

DIASPORA READS  
COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, AND RUSSIAN LITERATUROCENTRISM

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# Diaspora Reads

*Community, Identity, and Russian Literaturocentrism*



ANGELOS THEOCHARIS



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# CONTENTS



<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
Introduction	i
1 Russian Literaturocentrism as a Myth and Reality	25
2 Diasporic Readers and the Waterstones Russian Book Club	44
3 Transnational Games and Gifts	64
4 Reconciliation and Nostalgia for the Soviet Past	86
5 Russian Literaturocentrism in the Diaspora	110
6 Russophone Writers Meet the Diaspora	131
7 Enhanced Globality and the Covid-19 Pandemic	146
Conclusion	161
<i>Bibliography</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	185

*To my parents,  
Chrysanthi and Ioannis*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS



ARCC	Anglo-Russian Culture Club
ARKKA	Association of Russophone Book Clubs
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WRBC	Waterstones Russian Book Club



# INTRODUCTION



A quick visit to Waterstones Piccadilly in early 2017 brought Katya<sup>1</sup> to the 'Russian Bookshop', the Russophone section of the store. There, she found a large collection of classic and contemporary Russophone literature in the original and in translation. Roaming through the books, Katya realised that she couldn't choose any contemporary book to read, as she didn't recognise the vast majority of the names. Originally from Ukraine, Katya moved from Moscow to London in the mid-1990s with her husband. An avid reader with deep knowledge of classic Russian and Soviet literature, she felt guilty about her ignorance of post-1991 literary production. She headed to the till to ask for information about literary events and book clubs meeting at the bookshop. To her surprise, apart from the occasional meet-the-author events, the Russian bookshop did not organise any reading groups on Russophone literature. While leaving the bookshop with some Russian novels, Katya told herself there needs to be a Russian book club at Waterstones. And she decided to found it.

That's how the story of the Waterstones Russian Book Club (WRBC), the largest Russophone book club in the UK from 2017 to 2022, started. Katya returned to the bookshop a few days later with a proposal for the book club. The moment was right, as she found a very pro-Russian team in Waterstones. The bookshop chain's owner at the time was the Russian oligarch Aleksandr Mamut, and the Russian section, staffed with Russian-speaking assistants, was his initiative. In 2017, five years after the section's creation, the composition of the team had changed, but the manager of the Russian bookshop and his assistant were still Russian speakers. In the meeting with the bookshop manager, the moderator presented her eight-year experience from the in-house book club she was running and her background in literature. Katya convinced the manager to grant permission for the WRBC initiative, which guaranteed promotion of the club on the website and social media. Most importantly, the permission guaranteed a free, permanent space for the meetings at the bookshop's mezzanine café. Naming the newly founded book club should not have been particularly challenging for the moderator. The full name indicates the place (Waterstones) where the club meets, as well as the language of the literature read and the discussions held (Russian). The central element of the title ('Russian') is further clarified in the Facebook description: 'We read and discuss the works of contemporary Russian-speaking writers irrespective of the country in which they lived and worked. [...] We welcome all fans of contemporary literature in the Russian language.'<sup>2</sup> By 'Russian', the moderator refers to 'Russian speakers', a much broader term that covers native speakers of the language regardless of their

nationality and citizenship. Thus, the book club reads only Russophone writers, but its members can be all readers of Russian literature in the original, even if they are not native speakers themselves. The WRBC is also described as a reading group that welcomes contributions from its members on topics related to ‘literary news, events, or promoting discussions about contemporary Russian literature’, and not of a commercial or political nature.<sup>3</sup>

Ready for its first meeting, the Waterstones Russian Book Club gathered in March 2017 to discuss Guzel Yakhina’s acclaimed debut novel *Zuleikha Opens her Eyes* (2015). The choice of this book was not accidental, as it had received the Big Book Award and the Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award in 2015 and had been translated into more than twenty languages. The historical novel tells the story of Zuleikha, a young Tatar woman who is forcefully resettled in Siberia in 1930 as part of the Soviet dekulakisation campaign. Apart from being one of Katya’s favourites, the novel also had the potential to attract and appeal to various types of readers: those who follow influential literary awards, those who are interested in historical novels, and those who read ‘bestsellers’. With a clear intention to be popular, the WRBC was quickly established as an influential book club within London and more widely across the UK, progressively gaining popularity among Russophone readers globally.

When I joined the book club in March 2018, they were celebrating their first-year anniversary and reaching 500 members in their Facebook group. By the time I stopped being an active member in March 2021, the WRBC had over 2,500 Facebook members, and its online meetings were attended by over 100 Russophone readers from North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Turning into a literary phenomenon for the Russophone world with a strong connection to cultural institutions in Russia and the diaspora, the WRBC surpassed the goal of the Russian section’s managing director: ‘For Russophiles and the large, vibrant Russian community in London, we aim to make Slova an irresistible literary and cultural destination.’<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, the book club survived the sale of Waterstones by Mamut in April 2018, the move of the Russophone book collection to the Foyles Charing Cross Road Bookstore a year later, and eventually the Covid-19 Pandemic and the lockdowns. The smooth digital transition transformed WRBC into a literary platform with a global membership.

What managed to shake the book club from its foundation was the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The subsequent identity crisis forced the WRBC moderator to pause its activities abruptly and discontinue its public meetings until further notice. Since the study of the book club was completed a year before the war, this book captures the role literature played in the way Russian speakers created and sustained community spaces in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Within this chronological limit, the aim of this book is to explore how shared reading practices support the formation of community spaces, where migrants forge transnational identities and foster long-distance relationships with their cultural homelands. The following sections situate the phenomenon of WRBC within diaspora and transnationalism theory, as well as referencing scholarship on Russophone migration.

## Diasporas in a Global Context

Globalisation has been pivotal to culture formation worldwide, ever since the 1980s. As a broad phenomenon, globalisation has multiple aspects and manifestations including but not limited to ‘the flexible and spatially extended forms of production, the rapid mobility of capital, information and goods, the deterritorialisation of culture, [and] the interpenetration of local communities by global media networks’.<sup>5</sup> These patterns of interconnections between communities, places, markets, and cultures are varied, fragmented and incomplete, influencing the formation of subjectivities and global imaginaries. Arjun Appadurai in his seminal monograph *Modernity at Large* argued that ‘the new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center–periphery models’ but on the basis of multidirectional global cultural flows.<sup>6</sup> The disjunctive global cultural flows have five dimensions that he calls ethnoscaples, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes. Each of these heterogeneous, fluid, and principally imagined landscapes represents fields of sociocultural practice formed and transformed by globalisation. Ethnoscapes capture the globalised moment with the irregular flows and movements of migrants, refugees, and tourists, who create new, ethnocentric global networks characterised by flexible and ever-changing structures. The role of transnational media practices in the formation of a multi-polar world and the enhancement of migrant connectivity is covered by mediascapes. Relevant to the current discussion are also the ideoscapes, which cover the dissemination of political ideologies, cultural narratives and discourses through images, texts, audios, and videos.<sup>7</sup> These overlapping and mutually constitutive landscapes showcase the global reach of contemporary cultural and political phenomena and their ability to affect the construction of cultural identities and practices.

Globalisation is closely connected to transnationalism, which is an umbrella concept for transstate and transnational processes. In the migration context, transnationalism can be defined as ‘the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’.<sup>8</sup> For Alejandro Portes, transnational migration is heavily influenced by two distinct factors: on the one hand, the flow of labour migrants towards the developed countries that keeps the machine of capitalism working; on the other, the intrusion of core countries into the periphery through products and cultural standards in the form of economic and cultural expansion.<sup>9</sup> Across and in parallel to these flows, migrants establish communities that straddle political boundaries, existing in a state that is ‘neither here nor there’, but rather simultaneously in both locations.<sup>10</sup> Migrant transnationalism or transnational migration also include relationships and activities with individuals not only between the homeland and the host land but virtually with multiple places.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, bifocality remains a common analytical framework for transnational communities and diasporas highlighting the long-distance relationship of migrants with the home culture.

Transnationalism is not a new phenomenon. Transnational connections between communities in distant locations existed before late modernity as migrants sustained

relationships with families in the homeland. Nancy Foner offers the example of Russian Jewish and Italian migrants in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century who regularly sent money to their families, sustained communication, and, particularly in the case of the Italian migrants, bought land and houses in Italy planning their return.<sup>12</sup> However, the technological developments of the past decades have led to the intensification of these supranational links fostering a transnational life. Transnational life encompasses identities, social structures, ‘practices and relationships linking migrants and their children with the home country, where such practices have significant meaning and are regularly observed’.<sup>13</sup> Transnational meaning-making practices allow migrants to transcend borders and produce their own culture while potentially preserving a sense of belonging to a national or cultural community regardless of their location.

Human migration is an ancient phenomenon as populations have always been voluntarily or involuntarily moving and settling in new locations forging communities and creating culture. These migrant communities are often associated with the notions of diaspora and transnationalism. Transnationalism, on the one hand, is a broad phenomenon covering supranational processes that enable migrant populations to ‘develop and maintain multiple relations — familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political that span borders’.<sup>14</sup> Diaspora, on the other hand, is a Greek word consisting of ‘*dia*’ (across) ‘*speiro*’ (to sow seeds) and meaning the spreading and scattering of people away from the place of origin. It is an old concept for dispersed, ethnically and/or culturally related communities bearing a symbolic capital, which allows them to preserve a long-distance relationship with the imagined homeland. Anthony Cohen proposed five ‘prototypical ideal types’ of diasporas: victim (e.g. Jewish, African, Armenian), labour (Indian, Turkish), imperial/colonial (British), trade (Lebanese, Chinese), and deterritorialised (Caribbean).<sup>15</sup> Transnational communities belonging to these five types are characterised by a number of parameters and conditions, including forced or voluntary displacement, permanent or transient settlement in the host country, sustained or lost relationship with the country of origin, ingroup ethnical and/or cultural cohesion.

Despite the differences between diaspora and transnationalism, they are fundamentally intertwined, with scholarship often converging and intersecting.<sup>16</sup> In this framework, Janine Dahinden proposed the term of diasporic transnationalism which combines the central elements of the two concepts (community, identity, network, mobility) and refers to the flexible bonds, boundaries, and interconnections created and sustained by migrants with each other and the country of origin through transstate processes and social formations.<sup>17</sup> This approach focuses on ‘the processes of the making of a diaspora, the conscious and subconscious ways in which particular transnational communities, networks, and identities are formed and transformed’.<sup>18</sup> In this realm, I use ‘diasporic’ and ‘transnational’ interchangeably when referring to migrant communities and identities.

