ideas that are not your own).

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Course Assignments and Grading

Regular and active participation in class discussion: 30%

Four two-page papers:¹² 20% (5% each)

range of students in the classroom (for instance: 1st years, seniors, MA and PhD students, and non-degree or non-traditional learners).

⁹ I really want to stress this point repeatedly to the students: that in addition to the learning they gain from the readings and class discussions, there will also be a constant self-reflective element that connects them to the course material.

¹⁰ I forget where I read this--maybe one of Arthur Brooks' pieces in The Atlantic--but there appears to be a strong correlation between people having their phones out on a table (even face down) and negative opinions about their level of attention/engagement by others present. I certainly want to students to be able to use technology for note-taking or to improve accessibility, but having a phone out is something that needs to be discussed ahead of class.

¹¹ Another way to encourage students' expression of empathy! They'll already be discussing fairly weighty topics in class, responding to each other on Canvas and Perusal, and have the option to work on a creative final project together, but it's so important for those classroom ideas and conversations to continue outside of class (without there necessarily being a structured timeline for it, as I'm aware of students' very busy schedules) where the students can gain a more complete picture of each other, and not have the professor as an interloper.

¹² This is something that I've found effective in courses I've previously been in or taught, and I'm also echoing Alex Moshkin's point from his syllabus that "effective learning happens when students have an opportunity to complete frequent writing assignments that help them sharpen their ideas about the readings." In addition to that, giving students the option of a rewrite provides an opportunity for them to actually work on their writing (if they're not naturally prone to working through drafts), hopefully avoiding some of the frustration that might come with the sense of writing without knowing what the professor is looking for (or if there's such a thing as "good writing").

I will pass around prompts for each of the four modules. The purpose of these papers is for you to practice *concise* academic writing and synthesizing close reading with your own analysis, as well as to help you develop ideas for your final project. Each paper is due *one week after* the end of its respective module. After you have finished *all* four papers, you *may rewrite one* of them for a better grade.

Weekly posts and engagement on Canvas discussion board or Perusall annotations: 25%

For each week, please leave *at least one* post or annotation where you address a discussion question or raise your own point or question that came up during your reading (or about material covered in the previous class); and *at least two* substantive responses to other students' posts.¹³

Final assignment: 25%

You will have the option to *either* write a 10-12-page paper (15-20 pages for graduate students) that extends an idea from one of your two-page papers, or on a new topic relating to the themes and texts covered throughout the semester; *or* to develop a creative project, in conjunction with another student, with some personal connection to diaspora. More details on the latter option will be provided, but the purpose of this project would be to better understand the diasporic condition by defamiliarizing your own culture and language, imagining an unfamiliar reader, identifying linguistic and cultural signposts, and imagining what is lost and gained in translation.¹⁴

¹³ This point is key--when we started using Canvas and Perusall more during the pandemic to try and maintain some sense of class community, the majority of responses to posts were of the "Great point!" or "I totally agree!" nature. While I think it's healthy to maintain a positive tone throughout such exercises, it also feels like students are often posting for participation points rather than to actually engage with the material, their peers, or an interesting polemic.

¹⁴ One of the ideas I had for this came out of a project we had to do a few years ago at the end of Stephanie Sandler's "The Other Russia" course, which involved weekly visits (in pairs or groups of 3) to a local senior home, where the majority of residents were Soviet Jews, and to develop creative projects based on interviews/oral histories with the residents. For one, it gave students a chance to escape the Harvard bubble; but it was also an effective way to engage with a diasporic community while also engaging with fellow group members about our own experiences with diaspora, migration, and multilingualism. In the absence of a local diasporic community, I've imagined this project taking on an online component, where students can share projects (and get feedback) on forums with members of diasporic communities all over the world.

