

# TOWARD EURASIAN CULTURAL STUDIES: CHANCES AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract:** This article makes the case for a greater emphasis on Eurasian cultural studies in the West. Currently in the academy, cultural studies, including film and electronic media, are now replacing the past emphasis on high literature. Additionally, the role of non-Russian peoples in the former Soviet space is gaining more attention. Ultimately, policy decisions informed by such knowledge are likely to be more accurate and effective.

Two decades of post-Soviet independence in Eurasia and the corresponding sociopolitical transformations in the newly independent republics have caused a profound and likely paradigmatic shift in all academic fields studying this area, including the humanities, although this particular shift is seldom reflected upon. The two major trajectories that can be identified in recent years are the switch from a Soviet to a Eurasian paradigm<sup>1</sup> and the move from predominantly literary to cultural studies.

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<sup>1</sup> In his Presidential Address to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual ASEES Convention on 20 November 2011, Bruce Grant of NYU stated that “almost every major research center or program has added ‘Eurasia’ to its banner. Along the way, to be sure, most stumble to determine what exactly Eurasian means, and whom it is meant to embrace.” Bruce Grant. “We Are All Eurasian.” *NewsNet. News of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies*, vol. 52, n. 1 (January): 1-2.

The latter was not caused by the former but their almost simultaneous occurrence has complicated the situation even more. Both trajectories have unfolded not so much in a consciously planned manner, but have been conceptualized rather spontaneously and post factum.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the humanities responded to the rapidly transforming political and academic realities rather than intellectually accompanying or anticipating them.

### Literary vs. Cultural Studies

Ever since the study of foreign cultures became established as part of the humanities, the supreme position among its disciplines was occupied by literature, predominantly highbrow literature. The practical study of language was regarded as but a tool whose mastery would lead to a more sophisticated appreciation of literary masterpieces in their original language, while disciplines such as theoretical linguistics and folklore studies were assigned secondary positions. Worse yet, applied linguistics (language teaching methodology), for the longest time, was not even recognized as a discipline in its own right.

Within the cultural space that is frequently referred to as Eurasia,<sup>3</sup> Russian literature for decades went unchallenged as the royal path toward an understanding of deep cultural undercurrents of that “riddle wrapped in a mystery wrapped in an enigma,” as Winston Churchill famously characterized Russia (which, conspicuously, was often used as a synonym for the Soviet Union). Indeed, it did not take extraordinary lobbying to justify the funding of dozens of positions for literary experts specializing in Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoi, and Anton Chekhov. Together with studying and teaching the Russian classical canon as part of world literature, the study of contemporary Soviet Russian literature achieved another kind of significance during the Cold War: it was widely viewed as one of the few legitimate and freely accessible sources to acquire authentic information from behind the Iron Curtain, especially for the understanding of trends

<sup>2</sup> Long-term scholarly projects such as *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet Literatures* (MERSL), volumes 1-9 of which were published by Academic International Press (Gulf Breeze, Florida) were renamed so as to reflect the new political realities while at the same time maintaining the geographical scope of the former USSR – in this case, the title became *Modern Encyclopedia of East Slavic, Baltic and Eurasian Literatures* (MES-BEL) beginning with volume 10 (1996). In the foreword to volume 10, the title was called a “compromise” (vi).

<sup>3</sup> At present, there is no scholarly consensus on who (or what) does and does not belong to the Eurasian paradigm. “Soviet” as the designation for a cultural space had the advantage of geographical precision but the disadvantage of politically tainting this linguistically and historically highly diverse space. The debate on the term Eurasia will probably continue due to the unease regarding its political notions (expressed, for example, by the Eurasianists [*Evrasiitsy*] in the 1920s), but it is also likely that the term will continue to be used for lack of a viable alternative.