Central to the understanding of diasporas is the concept of imagined community coined by Benedict Anderson.<sup>19</sup> Anderson studied the phenomenon of nationalism

and nation-states and proposed a definition of nation ‘as an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’, adding that in fact ‘all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are [imagined]’.<sup>20</sup> The key word in this definition is ‘imagined’ as all members of the particular community assume that they share a culture and an identity without ever having physical contact with most of their fellow community members. This ‘image of communion’ constitutes the foundation for the shared feeling of belonging to a certain group, which exists only in their minds, in their imagination, but still drives the community life around it. In this way, the formation of an imagined community results in profound sense of horizontal solidarity and boundary-building. For Anderson, the construction of nations and imagined communities relies heavily on print capitalism and specifically on the dissemination of print culture, which transforms certain customs and traditions into a unified narrative, subsequently presented as catholic for a particular group.<sup>21</sup> Imagined communities foster affective connections, emotional links, and attachments between people. The shared narratives grounding national imaginations are embedded with ‘emotions of love, pride, fear and resentment’ empowering individuals to project their national identities and protect their communities from external threats.<sup>22</sup> For instance, unlike the Russian empire, the USSR managed to create an imagined and affective community, ‘a supra-ethnic bond between various nationalities and the Soviet enterprise as a whole’, which according to Ronald Suny is present even today in Soviet nostalgia and nationalist discourse.<sup>23</sup>

Over the last decades, the technological developments of modern communication and the emergence of social media have joined Anderson’s print culture in the promotion of solidarity and creation of shared identities in communities. Transnational media consumption and the ability to command a mediated presence anywhere in the world have led to the proliferation of imagined communities outside and across national borders.<sup>24</sup> Diasporas and transnational communities existed before the advancements of technology and they managed to preserve the sense of belonging with the cultural homeland through shared imagination. However, the digitalisation of communication has afforded migrants with the opportunity to participate in global flows of information and culture and to synchronise their diasporic imaginaries according to narratives and discourses related to their home culture. Nowadays, members of transnational communities are instantly informed about political events, social changes, and new cultural tendencies taking place at home (or other diaspora locations) and do not have to rely on letters and newspapers from home reaching them with delay.<sup>25</sup>

Zooming in on the diaspora experience, migrants today manage to stay in touch with families and kins removing boundaries between the home and the host societies. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller proposed the theory of polymedia according to which migrants negotiate their cross-border relations and presence through the selective and targeted use of different digital media and platforms.<sup>26</sup> Stéphane Dufoix called the mediated, ‘real time’ connection with home ‘dual presence’<sup>27</sup> but instead I propose the use of ‘multipresence’ since migrants are not limited to

the ‘here’ of the host society and the ‘there’ of home. Technology uptake allows migrants to be in as many places as they want at the same time communicating, socialising, and forging symbolic connections with those who share the same origins. However, the discussion about multipresence does not overshadow the experience of the physical diaspora community. For Gerard Delanty, transnational communities are embedded in a certain locus, yet they possess a global perspective which they deploy in their operations: ‘transnational communities operate in the global context but are the projects of locally-based communities’.<sup>28</sup> The diasporic culture so produced is hybrid, incorporating the experience of inclusion and/or exclusion in the host society, the cultural memory of the homeland, and the new or reformed discourses reaching the local community through mass media and other forms of communication.

The multifaceted relationship that a transnational community fosters with its homeland acts as a significant point of reference for diasporans. For Brubaker, ‘the orientation to a real or imagined “homeland” as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty’ is a constitutive criterion for the existence of a diaspora, along with dispersion and boundary maintenance.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, homeland orientation should not be regarded as part of a ‘teleology of return’<sup>30</sup> since the focus on returning has been supplanted by circular exchange and transnational mobility. Homeland is actively reconstructed by diasporic communities through symbolic practices taking place in both the private and the public spheres of migrant life. Diasporic homemaking, on the one hand, involves the materialised negotiation of memories from the country of origin and the living experience in the host society. On the other hand, cultural activities such as festivals, rituals, and commemorations afford diasporans with opportunities for celebration of cultural heritage, community-building, and performance of a shared identity. Transnational communities are (re)formed and sustained ‘through material, symbolic and emotional practices that are mutually constituted here and there, through bodies and data, across borders and networks, online and offline, by users and platforms’.<sup>31</sup>

### Understanding Transnational Identities

Identity is an inhabited and performed discursive practice, continuously constructed in response to history, culture, and politics.<sup>32</sup> For Stuart Hall, identities are ‘points of temporary attachment to subject positions’ produced by discourses and cultural systems.<sup>33</sup> Focusing on diasporic identities, the variety of available subject positions is determined by an unfinished synthesis of elements and structures from the cultures of the homeland and host land. This complex synthesis standing at the centre of transnational identities can be metaphorically described as a colourful mosaic. Salman Rushdie argued that when a diasporic author writes about the homeland, they are obliged to deal ‘in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost’.<sup>34</sup> As a useful tool for depicting identity fragmentation and discontinuity, the mosaic metaphor allows us to focus on multiple constituting elements such as locality, hybridity, otherness, and nostalgia.

Locality and multilocality are important features of diasporic identity. Starting with the locus of the homeland, traditional scholarship refers to the linkage to the homeland as a loyalty, which modernity and postmodernity have reversed. The long-distance relationship and possible self/collective identification with the homeland are based on a collective memory about that place, though this memory does not act in a predetermined way but is involved in the creation of 'new maps of desire and of attachment'.<sup>35</sup> Social constructionists have long disputed the local character of identity by emphasising that it is interwoven with global social discourses.<sup>36</sup> Diaspora experience is grounded in multilocality as diasporans live in the host society and interact with people there, while participating in community events, virtually linking with families and friends in the homeland or wherever they are situated, thus dividing their activities, presence, and connections among multiple societies. Diasporans simultaneously experience all involved loci receiving and co-creating narratives and discourses, which influence the construction of their transnational identities.

In turn, hybridisation captures the process by 'which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices'.<sup>37</sup> In terms of culture, hybridisation is the mixing of different cultures, which encompasses a range of cultural responses 'from assimilation, through forms of separation, to hybrids that destabilise and blur cultural boundaries'.<sup>38</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin writing about linguistic hybridities argued that hybridity is not produced through the integration of the differences but via the confrontation of the dialogical counterpoints letting differences be apparent.<sup>39</sup> The hybridisation procedure has its own temporalities, with accelerations and slowdowns, pauses and flat periods in the making of diasporic culture reflected on the heterogeneous product. Diasporic identity is intertwined with difference and hybridity to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish how diaspora leads to a hybrid experience from how hybridity constitutes the centre of diaspora life.<sup>40</sup> Transnational identity's hybrid character derives from the influence of cultural discourses and narrations from the homeland, the host society, and the diasporic experience itself. These discourses are embodied and performed during the socialisation of the migrants either on a 'transnational community' level, for example by participating in diasporic cultural associations, or generally in the host society. Diasporic experience is unique to every migrant as everyone experiences differently the processes of dispersion and acculturation. Diasporans find their way by learning how to navigate between the different cultural normative discourses of the homeland and the host land, and to choose which to follow according to the specific context. This 'milieu moving' showcases the migrants' cultural competence of the involved semiotic systems along with the fluidity of their transnational identities.

Nodal to the understanding of diasporic identities is the construction of difference and otherness as delimiting a group of people, a community in the transnational framework. According to Nikos Papastergiadis, 'all identity is defined in relation to difference', in the sense that the 'we' or 'I' (sameness) is constantly (re)formed in contrast to the imagined 'others/they' (difference).<sup>41</sup> Difference is neither primordial

nor immutable to influences. On the contrary, it is discursively constructed, as it is otherness, which consists of narratives and cultural representations. Sameness and difference, ingroup and outgroup diasporic positioning, become more complex in cases of superdiverse societies. Superdiversity refers to a condition ‘distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants’.<sup>42</sup> Otherness, in this context, refers not only to assumed subject positions towards the dominant discourses of the host society but also to those of other diasporas settled in the same country, given that transnational communities interact with each other. The transnational identities of the different communities might be sharing some elements since they are all being formed in the same host country receiving influences and being exposed to some extent to the same discourses and cultural practices. In any case, I do not argue in favour of homogeneity or homogenisation as a result of the diasporic cultures’ subordination under the discursive hegemony of the receiving society: superdiversity or ‘diversity within diversity’ is synonymous to heterogenisation established by its three features, ‘mobility, complexity and unpredictability’.<sup>43</sup>

The last element of diasporic identity to be examined here is nostalgia as a longing for return to the imagined homeland. The word nostalgia comes from the Greek language and consists of ‘*nostos*’, which means homecoming, and ‘*álgos*’, which means pain.<sup>44</sup> Nostalgia has been described as homesickness, the mental pain of unsatisfied homeland yearning based on ‘a selective remembering and forgetting of the past’,<sup>45</sup> which helps the diasporans confront the social and psychological realities of the present. For Svetlana Boym, nostalgia epitomises the relationship of individuals and communities not with a place, as it is commonly associated, but with the past and manifests itself either in a restorative or reflective manner: the first highlights the reconstruction of home through contextualisation of home culture, while the second refers to a psychological situation of re-experiencing the trauma of displacement.<sup>46</sup> However, the need for a physical return of contemporary migrants to the homeland has been highly disputed.<sup>47</sup> In this framework, nostalgia usually represents a deep desire to preserve a connection with the country of origin expressed through symbolic and material practices allowing the participants to re-experience their homeland in the imagination. There is always the case of long-distance nationalism among diasporans, which involves engagement with the politics of the homeland and can be viewed as a form of presence but does not necessarily reflect an actual interest in returning.

Building on this understanding of transnational identity as a colourful mosaic of fragmented elements, it is essential to delve into the historical context of Russian-speaking migration. In examining the history of Russian and Soviet migratory waves, the role of diasporic cultural institutions, and the diversity of community experience in a transnational context, will provide deeper insights into how these identities are shaped and performed within transnational communities.

## A History of Russian-Speaking Migration

From the sixteenth century until the present time, migration in Russia has followed a path dictated by the circumstances of each era. In the Russian Empire, the need for housing and land distribution following population increase was satisfied for centuries through internal colonisation which was made possible by the country's vast territories and the often-expansive state policies. In this way, internal migration surpassed any cases of emigration for which an approval from the tsar was required. In the Soviet era, migration outside the borders of the USSR often had political, ethnic, or religious character and was dependent on official permission by the Soviet state because the right of free movement outside the country and of return did not appear until 1993.<sup>48</sup>

The pre-revolutionary Russian migration history can be divided into three phases: the first (sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries) coincides with the main period of expansion, both external and internal colonisation and initial diplomatic and cultural exchanges with the West.<sup>49</sup> In this phase, external migration is rather insignificant, as it can be understood by the absence of migration legislation and limited records.<sup>50</sup> The second period starts with the modernising reforms of Alexander II (1855–81) and lasts until the 1890s. In that period, different minorities were granted permission to leave the country.<sup>51</sup> The third phase, from the 1890s to roughly the beginning of the First World War in 1914, was characterised by social and political instability and a significant increase in emigration numbers.<sup>52</sup>

In the twentieth century, the main migratory waves to the West start after the Russian Revolution in 1917. The first wave (1917–45) started with the political turbulence caused by the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Civil War (1917–1922) with approximately 2 million people fleeing the country.<sup>53</sup> This wave has been called 'white',<sup>54</sup> since the migrants were either anti-communists or were considered as threats to the emerging Soviet state.<sup>55</sup> The educational level of the émigrés was rather high with 75% of them having completed secondary education.<sup>56</sup> There was a common belief at the time that a typical, post-revolutionary émigré was 'idealistic, naive, well-educated and filled with pain and love for the country that he left'.<sup>57</sup> These migrants formed 'Russia Abroad', which was 'a Russian society [that] found itself in exile and proceeded to organise itself in the expectation that its existence "beyond the borders" of the homeland would be only temporary'.<sup>58</sup> Russia Abroad comprised people representing various social strata of pre-revolutionary Russia, who settled in a number of European countries such as France, Germany and Great Britain. Every local (sub)community appeared as Russia in miniature and established its own cultural microcosm through artistic and literary production.<sup>59</sup> As a society in exile, they set the mission to 'preserve the values and traditions of Russian culture and to continue [their] creative efforts for the benefit and ongoing spiritual progress of the homeland'.<sup>60</sup> Most members of the Russia Abroad communities were characterised by nostalgia, deep denial of the reality that the Soviet Union had officially replaced the Russian Empire, and to a certain extent a bipolarity in the endeavour to 'keep intact' their cultural identity based on the pre-revolutionary ethos and cultural discourses at least during the first decade after the Russian Revolution.

