



From a protest sign at the Christopher Street Day demonstration of support for gays and lesbians of Russia in light of the “anti-gay propaganda law” passed by the State Duma of the Russian Federation (Berlin, June 22, 2013).

Reclaiming Russian Cultural Tradition during the Rise of the Right or Queering the Russian Realist Novel

BY ANI KOKOBOBO

Alexander Pushkin, whom Russians fondly call their “everything,” once declared: “Our exalting illusion is far dearer than lowly truths” (“The Hero,” 1830). The poet’s aphorism has a whole new lifeline in the present, with the Russia investigation dominating the news, as students come into our classrooms having absorbed buzz about hackings, Russian ties to the American right, collusion, and similar media hype. When I first introduce students to Russia nowadays, I feel a heavier sense of responsibility on my shoulders, both as a teacher and as a cultural emissary. Fault lines between the left and right are increasingly more marked in American politics, and perceptions of Russia are deeply influenced by them. Polls show that, particularly since the 2016 elections, American perceptions of Russia are shaped by where the perceiver fell on the political spectrum—more conservatives approved of Russia than liberals, though these numbers have dropped over time.¹ Russia is in the eye of the beholder!

Part of our challenge as 21st-century educators is to construct an inclusive, safe classroom that accounts for and responds to all these fault lines. For me, as a 19th-century scholar, since I’m not in a position to address the present head on, reclaiming Russia’s cultural heritage—and using my source materials to provide rich, plural perspectives for politically tumultuous times, and, at times, alternatives to the Kremlin—is one strategy to a more inclusive classroom.

When I first introduce students to Russia these days, I start by emphasizing the fluidity of political polarities. In fact, “the right” has meant something quite different in Russia.





Patriarch Kirill and President Vladimir Putin at the commemoration of the 1,025th anniversary of the baptism of Rus' (Kyiv, June 7, 2013).

“With his ascent to power, Vladimir Putin has reinforced the long-established pattern of Russian conservatism tied to authoritarian rule. Rather than merely sustaining this Russian version of authoritarianism, he has also been building a hybrid variety of Russian conservatism.”

As Richard Pipes argues in his book *Russian Conservatism and Its Critics*, if in the United States, conservatism usually means “less government,” in Russia it has traditionally connoted “more government.” In other words, conservatism has been bound up in authoritarianism and the belief that Russia needs a strong hand, unchecked by parliament. As Russian writer and historian Nikolai Karamzin put it in 1810: “Autocracy has founded and resuscitated Russia. Any change in her political constitution has led in the past and must lead in the future to her perdition.”² Two years later, he convinced Alexander I to stop being a liberal, writing, among other things: “Sire ... Russia, taught by long disasters, vested [...] the power of autocracy in your ancestor. You may do everything, but you may not limit your authority by law.” With these words, Karamzin was reinforcing an age-old position, held by many of Russia’s luminaries, that

the country needs a strong hand.

It is interesting to think about some of the ways in which this model of Russian conservatism is becoming increasingly politically relevant worldwide as fears of authoritarianism grow. On the flip side, American conservatism, with its Christian evangelical element, has gained traction in Russia. With his ascent to power, Vladimir Putin has reinforced the long-established pattern of Russian conserva-

tism tied to authoritarian rule. Yet rather than merely sustaining this Russian version of authoritarianism, which is closely tied to long-standing notions of Russian distinctiveness and messianism, beginning with his 2012 presidential campaign Putin has also been building out a hybrid variety of Russian conservatism. This recent Russian conservatism is a more nuanced right-wing, civilizational model that fits more closely with the U.S. political right.