Weekly Schedule

(* = scholarly or additional literature)

Module 1: Theorizing Diaspora

Week 1: Origins and Archetypes

Ilya Kaminsky, "Searching for a Lost Odessa—and a Deaf Childhood" (*The New York Times*, 2018)

Gary Shteyngart, "A Botched Circumcision and Its Aftermath" (*The New Yorker*, 2021)

Keith Gessen, "A Russian-Born Writer Contemplates His Homeland—Then and Now" (*Vogue*, 2022)

*William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return" (1991)

*Kim Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse" (2001)

Week 2: Heretics and Prisoners (Internal Exile)

Avvakum, *The Life Written by Himself* (17th century)

Varlam Shalamov, selected stories from *Kolyma Tales* (1954—1973)

*Lisa Anteby-Yemini and William Berthomière, "Diaspora: A Look Back on a Concept" (2005)

*Andrea Gullotta, "A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: The Gulag Press" (2011)

Week 3: Russian Goes Abroad

Geographical distribution of Russian speakers today:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_distribution_of_Russian_speakers

Afanasy Nikitin, selections from *A Journey Beyond the Three Seas* (15th century)

Andrey Matveev, selections from memoir about the Grand Embassy of Peter the Great in Western Europe (1697—1698)

*Kevin Platt, "Introduction: Putting Russian Cultures in Place", in *Global Russian Cultures* (2019)

*Maria Rubins, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being a Diasporian: Modes of Writing and Reading Narratives of Displacement", in *Redefining Russian Literary Diaspora, 1920-2020* (2021)

First two-page response paper due

Module 2: Journeys Across the 19th Century

Week 4: Translating Europe

Vasily Zhukovsky, selections from translations of Byron, Goethe, Schiller, La Fontaine, Virgil, and Homer; compare with originals and English translations, and discuss Zhukovsky's choice of source texts and manner of translation

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (1923)

*Hilde Hoogenboom, "Sentimental Novels and Pushkin: European Literary Markets and Russian Readers" (2015)

*Julie Hansen, "Introduction: Translingualism and Transculturality in Russian Contexts of Translation" (2018)

Week 5: Travelers, Real and Imagined

Alexander Radischev, *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790)

Nikolai Karamzin, selections from *Letters of a Russian Traveler* (1791)

*Andrzej Walicki, "The Culmination of the Enlightenment in Russia: Alexander Radischev", in *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (1979)

*Michael Cronin, "Knowing One's Place: Travel, Difference, and Translation" (2010)

Week 6: Revolutionary and Spiritual Exiles

Alexander Herzen, selections from *From the Other Shore* (1850) and *My Past and Thoughts* (1868)

Mikhail Bakunin, "Revolutionary Catechism" (1866) and "Appeal to My Russian Brothers" (1867)

Helena Blavatsky, "What Is Theosophy?" (1879) and "What are the Theosophists?" (1879)

Pyotr Kropotkin, selections from *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1899) and “Advice to Those About to Emigrate” (1893)

*Andrzej Walicki, “Anarchism”, in *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism* (1979)

*Martin Miller, “The World of Emigration in Nineteenth-Century Europe” and “The Russian Émigré Press: In the Shadows of *Kolokol*”, in *The Russian Revolutionary Emigres, 1825-1870* (1986)

Week 7: “We All Came Out of Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’”

Nikolai Gogol, selected stories from *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1832)

Nikolai Gogol, “Nevsky Prospekt” (1835) and “The Overcoat” (1842)

The Overcoat (film, dir. Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, 1926)

*Robert Maguire (ed.), selections from *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays* (1975)

*Yuliya Ilchuk, *Nikolai Gogol: Performing Hybrid Identity* (2021)

Second two-page response paper due

Module 3: Catastrophe, Displacement, Reinvention

Week 8: 1917 to Paris

Ivan Bunin, *The Life of Arseniev* (1930) and selections from *Cursed Days* (1926)

Teffi, “Que faire?” and other selected stories (1920—1930)

Arkady Averchenko, “The Tragedy of the Russian Writer” and other selected stories (1920—1925)

*Greta Slobin, “Double Exposure in Exile Writing: Khodasevich, Teffi, Bunin, Nabokov”, in *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora (1919–1939)* (2013)

*Maria Rubins, “A Century of Russian Culture(s) “Abroad”: The Unfolding of Literary Geography”, in *Global Russian Cultures* (2019)

Week 9: 1917 to Berlin

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (1938) and selections from *Speak, Memory* (1936—1951)

Vladislav Khodasevich, selections from *Necropolis* (1939)

Nina Berberova, selections from *The Italics Are Mine* (1969)