The second wave refers to the emigration from the Soviet Union to Western Europe and the USA after the end of the Second World War. This wave predominantly involved ethnic Poles and Germans, people from the Baltic countries and Ukraine, as well as Russians who worked in Germany in the previous period and hesitated to return to the USSR.<sup>61</sup> The third wave lasting until the collapse of the USSR was signified by the end of the Stalinist totalitarianism and progressive abatement of repressions, even though free movement was still prohibited. Emigration was smaller compared to the previous waves, with an estimated 1.1 million migrants for the whole period,<sup>62</sup> and mostly reflected the movement of certain ethnic groups, such as Jews, Greeks, and Germans who were granted permission to return to the nation-states that were considered as their homelands.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the migration of the above minorities did not actually start before the 1970s, when the climate between the Soviet Union and the West started to relax, and peaked during Perestroika.

The fourth wave followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and marked the beginning of a new era for Russia in terms of emigration and population movement, which lasted roughly until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The borders of the Russian Federation were redrawn and the 25 million Russian speakers who lived in all the fourteen non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union found themselves in the respective successor states, the 'near abroad'. Russians had settled in the above Soviet Republics as a result of Stalinist population transfers and internal migration facilitated by favourable state policies and the use of the Russian language as the lingua franca of the USSR. Although a significant number of ethnic Russians finally returned to Russia in the decade following the collapse, the remaining populations have constituted Russophone linguistic minorities.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the liberalisation of migration created an alternative to exile, the main case of movement outside the Soviet borders. Granting the right to move freely and return was translated to an intensification of travel, tourism, and emigration. The prevailing motivation behind this emigration wave was mainly economic prosperity, in opposition to the previous waves of the twentieth century, when migrants left the country mostly for ethnic, political, or religious reasons. Nonetheless, ethnic migration appeared mostly during the 1990s for ethnic groups such as Jews, Germans, Armenians, and Greeks moving to the relevant nation-states or to Western countries, in some cases to escape from violent ethnic and regional conflicts that proliferated after the dissolution.

The unprecedented global dispersion of populations from the post-Soviet space after the dissolution of the USSR led to the progressive formation of vibrant Russophone communities from Argentina to the USA and Canada, from Sweden and Germany to Israel, South Africa, and Australia. The global expansion of Russophone culture has resulted in its deterritorialisation since its production is not limited (if it ever was) to the Russian territory. Andy Byford, Connor Doak, and Stephen Hutchings maintain that 'that which we call Russian culture is co-produced and reproduced, consumed and reinvented across the globe, in different languages of the world and by agents with or without connections to

Russia itself'.<sup>65</sup> Hence, a multitude of fragmented and diverse Russian cultures has thrived across various geographical locations and historical periods. For example, a set of émigré Russian cultures broadly called 'Russia Abroad' flourished in Western Europe and the USA, where Russians found refuge after the Russian Revolution. Overall, the disconnection of Russophone culture from a specific location allows us to approach diasporic cultural production and consumption in a non-hierarchical way, beyond centre–periphery structures.

In the first two decades of twenty-first century, the relationship between the Russian Federation and its nationals settled in other countries changed radically. Migrants and their associations were not considered by the Russian state as enemies, but as compatriots, 'sootechestvenniki'. The intentionally vague and abstract idea of 'sootechestvenniki' covers ethnic Russians and Russian speakers who live in the 'near' and 'far abroad', those born in the Soviet Union or their descendants. The Russian state has made considerable efforts to instrumentalise the Russophone diaspora by investing in the preservation and formation of loyalties to the Russian Federation.<sup>66</sup> To foster diasporic mobilisation,<sup>67</sup> the 'Russkiy mir' (Russian World) concept was developed to capture 'a naturally existing civilisational community'<sup>68</sup> with the Russian language, Soviet heritage, and Russian culture as identifying markers. In this way, the Russian state aimed to expand the Russian political and cultural influence on foreign territories by 'creat[ing] a discursive basis for people potentially to associate themselves as Russian compatriots', subsequently leading to boundary-building around these populations.<sup>69</sup>

For the implementation of the relevant diasporic policies, Putin founded in 2007 the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation and a year later the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, known as Rossotrudnichestvo. Rossotrudnichestvo on the one hand aims 'to form a large circle of friends and a friendly attitude towards Russia',<sup>70</sup> which includes the expansion of the 'Russian influence amongst the 25 million or so ethnic Russians and 100 million Russian speakers in the post-soviet space'.<sup>71</sup> The Russkiy Mir Foundation on the other hand is also a soft power organisation that focuses on the promotion of Russian as both a native and a foreign language by providing language classes through its network of cultural centres, as well as organising lectures about Russian literature and cultural events with invited Russophone writers and other prominent speakers. However, both organisations have been declared instruments of Russian propaganda and disinformation by the European Parliament (2016) based on their international activities targeting diasporic and foreign audiences.

### Russian-Speaking Migrants in the UK

The history of the Russian presence in Britain starts in 1524 with the first diplomatic contacts between Muscovy and England.<sup>72</sup> The relations between the two countries continued to develop slowly and in 1707 a Russian Embassy was established in London. In the 1880s, the first migratory wave from the Russian Empire reached Britain comprising principally political exiles and Jewish refugees escaping pogroms, who settled in London, Manchester, Leeds, and Glasgow.<sup>73</sup> While, in the wake of the Russian Revolution, the number of ‘White émigrés’ arriving in the UK was smaller than of the numbers arriving in Germany, France, and other central European countries, it was nevertheless significant. The migrant community of the time consisted of Russian aristocrats, including members of the royal family, political leaders, entrepreneurs, bankers, Mensheviks,<sup>74</sup> officers, and soldiers.<sup>75</sup> The estimation of numbers ranges from 2,500<sup>76</sup> to 15,000 people,<sup>77</sup> representing a small diasporic community supported by schools, political and cultural organisations, and publishing houses.

The following Soviet migration waves reached Britain among other countries, although the Russophone presence on the island was still minor compared to that in other European countries, Israel, and the USA. Until the end of the twentieth century, the notion of ‘Russians in Britain’, though being used, did not correspond to a multitudinous, ‘distinctive’ community recognised as such for its presence in the British society. From the period from Perestroika onwards, the numbers of Russian speakers increased significantly. Focusing her research on the early 2000s, Oksana Morgunova divided the Russian-speaking migrants residing in the UK into three groups: the first group consists of ‘highly qualified specialists’ who first arrived in the UK during but mostly after perestroika filling positions in academia and industry.<sup>78</sup> The movement of this type relates to ‘brain drain’, a common phenomenon for states in transit that struggle economically, as was the case for most post-Soviet countries in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>79</sup> The second group refers to marriage migrants, mostly wives, who have a vocal presence in the life of the Russian-speaking diaspora in Britain: even though these marriage migrants are often unemployed, occupied mainly as housewives, it is Russian-speaking women who are highly active and heavily involved in the Russian-speaking schools and cultural organisations fostering cultural continuity and the Russian language inside and outside their families. The third group is composed of Russian speakers from the Baltic countries who arrived in Britain following the eastern enlargement of the European Union in 2004. Most members of this group are labour migrants who seized the opportunity created by the expansion, as well as by the easing of the UK immigrant regulations from 1997 to 2008.

Statistical data and estimates of the Russian-speaking population in the UK have been disputed with respect to their ability to capture the actual presence of the community under discussion. According to the 2021 Census, there were around 112,000 people in England and Wales who considered Russian their main language.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, there were approximately 44,000 ethnic Russians in England and Wales, and 3,000 Russia-born people in Scotland.<sup>81</sup> The previous

census identified over 67,000 Russian speakers in England and Wales,<sup>82</sup> and 6,000 in Scotland.<sup>83</sup> These numbers contradict the 2007 Russian mapping exercise that was published by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which claims that 300,000 Russians were living in Britain.<sup>84</sup> The difference between the 2011 Census and the IOM's published data was interpreted by some community members as a downgrade of the Russophone presence in the UK. As a result, the Russian-speaking Community in Britain, a large diasporic association, conducted a sociological study supported by the Russian World Foundation calculating the Russophone population between 100,000 and 167,000 people.<sup>85</sup> For Polina Kliuchnikova, the main reason behind this dispute was political. Claiming a community so large can be interpreted as a recognition of its significance for both the host and the sending countries. Simply put, the sending country extends its sphere of influence on another state by claiming a notable diasporic community in that region.<sup>86</sup>

While the precise size of the community remains a subject of contention, its presence and activities have been studied by a number of scholars, who have approached the existence of a cohesive diasporic community sharing a cultural identity in different ways. The common cultural heritage drives Russian speakers to form subcommunities,<sup>87</sup> informal personal networks,<sup>88</sup> online fora, and discussion groups,<sup>89</sup> without consolidating them into a homogeneous transnational community. Contrary to this group of researchers questioning the formation of a wider Russophone community, Byford observed various performances and practices of a heterogeneous 'community-at-large' bringing together a diverse and fragmented migrant population.<sup>90</sup> For Kliuchnikova and Nina Ivashinenko,<sup>91</sup> the Russian language has the potential to serve as a binding force for the diaspora under discussion, while for Anna Pechurina,<sup>92</sup> the presence of a community is indicated through material practices reflecting an orientation towards the home culture.<sup>93</sup>

My interviews and informal discussions with the WRBC members before and after the book club meetings captured the progressive expansion of the Russophone community from 2000 onwards. Anastasia, a Russian speaker who lived in England in the 1990s, described how the Russian-speaking community has grown over the years:<sup>94</sup>

During the fifteen years I have lived outside England, the diaspora has grown! When I arrived in England in 1991, hearing Russian on the streets was nearly impossible; it was a rare occurrence. Now, the same can be said about hearing English in the streets of London. I was not aware of just how much the diaspora has grown, but also how well it is organised. One can attend lectures, films, performances, clubs in Russian almost every day in London, and all the events I have had the opportunity to attend were very interesting.