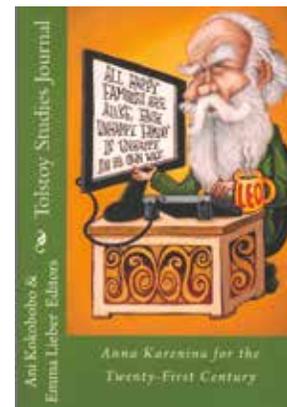
This conservative ideology, which foregrounds Russia’s distinctiveness and moral superiority to the West, is multilayered and complicated. As a scholar and teacher of the 19th-century realist novel, my focus in thinking about it has fallen on what the Kremlin defines as “traditional values” and how these relate to the bulk of my teaching material, Russian realist novels. A considerable part of the historical Russian cultural tradition, the Russian novel touts itself as distinctively Russian as a literary genre. It also delves into questions of family and normativity. From this perspective, the Russian novel can be a powerful resource for a more inclusive pedagogy, helping us show students the rich pluralism of ideas within Russian history and culture, outside the Kremlin’s official positions.

What does Putin mean by “traditional values”? Back in his 2013 “State of the Nation” address, he articulated his commitment to “traditional values,” which include “the values of traditional families,” alongside religion and spirituality. Some of these ideas are further explained in the Russian Federation’s State Family Policy, in effect until

2025, which defines marriage as a “civil voluntary union between a man and a woman [...] created with a purpose of family formation, birth and/or joint upbringing of children.” Of course, if you read between the lines, this rigid definition of family as a heteronormative unit with procreative purpose also serves as a pretext for broaching the rights of the LGBTQI community in Russia. And this has happened, at both the regional and federal level, through antihomopropaganda—really, antigay—laws to prevent propagandizing nonheterosexuality and/or gender variance to minors.

These Russian developments have gained much traction among conservatives worldwide, and particularly American conservatives, who perceive a decline in moral values in the West. Pat Buchanan has lavishly praised Putin, while even more disturbing endorsements have come from right-wing organizations, like the onetime Traditionalist Worker Party, an American group aimed at preserving the privilege of whiteness. In fact, there may even be cross-cultural influences, or at least parallels, from the American right to Russia, as the Kremlin’s definition of marriage and anti-LGBTQI policies mirror those advanced by a U.S. group known as the World Congress of Families (WCF). Listed by the Southern Poverty Law Center as a hate group based on its anti-LGBTQI position, the WCF is opposed to gay marriage, pornography, and abortion, and defines marriage as “the voluntary union of a man and a woman ...”³ The group, with deep ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, was partly founded by two Russian sociologists and has helped organize congresses of ultraconservative groups in Russia.

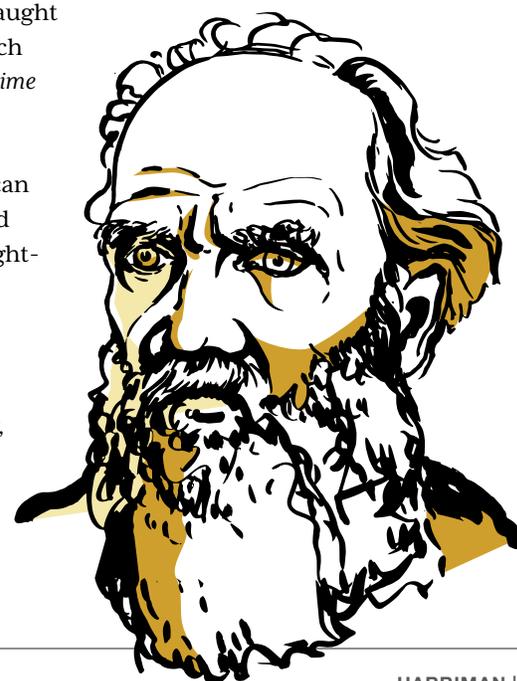
The Kremlin’s social agenda and its determination to stand for the traditional, heteronormative family in a rapidly changing, diverse world presents both a problem and an opportunity for us as 21st-century educators. If a broad range of students with different backgrounds and sexual orientations even loosely associate Russia with legally sanctioned homophobia (among many other prejudices), that puts tremendous responsibility on Russianists to facilitate an inclusive classroom and conversations that allow for pushback against this corrosive alignment of ideologies. And Putin’s own use of classic Russian authors, like Fyodor Dostoevsky, to make the case for his conservative turn, underscores not only the continued relevance of Russia’s classics, but also the fact that our pedagogy and teaching materials can perhaps be our first line of defense in these debates.