within the Soviet intelligentsia and the Communist Party establishment. Not surprisingly, this practical approach to literature as a source of precious political information largely neglected aesthetic aspects and at times appeared methodologically crude, but it secured literature's legitimacy for decades as an important part of the now defunct field of Sovietology.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature was studied as a complex body of texts that held the potential to better understand Russia's exceptionalist identity and to function as a "window into the mysterious Russian soul."<sup>4</sup> Significantly, the Soviet dissident movement, with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as one of the leading figures of anti-communist subversion, also had a strong literary component whose effects were amplified by electronic media; this, too, helped prolong the supremacy of literature in the humanities. The Solzhenitsyn phenomenon in particular was responsible for the high respect attributed to literature in the 1960s and 1970s and its treatment as a legitimate subject for scholars outside the literary field. Analyzing novels such as *In the First Circle* (*V krughe pervom*) or *Cancer Ward* (*Rakovyi korpus*) then was considered a regular part of the discourse among political scientists and historians. Moreover, Solzhenitsyn's biography—from naïve believer to moralistic observer ending as a self-conscious opponent of the Communist system and its ideology—became a recognized pattern for a morally righteous intellectual life in the Soviet bloc and was followed, with slight variations, by a large number of literati (Natal'ia Gorbanevskaja, Vladimir Maksimov, Andrei Siniavskii, etc.). As a consequence, the public and academic interest in Russian literature as a moral and political force was directed both at literary texts and the lives of their authors whose plight was widely reported by Western official and Soviet unofficial media.

Literary specialists in the Slavic field could hardly avoid the political underpinnings and consequences of their object of study. Still, such politicization also caused a peculiar counter reaction: an increasing number of connoisseurs turned to Silver Age decadence, avant-garde experimentation, or the *oeuvre* of Vladimir Nabokov in order to escape what they viewed as excessively political and pragmatic readings and the advancement of authors who were lacking in artistic talent but attracted public attention because they held dissident views. Yet, regardless of such unease, as long as the Solzhenitsyn phenomenon lasted, political scientists and historians continued to study novels, short stories, plays, and essays and to debate literary issues. Only after Solzhenitsyn settled in the West and began to express provocatively conservative views did the uncritical

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that one of the most influential foreign policy specialists in this country, Strobe Talbott, wrote his thesis on poet Fedor Tiuchev, who gave Russia's exceptionalism a stringent poetic form like no other author, may seem surprising today – but it was far from an anomaly in the 1960s.

admiration for Russian literature begin to waver. Solzhenitsyn's 1978 Harvard speech proved a veritable wake-up call among Western observers, causing an uproar and an increasing alienation between the writer and his Western readership. The focus on literary dissidence began to wane and give way to a more sober and differentiated view of the reality of Russian literature and its underlying worldviews; the widespread disillusionment with Solzhenitsyn also marked the beginning of Russian literature's declining importance for neighboring disciplines. The last Russian Soviet writer to cause a public sensation was Aleksandr Zinoviev, whose expertise as a logician and whose unusual literary form, as well as the radicalism of his concept of Communism, made him a media celebrity from 1976, when *The Yawning Heights* (*Ziiaiushchie vysoty*) was published in the West, until 1991 when the unexpected self-abolition of the USSR caused a fundamental change in the dissident movement.<sup>5</sup> But it is certainly significant that the Nobel Prize in Literature was not awarded to Zinoviev but to the rather apolitical Joseph Brodsky, or, to use an analogy from Czech literature, not to polemical playwright cum activist Vaclav Havel but to the politically disinterested, romantic Jaroslav Seiffert.

Along with political dissidence, a related aspect of Russian and Soviet literature that intensely interested Western scholars and the media was censorship, i.e., the illiberal, politically motivated intrusions of the authoritarian Soviet state in the arts. Of course, censorial hypersensitivity had the paradoxical effect of sensitizing millions of readers to textual ambiguities, allusions, symbols, and other refined subversive techniques. When censorship disappeared together with the system that it had protected, so did the widespread mode of hypersensitive political reading and interpretation of fiction. The astounding fact that within a mere two years—between 1990 and 1992—the readership of great reform-minded literary journals such as *Novyi mir*, *Znamia*, and *Oktiabr'* dwindled from up to two million sold copies to twenty thousand or fewer indicated fundamental changes in the priorities of literary communication and in culture in its entirety. Likewise, post-Soviet political discourses rapidly lost their literary perceptiveness. After the joint disappearance of dissidence and Sovietology, literature once again became a predominantly private affair. This, in turn, had consequences for the academic study of Russian literature: with the general waning of interest in Russia and her political tribulations, the number of positions in Slavic departments was rapidly reduced—a trend that continues to this day.