Anastasia's absence from Britain between approximately 2000 to 2015 afforded her the opportunity to reacquaint herself with the local diasporic life. For her, the plethora of cultural events and the existence of a Russophone linguistic soundscape indicate a distinctly visible diaspora thriving in cultural activities in contrast to the situation she encountered in the 1990s. Katya, the book club moderator, recalled

her experience with the Russian community in London, where she moved with her English husband shortly after the dissolution of the USSR:

There was a diaspora before, after the revolution [1917], but I didn't know it. I did not participate in it when I arrived. It was practically non-existent. There was a very small circle of Russian friends because we were all Russians in London. We gathered on this basis, not because someone was particularly interesting or close to us, but solely because they were Russian — that was the common denominator. This group of people was quite diverse. Often, it felt like we wouldn't even talk to these individuals if we were in Moscow because apart from all being Russian, we had little else in common.

Katya's account sheds light on the relationships between different generations of migrants from Russia and the Soviet Union in the 1990s. In her experience, descendants of the post-revolutionary diaspora in Britain were almost inexistent, despite the significant numbers that were documented by historians for the interwar period.<sup>95</sup> Given that the options for diasporic socialising were limited at the time, Katya relied on the small number of 'Russian friends', whom she did not feel particularly close to and would not choose to spend time with if she were still living back home. According to Cohen, social relationships based on 'bonds of language, religion, culture and a sense of a common history and perhaps a common fate' are common for diasporas and can lead to the creation of affective ties among the migrants.<sup>96</sup> This period of diasporic life in Britain is clearly distinguished by Katya from the current one:

And now there is a huge group of Russians in London — or rather, Russian speakers in London, as they prefer to identify themselves, from Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, and other places. And they are of very high quality. That is, people with higher education who well-read, play games, and are intellectually active.

The influx of Russian speakers from the Baltic or other Eastern European countries diversified the relevant community in Britain and promoted the creation of personal networks based on shared interests and cultural capital. The presence of 'highly educated' Russian-speaking migrants in London was noted by another book club member, Dina, who has lived in London since 2012. Dina migrated from Saint Petersburg in 1997 and lived in Rome before moving to London, which allows her to assess diasporic community life in both places:

I particularly like the Russian migration here because I have never witnessed such a significant Russian presence in Rome, where I have lived for fifteen years. I am very pleased that the community is very nice here. There is always someone organising something, someone always coming up with ideas. Very pleasant people gather together. Typically, when we meet someone new, there's a desire to engage with them. The Russian community is very close-knit, and I find it to be quite diverse.

London is being portrayed here as an attractive diaspora locus for Russian speakers thanks to the composition of the transnational community. The presence of a diverse and multi-layered Russophone community allows newcomers to join existing diasporic groups and cultural initiatives or to create new ones following

their pre-migration socialising patterns and practices. Dina characterises the Russian speakers with whom she chooses to socialise in London as ‘nice’ in contrast to the less cultivated and ‘interesting’ ones she encountered in Rome. The boundary-building taking place is not only connected to the cultural capital of the community members but also to their relationship with their homeland revealing various dispositions and demographics within the Russophone diaspora: ‘There are people who left Russia or their home with some heavy feeling, and they speak poorly about Russia, what is happening there. Others, on the contrary, came here to work for a while and are going back.’ The diversity of the Russian-speaking community is also reflected in Mikhail Idov’s TV-show *Londongrad* (2015) and Andrei Ostalsky’s novel *An English Mystery* (2014). For Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, the two fictional works present two contradictory and ‘deeply utopian visions of British Russianness’: in the TV-show, the Russian-speaking community constitutes a ‘self-sufficient superior group which [has] colonised London’, while in the novel there is ‘no Russophone community in London, as his [Ostalsky’s] atomised, isolated Russian-speaking character shares his linguistic code and identity with neither the host society nor the odd Russian-speaking mobster he encounters’.<sup>97</sup>

The increasing influx of Russophone migrants was also associated with the establishment of the necessary infrastructure of institutions, events, and networks for building and sustaining the community. Masha, a community leader and writer in her early 1960s, described how the Russophone community life has developed from the 1990s, when she migrated from Russia. In the first years, having to focus on her work and her son’s upbringing, Masha had very little time to socialise with other Russian speakers. Still, the available cultural events and initiatives were limited, and the only Russian school was inaccessible to her. Since 2015, the situation changed radically:

Five years ago, everything started bubbling up, I don’t even know why. It all happened simultaneously. Speaking on behalf of my friends who are creative people. People started going to events and theatres more often. Not only to Russian, but also to English theatres. The period when people were solely focused on making ends meet seemed to fade away, and they began to immerse themselves more in culture, both Russian and English. They began to live a more open social life. This is true for the people I know. Even as our children grew older, they continued to attend Russian events. They have become more actively involved in cultural activities. The community has become more culturally conscious.

For Masha, the sudden rise in community events is explained by the fact that Russian-speaking migrants achieved financial security and were able to engage more actively with the local, diasporic or not, social and cultural life. Financial stability and upward social mobility allowed Russian speakers to explore their cultural identities in a transnational framework and therefore to become more visible in the host society. In her account, Masha admits with pride that not only first-generation migrants but also their children participate in this prolific diasporic network, suggesting the existence of a shared cultural consciousness among the different generations. These interviews with WRBC members offer insight into the

thriving migrant life of dispersed Russian speakers (who might identify with the Russian Federation or not) as it developed in the UK until the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Turning to grassroots initiatives and community groups, this ethnographic study aims to delve into the migrant experience formed in diasporic spaces, where culture is created through dialogue with imagined homelands.

### Book Overview

Reading communities respond to the need of readers to come together, discuss literature, and transform the book experience from solitary to shared. Building on a long reading tradition, members of contemporary book clubs meet online or offline in houses, libraries, and bookshops, read a variety of literary genres, eat and drink together, hold well-structured or very relaxed discussions, share personal news, and collectively explore imaginative worlds. These meaning-making practices turn reading groups into discursive platforms where identities are being constructed and negotiated. In a diasporic context, participation in such groups also represents an opportunity for migrants to discuss books in their first language with those sharing the same cultural heritage. In this way, diasporic book clubs transform into community-building and identity-formation spaces guided by a home literary culture.

*Diaspora Reads* showcases the role of community literary practices in the construction of transnational Russophone identities in Britain. The Russophone community in the UK represents a diverse social, demographic, and ethnic group composed of UK citizens and residents of Russian and Soviet heritage, including migrants from the former Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, and neighbouring countries, bound by one common denominator, the Russian language. Community members are involved in a great number of literary events that include book festivals and fairs, meet-the-author events, and reading groups. The monograph zooms in on the meetings of the Waterstones Russian Book Club, where members discuss novels, play literary games, meet with famous writers from Russia and the diaspora, celebrate anniversaries, and host events in collaboration with cultural organisations and grassroots initiatives. The book club brought together Russian-speaking readers from inside and outside the UK (in both post-Soviet and Western countries), following its activities closely and participating in its online and offline meetings.

Conceptually, this book draws on a theoretical framework that approaches transnational/diasporic communities as migrant groups with fluid and hybrid identities sharing a cultural imaginary,<sup>98</sup> reading as social practice,<sup>99</sup> and literaturocentrism as a phenomenon of Russian and Soviet cultural history.<sup>100</sup> In terms of methodology, the monograph is based on an ‘ethnography of the transnational’,<sup>101</sup> that combined online and offline participant observations of the WRBC literary gatherings before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as interviews with diasporic readers and visiting writers. I argue that the shared reading practices of the Russophone diaspora in Britain support the survival of Russian literaturocentrism

outside the post-Soviet region, as well as the formation of a transnational community space, where migrants forge transnational identities and foster a long-distance relationship with their cultural homelands.

The book consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 examines the sociohistorical parameters that established the central role of literature in Russian culture as the necessary foundation for the analysis of the activities of diasporic Russophone book clubs in Britain. The cultural myth of Russian literaturocentrism encompasses the sacralisation of the literary field and highbrow literature, the idolisation of authors as heroes and martyrs, and the idealisation of avid readership. The Soviet era integrated literaturocentrism into the USSR's ideological project, fostering a unified reading audience. With the USSR's collapse, literaturocentrism abruptly ended, freeing literature from political ideologies but subjecting it to market forces. The removal of censorship and cultural shifts challenged literature's dominance, leading to a diminished reading public. However, the Russian internet facilitated global Russophone literature distribution and a network of readers. At the same time, soft-power initiatives have been targeting reading audiences since the 2010s, aiming to enhance Russia's global presence and political influence through Russophone literature.

Chapter 2 introduces the Waterstones Russian Book Club by first situating its literary activities in the context of the cultural life of the Russophone diaspora. Russian speakers in Britain have at their disposal a variety of options for engagement with Russophone literature: literary events, language schools, bookshops, community groups and grassroots initiatives. Offering a long-term shared reading experience, community book clubs are spaces where meaning is produced and challenged, identities are performed and enacted as readers consume literary works from home and other locations of Russophone culture. The presentation of the WRBC focuses on book discussions, meeting structure, book selection process, membership types, and demographics.

Chapter 3 explores the performances of transnational Russophone identity through literary games and gift-giving at the Waterstones Russian Book Club. These cultural practices take place at both ordinary and special book club meetings and are sometimes combined, for example when an award ceremony is dedicated to the winners after a gaming session. In other instances, a celebratory meeting incorporates gaming activities, and a special book club meeting includes a gift to the WRBC community. These meaning-making and community building practices reveal the creative hybridisation of literary activities, the survival of Soviet cultural discourses creolised from the host and global cultures, ingroup othering processes, and efforts at diasporic mobilisation on behalf of cultural and political organisations.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to the negotiation of Soviet cultural memory in the book club discussions and celebrations. Diasporic readers vote for books that allow them to revisit familiar places, relive historical moments, and reconnect with the cultural homeland. Historical novels ignite vivid discussions and debates about the past and people who played an important role in each era. At the same time, celebrations, festivals, and fairs enrich community life as members remember

milestones, observe national holidays, uphold traditions, and commemorate eminent people. In this context, I examine a book discussion on Zakhar Prilepin's novel *Obitel'*, which depicts life in a Gulag forced labour camp at the end of the 1920s, before moving to the analysis of the WRBC anniversary celebrations as performances of Soviet nostalgia.

Chapter 5 looks at the survival of Russian literaturocentrism in the post-Soviet era as well as at its role in bringing together diasporic communities. Drawing on interviews with Russophone writers and diasporic readers, I show that the engagement with literature reflects the continuation of a literaturocentric tradition that allows diasporans to preserve their cultural identities and their relationship with the imagined homeland. Visiting writers contended that the influence of the literaturocentrism has somehow receded in contemporary Russia following the collapse of the sociopolitical system that supported its prevalence. However, Russophone literature preserves its significance for the diasporans since it allows them to stay informed about life in the homeland, practise their language skills, and converse with cultural authorities.

Chapter 6 delves into the relationship between diasporic readers and Russophone writers as formed in the context of shared reading practices. Russian-speaking writers visit London, Edinburgh, and other British cities regularly, invited by cultural organisations, diasporic or not, Russian departments of universities, book fairs, and bookshops. The first part of the chapter focuses on the negotiation of the writers' presence in the discussions, celebrations, and games of the Waterstones Russian Book Club. The second part draws on interviews with thirteen famous Russophone authors from Russia or the diaspora coming to Britain to promote their work (in alphabetical order): Mikhail Durnenkov, Shamil Idiatullin, Alexei Ivanov, Irina Lukyanova, Vera Pavlova, Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaya, Alexei Salmikov, the late Vladimir Sharov, Anastasia Strokina, Eugene Vodolazkin, Guzel Yakhina, Yulia Yakovleva, and Galina Yuzefovich.