From left: Hipster Dostoevsky is called on to advertise Vera Biron’s film about the St. Petersburg celebration of Dostoevsky Day; the cover of *Anna Karenina for the Twenty-First Century* (2016), edited by Ani Kokobobo and Emma Lieber.

The question of what family means looms large in the Russian novel. If the Kremlin projects exclusion and only certain types of families as legitimate, then the Russian novel, with its expansive inclusiveness, provides a counterpoint for students, showing a different Russia where families vary and love stands superior to tradition. When Leo Tolstoy announces at the beginning of *Anna Karenina* that “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,” he was, wittingly or unwittingly, hinting at the wide range of configurations and patterns of attachment, because the Russian novel is not a genre of traditional family happiness.

I’ve already taught a course in which Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, read alongside African-American writings, helped me foster thoughtful dialogues about race, communities, and inclusiveness. Currently, I am planning a revised version of my



Russian novel course that can facilitate a broader conversation on gender, family, and identity, and help push back against binding notions of normativity being advocated by the Kremlin.

There are no overtly queer relationships in the 19th-century Russian novel proper, although there are numerous instances of homosocial bonds and hints of homoeroticism. The main way in which this genre can help us interrogate questions of family and heteronormativity is if we employ a broader queer lens. Michel Foucault writes in an essay on friendship: “I think that’s what makes homosexuality ‘disturbing’: the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself” (*Friendship as a Way of Life*). According to queer theorist Jack Halberstam, this idea “detach[es] queerness from sexual identity,” leading us to “think instead about queer uses of time and space and how these develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction.” Halberstam juxtaposes this “time of reproduction” to “queer temporality,” which “flashes into view in the heart of a crisis”—like the AIDS epidemic for the gay community. With the threat of no future hovering, “queer temporality” breaks with linear and teleological history, to focus on “the here, the present, the now,” and kinships outside the familial, generational model (*In a Queer Time and Space*).

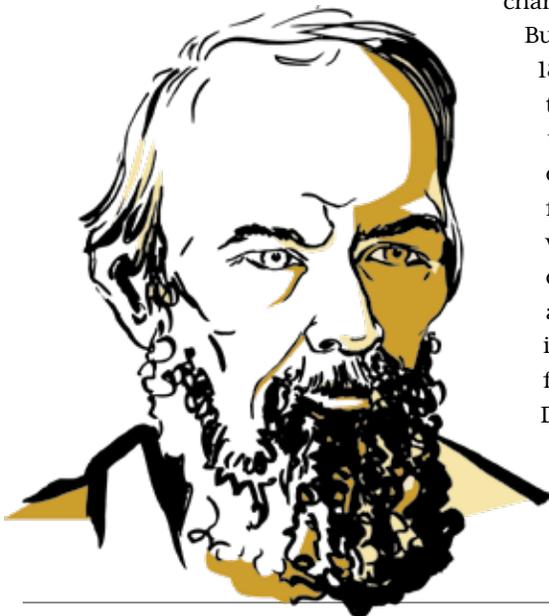
These ideas can be implemented in the classroom to illustrate to students how the Russian novel exhibits multiple “ways of life.” The “time of reproduction” certainly appears, and often, in pastoral countryside estates where families replicate across the generations, like Sergei Aksakov’s *Family*

Chronicle or Ivan Goncharov’s *Oblomov*.