With the dissolution of the Soviet state, the abandonment of the

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<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the fall of the Soviet Union, some of the most outspoken critics of the Communist system, such as Roy Medvedev and Aleksandr Zinoviev, began a partial or complete revision of their previous views, including the role of Iosif Stalin and the Stalinist phase in Soviet history – a phenomenon in Russian intellectual history that has yet to be analyzed.

Communist project, and the overwhelming quantitative dominance of electronic media, literature largely lost its significance as a state-supporting and state-legitimizing agent. Related to this development are the quiet severance of democratic movements from literature in the 1990s, and the replacement of symbolic literary figures by professional politicians and activists. The fact that literature was no longer a sociologically significant phenomenon also seemed to justify the steadily decreasing interest of Western academia in contemporary Russian literature. Indeed, why analyze novels or volumes of poetry that no longer boast a circulation of 100,000 or 200,000 copies but of 3,000 or fewer? From a sociological point of view, the impact of such books on “the masses” is certainly negligible. For an understanding of political trends within the population, professionally rendered sociological surveys are much more precise and now easily available. This begs the question of why an aspiring diplomat, businessman, or political scientist would need any knowledge of Russian literature, except for leisure.

Within *academe*, Russian literature’s loss of its formerly undisputed crown coincided with a paradigmatic shift from literary toward cultural studies in the humanities. In the post-Soviet framework, this shift was not caused by literary scholars, who remained insistent on the primacy of literature, but by historians such as Peter Kenez and Richard Stites who discovered film and pop music as legitimate subjects for analysis, as well as language teaching methodologists who opened their textbooks to a variety of contemporary non-literary texts. As imprecise terms such as *memory* and *mentality* acquired legitimacy within the historical discourse, the interpretation of lowbrow culture—television miniseries, songs, modern folklore such as urban legends and jokes—became subjects of interest for experts in foreign culture. The split between canonical and non-canonical approaches within the humanities will likely deepen further; thus, we are currently witnessing the emergence of an increasingly serious subfield of Russian film studies, among others.

### **The Role of the Non-Russians**

Looking back at the role of humanities (specifically, philology) in the process of understanding Soviet culture, one lacuna becomes particularly obvious: the non-Russian literatures of the *multinational* Soviet Union. As a matter of fact, specialists in *Soviet* literature were almost exclusively experts in *Russian* literature. With the exception of Chingiz Aitmatov, who appeared in the literary firmament in the early 1960s and was writing in Kyrgyz and Russian thus presenting the ideal case of successful Soviet cultural integration, Western scholarship paid scarce attention

to non-Russian literatures and cultures.<sup>6</sup> In the best-case scenario, it was the national diasporas in the West who kept an interest in non-Russian literatures and cultures alive—especially the Ukrainian and the Armenian diasporas in Canada. Efforts of the former were impressive due to their systematic character, which included large-scale scholarly projects such as multi-volume encyclopedias. But their effect on the commercial book and film markets remained minimal, as did their establishment in academic departments.

When referring to the non-Russian parts of the empire, the term “Russification” was often deemed sufficient to characterize the quasi-colonial approach toward the cultures of the more than one hundred ethnic groups populating the USSR. Ironically, Slavic philology with its heavy emphasis on Russian factually mirrored the Russo-centric state of Soviet culture, which was politically denounced. At the same time, the Slavic field in the West faced a methodological problem: from a strictly philological standpoint, it had no business studying Baltic, Central Asian, or so-called Transcaucasian cultures. Not surprisingly, the expertise developed in regards to non-Russian literatures and cultures remained spotty at best.