Chapter 7 captures the digital turn of the WRBC from offline to virtual meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic. The book club responded to the pandemic-related lockdown by going online for the first time and adding to its mission (i.e. reacquaintance with contemporary Russophone literary works) the community-driven entertainment, care, and distraction through literature. The new hybrid reading paradigm of the WRBC involved the experimentation with genres and formats, synchronous and asynchronous discussions, both oral and text-based. The WRBC exploited the affordances of digital media to promote co-presence by bringing together the club's regulars and attracting Russian-speaking readers residing outside London or the UK, as well as by facilitating the sense of community among the participants. The highlight of the pandemic experiments was the introduction of the 'Forum of Book Clubs', a new digital formation that celebrated Russian literature by uniting book clubs and readers inside and outside Russia, thereby showcasing the potential of the WRBC to act as a digital meeting point and platform for a global Russophone reading community. Following the success of the two fora, the moderators founded the Association of

Russophone Book Clubs (ARKKA), which includes over 300 Russophone book clubs, with the majority of those being diasporic.

In the Conclusion, I reflect on diasporic book clubs as highly adaptable community spaces where participants can read, discuss, and interact with literature, and meet with writers and other diasporans. As a flexible and fluid social network, WRBC brings together readers who are passionate about Russophone literature, share a linguistic and cultural heritage, but have different subjective positions towards the diaspora. Still, literaturocentrism survives in the diaspora and its influence is apparent in different aspects of the WRBC members' life. The book club members collect books and regard them as essential features of their homes; prefer to socialise with their fellow migrants if they are well-read; and try to instil a love of Russophone literature in their children despite the difficulties of migrant life by reading together, discussing books, and explaining to them the necessary vocabulary and cultural references. As witnessed in the WRBC meetings, diaspora's literaturocentrism is dominated by Russian-based literary production and cultural institutions. However, the book club did not approach the relationship with USSR/Russia on the basis of a past–present dipole, but instead as a continuum in which global Russophone culture is being produced and reproduced. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the cultural homeland orientation has been severely challenged, causing an identity crisis within the book club.

## Notes to the Introduction

1. A pseudonym is used here for anonymity.
2. Waterstones Russian Book Club Blog, *About* (2017) <<https://russianbookclub.wordpress.com/blog/>> [accessed 20 July 2024].
3. This part of the description was added later, probably in response to unwelcome posts by members. See Waterstones Russian Book Club Facebook Page, *About* (2022) <<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1851588408431947/about>>.
4. Adam Sherwin, 'Russian Billionaire Leads a London Bookshop Revolution', *The Independent*, 27 January 2012 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/russian-billionaire-leads-london-bookshop-revolution-6295927.html>> [accessed 25 January 2021]. Slova is the name of the bookshop's Russian section.
5. Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity* (Polity Press, 2000), p. 76.
6. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 32.
7. For instance, in the course of the twentieth century the world witnessed the formation of a socialist ideoscape, which competed with capitalism in forging spheres of political and ideological influence.
8. Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina S. Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1994), p. 6.
9. Alejandro Portes, 'Globalization from Below: The Rise of Transnational Communities', in *The Ends of Globalization: Bringing Society Back In*, ed. by Don Kalb and others (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 253–70.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
11. Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (Routledge, 2009). Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, 'From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68.1 (1995), 48–63.

12. Nancy Foner, 'What's New About Transnationalism?: New York Immigrants Today and at the Turn of the Century', *Diaspora*, 6.3 (1997), 355–75.
13. Robert C. Smith, *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants* (University of California Press, 2006), pp. 6–7.
14. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, 'Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 645.1 (1992), pp. 1–24 (p. 1).
15. Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Routledge, 2008).
16. Thomas Faist, 'Diaspora and Transnationalism: What Kind of Dance Partners?', in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. by Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 9–34 (p. 16).
17. Janine Dahinden, 'The Dynamics of Migrants' Transnational Formations: Between Mobility and Locality', in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods*, ed. by Bauböck and Faist, pp. 51–72.
18. Roza Tsagarousianou and Jessica Retis, 'Diasporas, Media, and Culture: Exploring Dimensions of Human Mobility and Connectivity in the Era of Global Interdependency', in *The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture*, ed. by Jessica Retis and Roza Tsagarousianou (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), pp. 1–20 (p. 2).
19. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, [1983] 2006).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
21. For Leerssen, Anderson proposed 'the social embedding of literature, not as a poetical creation or ideological expression, but as a material production and as a communicative praxis' that supports the formation of reading communities. See John Breuilly, 'Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities: A Symposium', *Nations and Nationalism*, 22.4 (2016), pp. 625–59.
22. Ronald G. Suny, 'The Contradictions of Identity', in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities*, ed. by Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 17–36 (p. 20).
23. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
24. Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Digital Diasporas: Postcoloniality, Media and Affect', *Interventions/International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 22.8 (2020), pp. 977–93.
25. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, 'Crafting Love: Letters and Cassette Tapes in Transnational Filipino Family Communication', *South East Asia Research*, 19.2 (2011), pp. 249–72.
26. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia* (Routledge, 2012); Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, 'Polymedia: Towards a New Theory of Digital Media in Interpersonal Communication', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16.2 (2013), pp. 169–87.
27. Stéphane Dufoix, *Diasporas* (University of California Press, 2008), p. 98.
28. Gerard Delanty, *Community*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2010), p. 126.
29. Rogers Brubaker, 'The "Diaspora" Diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28.1 (2005), pp. 1–19 (5).
30. James Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3 (1994), pp. 302–38 (p. 305).
31. Ponzanesi, p. 988.
32. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990); Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, *Discourse and Identity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
33. Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs Identity?', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Sage, 1996), pp. 1–17 (p. 6).
34. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (Vintage, 2010), pp. 10–11.
35. Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, 'On Moving Targets', *Public Culture*, 2.1 (1989), pp. i–iv (p. i).
36. Anna de Fina and Sabina Perrino, 'Transnational Identities', *Applied Linguistics*, 34.5 (2013), pp. 509–15 (p. 511).
37. William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (Verso Books, 1991), p. 231.
38. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (Sage, 2012), p. 264.
39. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas Press, 1981).

40. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222–37; Niall Brennan, 'Unraveling Diaspora and Hybridity: Brazil and the Centrality of Geopolitical Context in Analyzing Culture in Global Postcolonial Space', in *The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture*, ed. by Retis and Tsagarousianou, pp. 137–50.
41. Nikos Papastergiadis, *Cosmopolitanism and Culture* (Polity Press, 2012), p. 163.
42. Steven Vertovec, 'Super-diversity and its Implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30.6 (2007), pp. 1024–54 (p. 1024).
43. Jan Blommaert, *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes: Chronicles of Complexity* (Multilingual Matters, 2013), pp. 4–6.
44. In her definition of nostalgia, Boym mistranslated *algos* as longing instead of pain. See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001).
45. Daphne Berdahl, "'(N)Ostalgie" for the Present: Memory, Longing, and East German Things', *Ethnos*, 64.2 (1999), pp. 192–211 (p. 198).
46. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001).
47. Kim D. Butler, 'Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 10.2 (2001), pp. 189–219; Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). For example, all my research participants voluntarily moved from the post-Soviet countries to the UK and stated in their interviews that they have not set a plan, even distant, to return home.
48. In the case of dissidents like Joseph Brodsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the 'permission' took the form of forced exile.
49. Alexander S. Akhiezer, 'Emigratsiia kak indikator sostoiianiia rossiiskogo obshchestva [Emigration as Status Indicator in Russian Society]', *Mir Rossii*, 4 (1999), pp. 163–74.
50. Fedotov writes that during the rule of Boris Godunov (1598–1605) eighteen people, the 'first intellectuals', were sent to study in Germany, France, and England, but no one returned. See Georgy Fedotov, *Litso Rossii [The Face of Russia]* (YMCA-PRESS, 1988).
51. In the period from 1871 to 1890, 177,000 Jews left the Russian Empire, especially after the publication of Alexander II's decree on the 'Permission to the Jews' in 1880 and his assassination the following year that caused an anti-Semitic uproar and pogroms. See Stephan Themstrom, *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 571–79.
52. For instance, between 1899 and 1916 3.3 million people migrated to the USA.
53. Ludmila Isurin, *Russian Diaspora: Culture, Identity, and Language Change* (Walter de Gruyter, 2011).
54. White Army, White Guard, or the 'Whites' refers to the anti-communist opposition to the Bolsheviks (the 'Reds') during the Russian Civil War (1917–22).
55. Malia argues that a significant number of the migration, around 1.5 million, belonged to the pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia and not to 'White Guardists [...] whose skills were cruelly lacking for the post [Civil] war reconstruction'. See Martin Malia, *Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia* (Free Press, 1994).
56. Julitta Suomela, *Zarubezhnaja Rossia: ideino-politicheskie vzgliady russkoi emigratsii na stranitsakh russkoi evropeiskoi pressy 1918–194022 [Foreign Russia: Ideopolitical Views of Russian Emigration on the Pages of Russian-European Press 1918–1940]* (Kolo, 2004).
57. Isurin, p. 5.
58. Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 3.
59. Among the members of Russians Abroad were Vasilii Kandinsky, Mark Chagall, Ivan Bunin, and Marina Tsvetayeva. One of the most famous transnational communities that fall under the notion of 'Russia Abroad' was the interwar Russian Parisian community with a population of more than 45,000, bigger than the American community at the time. See Maria Rubins, *Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
60. Raeff, p. 4.
61. For Morgunova, this wave also captures the emigration of political dissidents who found the opportunity to escape from the Soviet Union, along with prisoners of war and Nazi supporters