But following the 1861 Emancipation of the Serfs, we also see a decline of the family structure, which opens the door for more alternatives. For instance, Putin’s favorite writer, Dostoevsky, conventionally understood as

a writer of crises and threshold moments, does not really show us happy, and naturally growing, families. If we get anything in the way of happy relationships in Dostoevsky, these transpire between a prostitute and a murderer in a Siberian prison, or in the bizarre, romantic friendship between a former novice monk and a paralyzed hysteric girl, who may one day get married, if they live long enough. Or, on a less happy note, we see two men alongside the body of a dead woman, their shared love interest, murdered by one of them—while Dostoevsky’s Christ-like “beautiful man” is succumbing to an epileptic coma from the devastation of it all; Myshkin renounces his own future for a moment of true compassion toward Rogozhin. These are hardly the makings of traditional family happiness; they are merely moments, when individuals suffering alone, marked by deep vulnerability, come together to mitigate that suffering; moments when we see the full glory of what Dostoevsky called the “accidental family,” a structure that Liza Knapp argues is forged by “chance and love,” rather than genetics,⁴ and the author’s answer to the biological family. Dostoevsky’s time of crisis arrests us in the moment and is therefore more akin to queer time than reproductive time—rather than birth, it stresses community, compassion, and the diminishing futures confronting all of us.

Similarly, beginning with *Anna Karenina* and continuing in works such as *Resurrection*, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, *Father Sergius*, *The Devil*, and *Hadji Murat*, the pacifist Tolstoy treats heterosexual desire and heteronormativity as toxic and violent forces, eventually renouncing even sexual reproduction and advocating for asexual or, broadly conceptualized, queer configurations of human attachment, often in the form of Platonic relationships between men. Indeed, the relationship between the individual and his abstract and masculine divinity eventually supplants for Tolstoy—who had been orphaned at a young age—the position of his dead mother, recreated in his early fiction in all her loving fleshiness and vulnerability to mortality. The alienation from the body in the author’s later works thus unfolds as an alienation from the female body, whose heterosexual fetishizing the author saw as destructive for both men and women. Instead of the mother, the wife, female characters, and the nuclear family, Tolstoy’s later fiction centers on male characters and the platonic company of other men, thus reflecting the deep spiritual bond the author envisioned with his masculine God.



“Or, on a less happy note, we see two men alongside the body of a dead woman, their shared love interest, murdered by one of them—while Dostoevsky’s Christ-like ‘beautiful man’ succumbs to an epileptic coma.”

Since the end of the Cold War, exponentially fewer Russia experts have been trained in the United States, so naturally many media articles engage in silly and self-indulgent Russia coverage. I’m thinking here of a *Vanity Fair* piece called “The Secret Source of Putin’s Evil,” which focuses on how Henry Kissinger compared Putin to a character out of Dostoevsky; or, my favorite, from NPR, “Vladimir Putin Is Right Out of a Russian Novel.”⁵ Russia’s classic novels are some of her greatest emissaries in the world—for instance, at 20 million Google hits, Tolstoy comes closest to Putin’s 200 million results. While it is absurd to rely on these novels for guiding policy or explaining Russia’s actions as a political agent, they remain relevant in that they show different, often more inclusive, Russias outside the Kremlin’s grip and ideology. ■

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¹Patrick Miller, oral presentation, “Russia and the Right” roundtable, University of Kansas, 26 February 2019.

²Nikolai Karamzin, “Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia,” *Readings in Russian Civilization*, ed. Thomas Riha (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 281.

³See <https://www.politicalresearch.org/2013/11/04/profiles-on-the-right-world-congress-of-families/>, accessed 4 March 2019.

⁴*Dostoevsky’s The Idiot: A Critical Companion* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 27.

⁵See <https://www.npr.org/sections/theprotojournalist/2014/03/29/294807461/vladimir-putin-is-right-out-of-a-russian-novel>, accessed 3 March 2019.



*From top: Zakhar Komlev as Parfen Rogozhin, Yekaterina Guseva as Nastasya Filippovna, and Anton Anosov as Prince Myshkin, in a scene from the play *Idiot* at the Mossovet Theater (September 29, 2017); LGBT protest fist on a brick wall Russia flag.*