Twenty years ago, the political emancipation of non-Russian nations from the Soviet straightjacket brought about another methodological dilemma: neither in political nor in cultural terms could the formerly Soviet nations be treated as one anymore, yet they did share a common past that left deep marks in their collective memories and mentalities. The problematic term “Eurasian” was introduced as a matter of convenience, only underlining how utterly unprepared the humanities, among other disciplines, were for the changes.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to 1991, scholars in Lithuanian, Georgian, and other languages, literatures, and cultures often were émigrés from these countries, maintaining minority discourses as a matter of national pride, but their role at large conferences in the humanities or in scholarly journals was usually marginal. Overall, the study of the diverse cultures of Eurasia was a matter of singular scholars. Today, however, efforts to turn individual initiative into systematic scholarly enterprises, supported by serious financial investments and infrastructure, seem necessary and logical, albeit not inevitable, depending on whether the study of the diverse and manifold Eurasian cultures is considered to be essential or not.

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<sup>6</sup> A somewhat related case is that of Abkhaz author Fazil Iskander, whose *Sandro from Chegem* novels enjoyed huge popularity in the 1980s; however, Iskander writes exclusively in Russian.

<sup>7</sup> On the complex ramifications of the term “Eurasian,” see Mark von Hagen. 2004. “Empires, Borderlands, and Diasporas: Eurasia as an Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era.” *American Historical Review*, vol. 109, n. 2: 445-468.

### **Moving Forward**

What should be done in order to supplement the rapidly growing political and socioeconomic study of Eurasia with an intellectually legitimate array of cultural studies? In addition to learning the languages of Eurasia, a renewed attention toward cultural aspects in sociopolitical analysis holds great potential. The institutionalization of expertise on Eurasian cultures in departments such as history, anthropology, and film is desirable, complemented by the establishment of vibrant ties with national scholarly institutions in Eurasia. A general consensus on practical relevance will be decisive for the advancement of Eurasian cultural studies within Western humanities. Can decisions in foreign politics or business be made without proper knowledge of a national culture? Most likely, they can. Will decisions that are informed by a deeper knowledge of a national culture be more accurate and constructive? An affirmative answer to this question seems likely, although that also depends on how one measures the accuracy of a decision: long-term or short-term.

To put it bluntly: there is no denying that politics and the economy are relevant for culture—but how relevant is culture for politics and the economy? And if it is relevant, is its role sufficient to justify continued academic institutionalization on par with fields that directly study politics and business? In 1993, Samuel Huntington prominently stated the theoretical and practical relevance of culture, but the ensuing debate did not yield the intense cultural interest and sensitivity that one might have expected, given Huntington's high reputation in political science. Rather, his hypothesis was seen as a curious deviation from rational analysis, perhaps even an attempt to prolong Cold War thinking beyond the disappearance of the Communist bloc. To many scholars the elevation of a hard-to-pinpoint phenomenon such as culture to a major political factor seemed at least questionable. However, a positive view of the role of culture for our understanding of the modern world is a precondition for the future of Eurasian cultural studies as a legitimate partner of social sciences.

The systematic establishment of Eurasian cultural studies in the United States and the West also depends on the state of our universities. Present-day academia finds itself under brutal pressure not so much from the outside but from its own increasingly intellectually insensitive and unimpressible administrative cast, which forces scholars to prove the "importance"—often construed as profitability—of each of their disciplines, with the implicit or explicit threat that if such proof cannot be made, budget cuts and the disappearance of entire fields are the inevitable consequence. In the intramural competition for funds, humanities are particularly hard-pressed to make a case for themselves. Pointing toward rich intellectual traditions will hardly influence administrative decisions,

whereas a clearly expressed need for professional cultural competence will. The shift from a Russo-centric and literary-centric framework toward a Eurasian cultural paradigm could bring about a self-renewal and strengthened functional legitimacy in the humanities studying this cultural space. It should be based on a differentiated approach for each of these cultures, respecting and reflecting their individual complexities. The compromise umbrella term “Eurasia” then may very well acquire positive academic acceptance.