- and collaborators. See Oksana Morgunova, 'Discursive Self-representations in Russian-Language Internet Forums: A Case of Russian Migrants in the UK' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2007), pp. 19–20. Also, Helen Kopnina, *East to West Migration: Russian Migrants in Western Europe* (Ashgate, 2005), p. 25.
62. Anatoli Vishnevsky and Zhanna Zayonchkovskaya, 'Emigration from the Former Soviet Union: The Fourth Wave', in *European Migration in the Late Twentieth Century: Historical Patterns, Actual Trends, and Social Implications*, ed. by Heinz Fassmann and Rainer Munz (Elgar, 1994), pp. 239–59 (p. 240).
  63. Akhiezer, p. 170; Kopnina, p. 26.
  64. Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 'Introduction: The Russian Language, Challenged by Globalisation', in *The Russian Language outside the Nation: Speakers and Identities*, ed. by Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 1–30 (p. 17).
  65. Andy Byford, Connor Doak, and Stephen Hutchings, 'Introduction', *Transnational Russian Studies*, 1 (2020), pp. 1–34 (p. 1).
  66. According to Suslov, 'there has been neither a consistent policy towards the Russian-speaking diaspora nor a consistent ideology legitimizing Russia's special relation with its "compatriots" abroad'. In the past twenty-plus years, the 'Russian world' concept has transformed from a cultural archipelago (1996–2001) consisting of diasporic communities (the 'islands') to 'a sovereign "great power" with its natural "tentacles" abroad' that showcase its political influence (2001–09). More recently, in the period from 2009 to 2015, the doctrine of 'Russian world' 'has been reterritorialized as an irredentist and isolationist project, aligned with the logic of representing Russia as an alternative, non-Western model of modernity'. See Mikhail Suslov, "'Russian World" Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of "Spheres of Influence"', *Geopolitics*, 23.2 (2018), 330–53 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1407921>> [accessed 29 May 2019] (330, 346–47).
  67. Byford argues that compatriot mobilisation articulates the projection of 'Russian statehood beyond its borders, in international relations, either as image or as structure, in interaction with Russia's various historic Others, whether within the former Soviet space or beyond it, for example in the West'. See Andy Byford, 'The Russian Diaspora in International Relations: "Compatriots" in Britain', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64.4 (2012), pp. 715–35 (p. 720).
  68. Valentina Feklyunina, 'Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the "Russian World(s)"', *European Journal of International Relations*, 22.4 (2016), pp. 773–96 (p. 783).
  69. Ammon Cheskin and Angela Kachuyevski, 'The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics and Identity', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71.1 (2019), pp. 1–23 (p. 4) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1529467>>.
  70. Polina Khimshiashvili, 'Glava Rossotrudnichestva — RBK: "My na latinitse pisat' ne budem"' [Rossotrudnichestvo's Head — RBK: "We will not write in Latin"], *RBK* <<https://www.rbc.ru/interview/politics/12/09/2018/5b90ee6f9a7947682967bdo>> [accessed 10 March 2021].
  71. Peter Rutland and Andrei Kazantsev, 'The Limits of Russia's "Soft Power"', *Journal of Political Power*, 9.3 (2016), pp. 395–413 (p. 405).
  72. Anthony Cross, *'By the banks of the Thames': Russians in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Oriental Research Partners, 1980); Anthony Cross, 'Nachalo: russkiye v Britanii [The beginning: Russians in Britain]', in *Russkoe prisutstvie v Britanii [Russian presence in Britain]*, ed. by N. V. Makarova and Oksana Morgunova (Sovremennaya Ekonomika i Pravo, 2009), pp. 7–22.
  73. Lynne A. Hartnett, 'Relief and Revolution: Russian Émigrés' Political Remittances and the Building of Political Transnationalism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46.6 (2020), pp. 1040–56.
  74. Mensheviks constituted the minority in the Russian Social-Democratic Workers' Party in contrast to Lenin's Bolsheviks (the majority). After the October Revolution, they tried unsuccessfully to form an opposition to the Bolsheviks, and for that reason they were later suppressed.
  75. Olga Kaznina, 'Russkaya emigratsia v Anglii v pervoy treti XX veka [Russian Emigration in England in the First Third of the 20th Century]', in *Russkoe prisutstvie v Britanii [Russian Presence in Britain]*, ed. by Makarova and Morgunova, pp. 23–36.

76. Pierre Kovalevsky, *Zarubezhnaya Rossiya: istoriya i kulturno-prosvetitel'naya rabota russkogo zarubezhia za polveka, 1920–1970* [*International Russia: History and Cultural and Educational Work of the Russian Diaspora in the Half-Century 1920–1970*] (Librairie des cinq continents, 1971), pp. 56–57.
77. Raeff, p. 44.
78. Oksana Morgunova, 'Den' segodnyashniy: britanskiye russkiye ili russkiye britantsy? [Today: British Russians or Russian Britons?], in *Russkoe prisutstvie v Britanii* [*Russian Presence in Britain*], ed. by Makarova and Morgunova, pp. 37–46.
79. Irina Antoschyuk, 'Migrating Step by Step: Russian Computer Scientists in the UK', in *From Russia with Code: Programming Migrations in Post-Soviet Times*, ed. by Mario Biagioli and Vincent A. Lépinay (Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 271–96; Andrei V. Korobkov, 'Russian Academic Diaspora: Its Scale, Dynamics, Structural Characteristics, and Ties to the RF', in *Migration from the Newly Independent States*, ed. by Mikhail Denisenko, Salvatore Strozza, and Matthew Light (Springer International Publishing, 2020), pp. 299–321.
80. Office for National Statistics, *National Census for England and Wales 2021* <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census>> [accessed 20 July 2024].
81. National Records of Scotland, *Scotland Census 2022* <<https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/>> [accessed 20 July 2024]. The Office for National Statistics, 2021 estimated that in January 2021 there were approximately 65,000 Russian-born people in the UK, while approximately 28,000 were British citizens and 32,000 Russian citizens. According to ONS, there were 33,000 Ukrainian-born people in the UK, while approximately 8,000 were British citizens and 19,000 Ukrainian citizens.
82. Office for National Statistics, *National Census for England and Wales 2011* <[http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/QS204EW/view/2092957703?rows=cell&cols=rural\\_urban](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/QS204EW/view/2092957703?rows=cell&cols=rural_urban)> [accessed 17 November 2020].
83. National Records of Scotland, *Scotland Census 2011* <[http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/analytical\\_reports/Migration\\_Matters\\_Scotland\\_Census2011](http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/documents/analytical_reports/Migration_Matters_Scotland_Census2011)> [accessed 23 February 2021].
84. International Organisation for Migration, *Russia: Mapping Exercise* (2007).
85. Polina Kliuchnikova, 'Linguistic Biographie and Communities of Language of Russian Speakers in Great Britain' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2016), p. 5.
86. Darya Malyutina, *Migrant Friendships in a Super-diverse City: Russian-Speakers and their Social Relationships in London in the 21st century* (Ibidem-Verlag, 2015). Malyutina approached the discord between the two datasets with a critical eye on the methodology that was followed for each of them. In her opinion, the question comes down to who a Russian speaker is and who identifies as such, since the census gathered data under the theme of the main language. By comparing data from IOM, she concludes that although there is a considerable number of post-Soviet migrants who speak Russian, many of them will not identify as Russian speakers for political reasons (*ibid.*, pp. 32–33).
87. For Kopnina, the absence of a cohesive community was connected to the 'invisibility' of the migrant population due to its small numbers, geographical dispersion, whiteness (allowing them to go unnoticed), lack of Russian cultural institutions, illegal status in the country, and ingroup antagonism.
88. Malyutina claimed that 'one can use the term "community" only as a heuristic device rather than a definition of a concrete, unified, tightly knit and homogenous group' (p. 34). In her view, Russian speakers occasionally come together in small transnational networks due to several commonalities (i.e. the (post) Soviet cultural heritage, memories from home, the Russian language), yet they avoid 'large, more formal groups that are organised "from above"' (*ibid.*, p. 35).
89. Morgunova observed a thriving digital presence on Russophone social media in the UK and argued in favour of an emerging 'Russian in Britain' identity based on the living experience in the host society and symbolic connections with the Soviet past. Nevertheless, she noted that these expressions of diasporic identity do not extend to the offline world as they prefer to remain disengaged with each other with limited participation in community organisations. See Oksana Morgunova, 'Russians in the City — "Patriots" with a Touch of Spleen', *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, 9 (2013), pp. 51–68 (p. 51).

90. Andy Byford, 'The Last Soviet Generation' in Britain', in *Diasporas: Critical and Inter-disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Jane Fernandez (Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009), pp. 53–63; Byford, 'The Russian Diaspora in International Relations'; Andy Byford, 'Performing "Community": Russian Speakers in Contemporary Britain', in *Rethinking 'Identities': Cultural Articulations of Alterity and Resistance in the New Millennium*, ed. by Lucille Cairns and Santiago Fouz-Hernandez (Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 115–39. Byford's research on the Russian-speaking diaspora focuses on two different issues: first, the construction and the deconstruction of a community in diasporic events and press, i.e. through 'rituals and rhetoric' ('Performing "Community"', p. 118); and second, the mobilisation of Russian diaspora in the UK by the Russian state. He maintains that despite the extent and the visibility of the performances and practices of the Russophone 'community-at-large' around Britain, no 'coherent overall socio-cultural identity or unitary communitarian consciousness' (ibid., p. 124) has been forged nor seems to be in the making.
91. Nina Ivashinenko, 'Heritage Language Preservation, Social Networking and Transnational Activities: A Study of Russian Complementary Schools in Scotland' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2019).
92. Anna Pechurina, *Material Cultures, Migrations, and Identities: What the Eye Cannot See* (Springer, 2016).
93. In her research on Russian migrant homes, Anna Pechurina (ibid.) defines community as an aggregation of people sharing a particular tangible and intangible culture. Community members can cultivate and reaffirm their attachment to a place within their personal spaces through material practices, even when they are settled elsewhere, enabling them to create a sense of 'home'.
94. All interviews have been translated from Russian to English by the author. Each interviewee has been assigned a pseudonym for anonymity.
95. Kovalevsky; Raeff; Kaznina.
96. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, p. 173.
97. Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, "'Londongrad" as a Linguistic Imaginary: Russophone Migrants in the UK in the Work of Michael Idov and Andrei Ostalsky', in *The Post-Soviet Politics of Utopia: Language, Fiction and Fantasy in Modern Russia*, ed. by Mikhail Suslov and Per-Arne Bodin (I. B. Tauris, 2020), pp. 235–58 (pp. 251–52).
98. Anderson; Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'.
99. Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2003); James Procter, 'Diasporic Readers and the Location of Reception', in *Diasporas: Concepts, Intersections, Identities*, ed. by Kim Knott and Seán McLoughlin (Zed Books, 2010), pp. 256–62.
100. Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2000); Mikhail Berg, *Literaturokratii: problema prisvoeniia i pereraspredeleniia vlasti v literature* [*Literaturocracy: The Problem of the Acquisition and Distribution of Power in Literature*] (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000).
101. Raelene Wilding, 'Transnational Ethnographies and Anthropological Imaginings of Migrancy', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33.2 (2007), pp. 331–48.

## CHAPTER 1



# Russian Literaturocentrism as a Myth and Reality

Russian culture abounds with myths related to the special mission of literature and the writer in society. Most of them have been formed and reformed in the course of centuries, while others, like the myth of the most well-read nation, are more recent. The wider cultural myth of Russian literaturocentrism encompasses the sacralisation of the literary field and highbrow literature, the idolisation of authors as heroes and martyrs, and the idealisation of avid readership. Mythological thinking in Russia goes back to the eighteenth century as myths have been widely used for the interpretation of various cultural phenomena or ascription of importance to a certain person often leading to their sanctification. For Roland Barthes, a cultural myth is a linguistic, semiotic and ideographic system conveyed by an anonymous, natural and depoliticised discourse:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; it simply purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a naturalised and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation, but that of a statement of fact.<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, myths are ideological social constructs approached as natural conditions, givens, and widely shared beliefs. The ahistorical character of myths makes them atemporal and ecumenical. History is replaced with nature, making myths simple, essential, and easy to absorb.

