

RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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Russian Literature by Horace P. Biddle

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SINCE the Crimean war, in 1855, the power of Russia, although it suffered in that contest, has been much more noticed by other nations than it had been before; and since the abolition of serfdom in her dominion, in 1861, her government has become a study for other statesmen besides her own: but no nation yet has given her literature more than a passing notice. The reason may be plain. Her great military power is felt by the world, and her policy, in reference to the law of nations, has its influence, but her literature, which will ultimately represent the best results of all her powers, is not yet established. Perhaps her banner may yet wave, her policy rule, and her language be heard, from the chilling snows of Siberia to the burning rays of Good Hope—for she is rapidly availing herself of the science, art, and skill of other nations—if so, then her literature will be known to the world; for the school and college, in the range of time, are more powerful than the cabinet and the field.

Literature is as enduring as human nature, and had its beginning almost coeval with the origin of mankind. The traditions, observations, and tales of love and battle, form the bases of the first rude essays of the historian, the philosopher, and the poet. Poetry precedes civilization—not, indeed, in the shape

of regular poems, but in bold expression and striking metaphor; tradition is ever the precursor of authentic history, and observation is the only true basis of philosophy. The arts began early in the history of man. Necessity invents the useful arts, and the love of the beautiful, implanted in our nature, suggests the fine arts. After myths have passed away like the clouds of the sky, or the fogs of the sea; after traditions have been winnowed of their fictions, and furnished their grains of truth; after philosophy has studied the universe and its laws, then comes science, which is what we know; and all of these together constitute a nation's literature. Whenever a nation begins, it begins a history, a philosophy, the arts and sciences, and a literature. But amongst a people, where man has to struggle with the elements and his enemies for mere animal existence, although he necessarily acquires knowledge, there are but few joys for the mind and heart; yet in more polished nations literature gradually becomes a want of the soul, almost as much as bread is a want of the body. Literature, indeed, may be defined to be the recorded culture of the mind and the soul; and the best literature is the best thoughts, upon the best subjects, expressed in the best words. The orator and the poet precede the scholar and the author. The scholar learns from the poet, the author reads, invents, and imagines; the critic comes last. He draws his rules from those who spoke, wrote, and sung, without rules, save the great rule of nature; and the bold oratory and artless song of the savage sometimes have a beauty which no learning or criticism can improve. Kings, princes, heroes, warriors, statesmen,

and rulers, however useful to their times, however wise, brilliant, or accomplished, pass away with their periods; while the man of letters represents pure thought, which remains like the fixed stars; and he is often remembered for a single sentence, a line, a verse, a principle, a sentiment, simply expressed in words, long after kings, princes, heroes, warriors, statesmen, and rulers are buried beneath the dust of ages, and forgotten forever.

The earliest authentic history of the Slavonic nations, of which Russia is the great modern exponent, fades away amidst the traditions, legends, and tales which have just been noticed. Herodotus mentions a people which are supposed to have been a tribe of the Slavi; and some allusions to their country and race are made by Strabo, Pliny, and Tacitus. From the resemblance of the Slavonic language to the Sanscrit it has been supposed that these people came from India, but when they passed over into the regions they now occupy, can not be ascertained; probably it was before the Christian era, but the first authentic intelligence with regard to them does not reach back farther than the sixth century. Doubtless the whole Slavonic race originally spoke the same language, but it was soon broken up into dialects, as a language spread over a vast region of country will be—especially while it remains unwritten. The Slavonic language has become varied and enriched by the Greek, Latin, German, French, and even English, and has now ripened into the modern Russian; but the earliest manuscripts in the Slavonic language are not older than the time of the eleventh century. There are some inscriptions and devices upon the

crosses and monuments perhaps older than that date. The earliest records by native writers were written about the middle of the eleventh century. A code of laws was enacted as early as 1280, and recorded in the native language. And Russia, like Greece, and indeed like most other nations, has its epic poem. It is called "Igor's Expedition," and is supposed to have been written in the twelfth century. It is said to possess a refinement and delicacy remarkable for so rude a people as they were at that time, and also has much power and gracefulness; but the critics do not place it very high as a literary production. In the fifteenth century Russian literature received an important influence from the liberality of some of the native princes, who invited the learned from Germany, Italy, and France into their dominions. About the same time public schools were founded; and the Russian youth were sometimes sent to foreign universities to be educated. The language and literature of Poland, also, about this period commenced having an important effect upon the minds of the Russian people; and subsequently Russia obtained the greater part of her public libraries from the spoliation of Poland, and very much enriched her literature from the language and works of that intelligent and brave, but unfortunate people. History began to be regularly recorded, and thus assume an authentic and permanent shape; but Russian literature can not be said to have had a beginning before the reign of Peter the Great, at the close of the seventeenth century. He adopted the Russian language in his courts of justice, and in diplomacy, and made it the polite language of the nation. He had type cast,

and established presses, and caused many books to be translated into the Russian from other languages—particularly from the German and French; indeed, Peter the Great was to Russia very much what Alfred the Great was to England; still, up to this time even, the Russian language had no systematic grammar, and of course but little attention had been paid to style. But if Peter the Great laid the foundation of Russian literature, Lomonosof must be regarded as its architect. As most great benefactors are, he was humbly born; his father was a fisherman. He first learned to read from the servants of the church, and so ardent was his desire for knowledge, that he left the shelter of his father's roof clandestinely, and went to Moscow, where, he had been told, they taught the languages; thence to St. Petersburg, where he obtained a liberal education. Afterwards he traveled through Germany and Holland, where he studied philosophy and the sciences. His Russian grammar brought his native language from chaos into order, and he was the first one who cultivated style. He sketched the history of his country, and wrote several works on chemistry and mineralogy. He also composed a long epic poem, as well as several odes and tragedies, but they do not rank high; he was rather a philosopher than a poet. His works are blemished, however, by the too common fault of all who write under tyranny, namely, an undue tendency to panegyric, and a stooping to despotic power. These are weaknesses in a great mind, but the age and country in which he lived must be the excuse of Lomonosof. Contemporaneous with Lomonosof were Kheraskof and Sumarakof, who were very pro-

lific writers, but not of remarkable genius; although Kheraskof, having written an immense and cumbrous epic poem, was called the Russian Homer. About the same time also lived and flourished Dershavin, a poet of true genius. Although his works were bedazzled with the glory of Catharine, yet the true metal could be discovered beneath the tinsel. He wrote an "Ode to God" of uncommon beauty; it was translated into most of the European languages, and attained the distinguished honor of being printed in letters of gold and hung in the palace of the Chinese Emperor and the Temple of Jeddo. But devotion to power, from which not even Dershavin was exempt, is the weakness of all the literati of Russia. Patriotism is a becoming sentiment, but a literature expressive of that which is not just to all men, can have no abiding place in the Republic of Letters. Catharine was a great patron of learning, but a literature indebted to any other influence than that of truth and nature, can never be pure or permanent.

During the reign of Alexander, who succeeded Catharine, many new schools and several universities were founded, also a number of museums. This prince affected to be a great patron of letters, but his influence rather made learning fashionable than afforded it any substantial advantage. Writers became extremely numerous; authorship seemed to be a rage with the nobility. Russia, at this time, possessed about fourteen thousand volumes in the Slavonic language, more than seven thousand of which were said to be the product of a single year. We shall be able to mention but few authors of this period — they are very numerous — among whom