*Marijeta Bozovic, “Nabokov’s Translations and Transnational Canon Formation” (2017)

*Pavel Uspenskij, “Vladislav Khodasevich in the Emigration: Literature and the Search for Identity” (2018)

Week 10: Dissidence

Vasily Aksyonov, *The Burn* (1975)

Vladimir Bukovsky, selections from *To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter* (1978)

Selections from *Chronicle of Current Events* (1968—1982):

<https://chronicle-of-current-events.com/>

*Ann Komaromi, “Introduction” and “Literature and the Field of Dissidence”, in *Uncensored: Samizdat Novels and the Quest for Autonomy in Soviet Dissidence* (2015)

*Project for the Study of Dissidence and Samizdat (University of Toronto):

<https://samizdatcollections.library.utoronto.ca/>

Week 11: Joseph Brodsky, “Poet” / “Social Parasite”

Joseph Brodsky, selected poems from *A Part of Speech* (1977)

Joseph Brodsky, “The Condition We Call Exile, or Acorns Aweigh” and other selected essays from *Less Than One* (1986) and *On Grief and Reason* (1995)

Frida Vigdorova’s transcript of Brodsky’s trial (1964):

<https://www.nereview.com/files/2014/01/NER-Vigdorova.pdf>

Room and a Half (film, dir. Andrei Khrzhanovsky, 2009)

*Natasha Rulyova, "Introduction: Brodsky's Self-Translation Project" and "Writing in English", in *Joseph Brodsky and Collaborative Self-Translation* (2020)

*Jhumpa Lahiri, "Where I Find Myself: On Self-Translation" (*Words Without Borders*, 2021)

Third two-page response paper due

Module 4: Post-Soviet Émigré Communities

Week 12: America

Keith Gessen, *A Terrible Country* (2018)

Keith Gessen, "Why Did I Teach My Son to Speak Russian?" (*The New Yorker*, 2018)

Ilya Kaminsky, "Various Tongues: An Exchange" (*Poetry Foundation*, 2010)

Ilya Kaminsky, selected poems from *Deaf Republic* (2019)

Lara Vapnyar, selected stories from *There Are Jews in My House* (2003)

*Adrian Wanner, "Introduction" and "The Rise of the 'Russian Debutantes'", in *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (2011)

*Yelena Furman, "Rewriting Gender: Russian-American Women Writers and the Challenge to Russian Femininity", in *Global Russian Cultures* (2019)

Week 13: Ukraine, Israel

Andrey Kurkov, *Death and the Penguin* (1996)

Selected poems by Boris Khersonsky, Iya Kiva, Anastasia Dmitruk, Danyil Zadorozhnyi, and Volodymyr Rafeyenko

Selected poems by Rita Kogan, Alex Rif, Arik Eber, and Leonid Schwab

*Roman Katsman, *Nostalgia for a Foreign Land: Studies in Russian-Language Literature in Israel* (2016)

*Vitaly Chernetsky, "Russophone Writing in Ukraine: Historical Contexts and Post-Euromaidan Changes", in *Global Russian Cultures* (2019)

*Alex Moshkin, "Russophone Literary Journals in Israel" (2022)

Week 14: Global Networks and Looking Ahead

Litkarta: The New Map of Russian Literature: <http://www.litkarta.ru/>

Galina Rymbu, Eugene Ostashevsky, Ainsley Morse (eds.), selected poems from *F Letter: New Russian Feminist Poetry* (2020)

Hilah Kohen and Josephine von Zitzewitz, "Young Russophonia: New Literature in Russian" (*Words Without Borders*, 2021)

"'I Don't Want to Be Called Russian Anymore': Anxious Soviet Diaspora Rethinks Identity" (*The New York Times*, 2022)

*Angel Parham, "Internet, Place, and Public Sphere in Diaspora Communities" (2005)

*Mark Lipovetsky, "Is There Room for Diaspora Literature in the Internet Age?", in *Redefining Russian Literary Diaspora, 1920-2020* (2021)

*Angelos Theocharis, "Going Online, Going Global: The Pandemic Meetings of a Russophone Book Club" (2021)

Fourth two-page response paper due