Mythical structures can be found in literature, audiovisual culture, and performances of identity worldwide. As intangible, constructed images, cultural myths do not necessarily depict reality and historical truth. Still, they define the cultures and collective memories to which they belong, while they help differentiate one culture from the other, influencing the construction of national identities. A study of cultural memory with focus on its myths can reveal important elements of a national identity and pave the way to the understanding of a transnational identity. In the case of Russia, the various Russian myths strongly related to literature show its central role in the cultural imagination of the last three centuries, but it is a matter of further examination if literature and readership define Russophone cultural identities. This chapter offers a genealogy of Russian literaturocentrism, examining different historical eras and their contributions to the construction and proliferation of this cultural myth.

### Role of Literature in Russian Culture

According to the broader cultural myth, which also encompasses the myth of the author and the significance of logos, Russian culture and identity are literary-centric or literaturocentric. Literaturocentrism is strongly connected with the concept of power, particularly the power of discourse, wielded by writers over readers through the symbolic transmission of ideas, worldviews, and ideological messages, often reaching a level of symbolic subordination. In other words, a writer possesses a powerful tool for ideological manipulation and for the imagination's control. Mikhail Berg employs the term 'literaturocracy' to depict the prominent and powerful position that literature held in Russian culture until the post-Soviet times, when the phenomenon faced its final and insurmountable crisis. In his monograph *Literaturocracy: The Problem of the Acquisition and Distribution of Power in Literature* (2000), Berg offers a historical retrospective regarding the appearance of literaturocentrism in Russia starting from medieval times and reaching the end of the twentieth century.

Owing to the absence of the Renaissance in Russia, the emergence of secular writing was delayed. Although such writing began to gain autonomy from the seventeenth century onwards, it maintained close ties with the Church and religious literature. Consequently, the legitimisation of secular literature was rooted in its association with Church literature, transforming the writer into a bearer of sacred truth. Drawing on this symbolic capital, writers carved out their place in the cultural imagination, forming part of the triptych of 'God — Church — Poet'. In the early eighteenth century, Peter the Great pursued reforms aimed at separating the Church from the state and secularising the Word. As a result, the symbolic triptych expanded to include the monarch: 'God — Monarch — Church — Poet'. The secularisation of culture did not change radically the role of the writer and literature in the society. Poetry's symbolic status in Russian culture was elevated as the closest literary form to the sacred word. As Berg writes,

the authority of the poetic text was directly related to the author and the system of ideas, according to which only with self-sacrifice, personal service to good and heroism can someone earn the right to speak on behalf of the Truth.<sup>2</sup>

The Poet was perceived as a saint, an anchorite or God's fool who had to fulfil the mission of spiritual leadership. According to Vadim Linetsky, 'when it came time to determine the place of the "laborer of the word", the writer in secular culture, from three possible options: a buffoon, a professional and a prophet — the choice was made in favour of the latter'.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, poets were typically members of the social elite, and it was inconceivable to receive a payment for such a prestigious and noble activity.

At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, a new social group emerged in Russia: the intelligentsia. The new-born intellectuals initially drew their legitimisation from literature and logos in general, and later, the arts and the sciences that influenced the formation of their socio-psychological profile. This profile reflected the fact that they were supposed to serve the Truth and led to a deep-rooted complex of 'guilt before the people'.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the symbolic load for intellectuals of having to act as prophets, the dipole of 'intelligentsia–people' was created. This dipole gradually lost its relevance as the literary field became more independent from the mid-nineteenth century. A crucial moment was in 1905 when the preliminary censorship was officially abandoned. The literary production proliferated and with an ever-growing number of writers and poets, the intelligentsia was ready to overcome the guilt and the obligation of serving the Russian people. However, in Soviet times a literaturocentric model of culture was implemented that involved the re-sacralisation of the literary field and the subsequent idolisation of the Soviet writer. As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, the revival of literaturocracy ends abruptly with Perestroika and the USSR's break-up in 1991 when Soviet ideological literature gives way to the literary product.

Central to the understanding of the historical evolution of literaturocentrism are its attributed crises. Berg identifies three crises of the phenomenon when the symbolic status of literature was challenged: Peter's reforms to secularise the word, the loss of prophet's status amongst the intelligentsia in the early twentieth century, and the post-Soviet cultural and ideological crisis. Conversely, Ivan Kondakov argues that Peter's reforms were only the preamble to literaturocentrism's first crisis. The first actual crisis came along with the emergence of literary criticism in nineteenth century, what he calls 'kritikotsentrism'.<sup>5</sup> Literary criticism competed with literature in regard to who serves the Word better, the former who represented the thinkers that examined literature in its whole or the latter who were 'just' the creators of particular texts. The second crisis took place in the Silver Age (the last decade of nineteenth century and the two first of twentieth), when the monopoly of literature was challenged by the rising of non-verbal forms of art, like visual arts, theatre, and architecture. Similarly influential was the work of other literary groups like the futurists who 'distorted' the poetic language with their experimentations calling into question the sacred character of poetry.

As far as the third crisis is concerned, Kondakov interprets the ideologisation of literature during the Soviet times as the debilitation of a strong literary tradition. Their different approaches to the Soviet era can be explained by the fact that Berg is examining the symbolic status and capital of literature in each period, while Kondakov regards the historical period before the nineteenth century as the highest point for literature, the ideal time, when it was sacralised, and every turning point afterwards as the inescapable degradation. The contemporary crisis of Russian literaturocentrism is related to the ascendancy of visual arts and of mass culture. For Kondakov, contemporary literature is increasingly influenced by modern media, adopting functions, techniques, and poetics from non-verbal arts and cultural practices, which signify its degradation. However, this approach to literaturocentrism reaffirms the mythologisation of literature. Even as Kondakov dissects the various elements of this phenomenon, he maintains the significance of logos at its core and views any challenge to the sacred position of the Word as a threat. Thus, the discourse of the logocentric Great Russian literature is not deconstructed but rather reconstituted.

Another phenomenon related to literaturocentrism is graphomania. According to Boym, graphomania is a *sui generis* literary disease, defined as ‘an uncontrollable obsession to write and to be a writer’, ‘a unique epidemic, a complication of Great Literature’.<sup>6</sup> This ‘disease’ appears in a culture where high-quality literature is being produced and cherished and where there is demand for intensive literary production. Graphomania is the other side of the literary myth, a side effect of literaturocentrism, of the discursive power that literature has had in Russia. Given that the position of the author is idolised, many who have unsuccessfully tried to reach this respected place, have fallen into the trap of banalities and everyday writing. In the case of Russia, this widespread and arguably incurable disease can be witnessed from the time of Pushkin and Dostoyevsky until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Alongside the grand names of Russian authors, Boym makes an account of the victims of graphomania; the minor writers or literary characters who desperately tried to make art, yet in a pompous and/or unforgettingly common way. With this literary retrospect, she showcased graphomania as a persistent cultural phenomenon with major political and national significance from the early nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century.

Placed in a wider Eastern European framework, Russian literaturocentrism can be connected to the national (-istic) mission of literature in the nineteenth century, a mission that was repurposed in the twentieth century in various communist states. Andrew Wachtel defines Eastern Europe as ‘the part of the world where serious literature and those who produce it have traditionally been overvalued’ by attributing to the latter ‘esteem and status that in other parts of the world have been reserved for statesman, philosophers, businessman, or entertainers’.<sup>7</sup> This unusual definition allows Wachtel to include Russia in this geographical region and to unify it culturally around the discourse of literaturocentricity. The emergence of this discourse can be traced in the early nineteenth century and is connected to the role that the codification of national vernaculars played in the national awakenings of ethnic populations in Eastern Europe. Given that of all the presently existing countries of the region only Russia was an independent state at the time, there seemed to be a particular need to form a national identity. The basis for the creation of the national identity was a shared language among the population that differentiated this ethnic group from the others. However, most vernaculars were lacking in symbolic status as they were not considered to be sufficiently developed. In the case of Russia, Wachtel notes that Russian

cultural discourse had in the course of the eighteenth century been denationalised to such an extent that, as Lev Tolstoy pointed out at the beginning of *War and Peace*, most Russian aristocrats were more comfortable in French than in their native language.<sup>8</sup>

For that reason, it was crucial in Eastern Europe to systematise the vernacular languages and utilise them in the creation of world-class literatures as an indication of their high level and the basis for the formation of a national imagination through the distribution of print culture. The necessity for the appearance of a national poet or writer was undisputable. The patriotic poet had not only to create a literary language or codify the existing language, but also to identify and express

the national consciousness. In this way, these writers assumed the duty of nation-building, for which they were later canonised and venerated to a level of idolisation. For the Russian Empire, such a poet was Alexander Pushkin, who was quickly idolised for his contribution to Russian literature and culture.<sup>9</sup>

The Soviet era of literaturocentrism warrants special attention due to its significant role in extending influence over the diverse Russian-speaking population. The Soviet Union incorporated a literaturocentric approach into its broader ideological project, aiming to construct a shared communist ethos among the country's numerous ethnic and cultural groups.

### The Soviet Literacy Project and the Creation of the Soviet Reader

In the post-revolutionary era, extensive illiteracy was one of the most important problems that the new-founded Soviet state had to tackle. According to the 1897 census 79% of the Russian empire's population was illiterate, which had sunk to 60% by the beginning of the First World War.<sup>10</sup> Male literacy in the major urban centres was relatively high, reaching over 70% in Moscow Province in 1897, while in rural areas general literacy rates were much lower, standing at approximately 6% in the 1860s and 25% in the 1910s. Despite private and state policies, in the early 1920s only one third of the population was literate, which in most cases referred to the ability to read and write on a basic level.

The administrative and educational policies and initiatives that were initiated in the second half of the nineteenth century by the Russian state, mostly as part of the emancipation of the serfs, could hardly be called a full-fledged literacy project. The main focus of these policies was to increase the value of literacy by underlining its administrative and economic importance, rather than to create cultivated and educated individuals. Primary schooling was underdeveloped, and the different types of primary schools were competing with each other.<sup>11</sup> The absence of a unified educational system, along with the high rates of illiteracy, did not allow a mass readership to emerge. The readership of 'Great Russian literature' during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was primarily an urban, middle to upper-class phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Still, popular literature, urban or folk literature like the *lubok* stories, was widely read by lowbrow readers who had received some education.<sup>13</sup> This literature, as Brooks argues, played a role in the construction of Russianness, not by promoting the myth of literature's significance, but through discourses of political unity, the Great Russian ethnos, diversity, and cosmopolitanism.<sup>14</sup>

The Soviet literacy project had a more complex and multifaceted character than the pre-revolutionary efforts to tackle illiteracy. With literature holding the central position in the mission for the creation of a socialist culture, the reading revolution was handled with care in order to serve the purposes of the communist regime. Since the beginning of the cultural revolution, the illiteracy campaign became their 'cause célèbre' due to the significance of print culture for the Marxist-Leninist tradition and for some of the early Soviet leaders.<sup>15</sup> The printed word in general and most importantly literature were chosen as the main transmitters of the communist ideology. The Soviet leadership had to make a firm choice about the character of the communist cultural project, 'the Soviet *kulturnost*', along with the type of

readership it expected from the Soviet citizens. According to Wachtel, there were three options for the Soviet regime to choose from when planning the communist culture: first, to allow the revolutionary avant-garde artists to create a ground-breaking culture; second, to involve the workers and peasants in the formation of the new culture; and third, to permit the Soviet artists to construct the new culture using the artistic achievements of the pre-communist era, while following the strict regulations of the party.<sup>16</sup> Given the impracticality of building a new culture from scratch and the Soviet leaders' lack of trust in the masses, the third option was followed. For the success of the cultural project, Soviet people had to be vigorous but obedient readers, ready to absorb and conform to the ideological doctrines of the party. As Stephen Lovell argues, the condition of mass illiteracy paved the way for the creation of the Soviet reader, since the illiterate population was more vulnerable to this imposition of new ideologised discourses.<sup>17</sup> A centralised and, in most cases, Russocentric literary system had also the potential to unify or at least control the multicultural Soviet population.

One of the outcomes of the Soviet Cultural Revolution was the creation of a new cultural myth, the myth of the Soviet reader. This myth as many others refers to a constructed narrative that does not depict the historical truth, but rather constitutes the ideological output and the symbolic emblem for which the Soviet leaders aimed. Having monopolised both publishing sector and literary production, the Soviet state pressed writers to create a single, homogenised, popular, and approved culture. With the creation of the Soviet reader, the new culture managed to bridge the gap between the intelligentsia and the common people, unifying them. Readers were encouraged to create their own libraries in the way the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia hunted books for their collections. At the same time, this myth was the fertile ground for the construction of difference between the Soviet Union and the West. The Soviet literary audience was presented as extensive, highly cultivated, and homogeneous in contrast to the Western audience that was fragmented, diversified, and showed different levels of engagement with literature. This unified voice proved, on the one hand, the existence of a 'single way of talking and thinking about the reader, a single set of norms for cultural reception' reflecting a top-down ideological project, while on the other, a vision of a universal culture cutting across national conflicts and social boundaries.<sup>18</sup> In reality, the Soviet state was not in a position to control the way readers consumed the available literature as it did with the production and dissemination of books. Nonetheless, the expectation was that Soviet people would read more and more through the years and thanks to the beneficial effect of reading, they would embrace the Soviet value system and follow it in their everyday life.

The myth of the Soviet reader later evolved into the stereotypical phrase that the USSR was 'the most well-read country in the world'. The discourse of vigorous readership is connected to the heightened consumption of books both in terms of actual readership and acquisition of books as part of private collections from the 1960s and onwards. For Menzel, the Soviet state tried to establish books as status symbols and reading as highly valued cultural practice by initiating a book-shortage (*defitsit*),<sup>19</sup> while for Lovell, the latter was a consequence of the Soviet system's inflexibility. More specifically, Lovell argues that the book deficit was caused by

the inability of the publishing system to meet demand.<sup>20</sup> Following the communist doctrines, book production was designed to serve the presumed needs of the Soviet people. Many authors were censored, and a wide range of genres were excluded from the list of publishable books for not being sufficiently 'cultural', such as romance fiction and self-help books. At the same time, the number of new titles increased at a rather slow pace, while the print runs of selected books significantly rose every year. In this way, some works were over-represented and published in millions, while others were in shortage.<sup>21</sup> The book deficit caused a shortage mentality, a book hunger. Gradually and mostly towards the late Soviet period, people showed elements of a 'mania' for the collection of books and subscribed to as many literary journals as possible. The Soviet state responded to the book hunger with various measures, including the promotion of book exchange and the introduction of the *makulatura* series (a series of shortage books that readers had access to through coupons they received for recycling paper). All these measures, along with the blooming black market, further stimulated the book hunger and subsequently the symbolic status of literature and book-collecting. In this way, it was the shortage itself that initiated the 'book boom', rather than the opposite scenario.<sup>22</sup>

The study of the Soviet reading culture phenomenon sheds light on the formation of a mass and homogeneous reading audience, made possible by a centralised literary system, which controlled canon formation, as well as the publication and distribution of books and monthly literary journals.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, against the state's view of literature as a means for self-improvement and communist inculcation, the reading public formed its own identity and people read for leisure, and most importantly, for social prestige. Readers saw in literature the main option for entertainment, as well as an activity with symbolic status. The significance of the status factor can also be traced in the fetishisation of books and book collections, which shows the transformation of an everyday object to a commodity with high symbolic and material value. In other words, the myth of the 'most well-read nation' in reality reflects the phenomenon of massive readership of selected and ideologically approved literature, which in the late Soviet period acquired a frantic materialistic character. Samizdat (self-published and illegally distributed censored works) and tamizdat (literature illegally sent outside the Soviet Union to be printed there) were a widespread phenomenon indicating the existence of an unofficial literary culture that tried to quench readers' thirst for new ideas, new experiences, and new titles. Still, readers were well-read only by Soviet standards, since they were deprived of a considerable part of domestic literary production and ideologically incompatible foreign literature.<sup>24</sup>

This discussion of the Soviet reading myth illustrates the adaptation and, most importantly, the expansion of literaturocentrism to encompass all segments of society. Book collections, journal subscriptions, and avid readership reflected the elevated status of literature in the Soviet value system. The next step in understanding Soviet reading culture is to examine the mythologisation of authors in the Soviet Union, exploring the cases of state-approved writers whose books comprised the official literary canon, and dissidents who relied on underground dissemination of their work.

### The Soviet Author: Between the Writers' Union and Samizdat

The myth of the pre-revolutionary writer and poet was appropriated and reconstituted in Soviet times. According to Stalin, authors were the 'engineers of the human souls', with an undeniable role in the construction and dissemination of the Soviet ideology.<sup>25</sup> Having already outlined the central role of literature in the Soviet cultural policies, this aphorism underlines the ideological inconsistencies of the policies towards the writers and poets in the USSR. Marx and Lenin supported the demythologisation of discourses and the quest for the historical truth behind them.<sup>26</sup> The initial focus was on the bourgeois myths, but even the revolution was not supposed to be mythologised. Another inconsistency can be found in the distinctive and prominent position of the intelligentsia, owing to its special mission to create communist culture in the otherwise classless Soviet society.

The first and maybe most prominent example of a mythologised writer comes from the early Soviet times: Vladimir Mayakovsky, the famous poet who started his literary career as a prophet of the Russian Revolution and ended it along with his life to become a symbol of Soviet literature. For Boym, the myth of Mayakovsky reflects the pre-revolutionary concept of

the poet's life is a curious blend of German Romantic ideas of national genius and of Russian patriotism; of the European Romantic conception of the unity of the poet's life and art and of the civic tradition of the Russian intelligentsia.<sup>27</sup>

The Russian poet bears the ideals of enlightenment, is a martyr and a saint, a nation-builder and the ideal intellectual. The cult of the poet as a saint and a hero remained unchanged in the Soviet era. By being connected to the revolution, Mayakovsky was recognised as a hero, a poet who successfully measured up to the tradition and managed to serve his mission, as well as to participate actively in the radical transformation of his country. Mayakovsky's case was unique in Russian literary history because he modernised the myth of the writer. The new writer was able to influence and represent political change, to create their own image and legacy and reinforce literature as a force to be reckoned.

In the 1930s, the Soviet leadership made decisive steps towards the exploitation of the author's myth for its own benefit. One of the milestones in Soviet literary history is the rehabilitation of Pushkin in 1937 as national poet. This controversial event accompanied by the celebrations of the 'Pushkin Year' signified the continuation of the pre-revolutionary literature-related discursive practices by the Soviet state. In this way, public celebrations of literature and of writers as nation-builders and ideology-makers were officially embraced by the state. Three years earlier in 1934 the Union of Soviet Writers was established to create the necessary supportive institutional framework for a blooming socialist literature. Members of the Union received higher wages than most Soviet people and 'social and medical benefits that immediately positioned them within the upper-middle class of Soviet society'.<sup>28</sup> Being a writer was both prestigious and beneficial. Nonetheless, the dependent relationship between writers and the state as an outcome of Union membership led them to be 'seen as lackeys and opportunists [...] as mediocre writers at best'.<sup>29</sup>

The state support for the worship and commemoration of writers continued in the post-war period. In 1946, a Nekrasov museum opened in Leningrad; in 1954, the Moscow house of Chekhov was turned to a museum; and in 1971, a Dostoevsky Museum appeared in Leningrad. Moreover, the public worship of writers was not limited to those selected and promoted by the Soviet state.<sup>30</sup> Isaiah Berlin maintained that some banned authors like Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova were so famous that even those people who had not read their works could easily recognise them.<sup>31</sup> In his view, influential dissident writers were being monitored due to their ability to promote ideas that could possibly harm the Soviet Union.<sup>32</sup> Dissident literature was published through samizdat and tamizdat giving recognition to writers both inside the USSR and abroad. In fact, three dissident and exiled writers received the Nobel Prize in Literature — Pasternak in 1958, Solzhenitsyn in 1970, and Brodsky in 1987. Despite the unofficial and underground character of this literature, the writers were still idolised. In fact, political oppression reinforced the myth of the writer and their special position in society. People were already accustomed to a view of authors as tragic figures that have to confront the state and overcome any obstacles in order to serve the Truth and the Word. Referring to the underground literary scene of Leningrad in the 1970s, Josephine von Zitzewitz notes ‘the rapidly evolving myth of the underground poet as a tragic hero: he [she] was the preserver of authentic literary culture at a time when this culture was under acute threat from a hostile environment’.<sup>33</sup> Underground writers tried to create while being in a dialogue with their idols, the great names of the past who lived up to the standards of their unique mission. The efforts of dissident authors like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Vasily Aksyonov were officially re-evaluated, both during Perestroika and, eventually, after the break-up of the USSR, when the Soviet population turned to them for guidance.

The two different literary traditions were created simultaneously, with the underground writers competing with the state-approved Writers Union members for a place in the country’s literary history as the true successors of the pre-revolutionary mythologised authors. The existence and nature of this debate supports the survival of the authorial myth and subsequently of literaturocentrism in the Soviet era.

### **Post-Soviet Russia and the End of Literaturocentrism**

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 brought the Soviet literaturocracy and the long history of literaturocentrism to an end. With the establishment of capitalism as the new economic system, the privatisation of the publishing industry and the discontinuation of financial support to writers led to a rapid transformation of the state-fostered literary field, as well as the underground, dissident scene. For Boris Noordenbos, ‘the political developments of perestroika provided an opportunity to finally break with the pathological social and moral commitment of both official and unofficial literature’.<sup>34</sup> Yet, public discourse mourned the death of the Soviet mass reader and awaited the subsequent death of the Great Russian literature.

Despite the initial shock and the financial crisis that followed the dissolution, literary production quickly adapted to the rules of the market economy. Freed from the ideological doctrines of the past, the character of reading changed from that of an educational activity to a hobby, one of the many available pastimes from which to choose.

Birgit Menzel divides the post-Soviet cultural era into three periods: the first period (1991–99) is characterised by the abrupt decline of reading, the collapse of the Soviet literary system and the rise of popular culture. The end of the state monopoly in publishing allowed the private sector to thrive, but mostly in a chaotic way due to the absence of the appropriate regulations. The number of new titles increased by 30–40%, while the print runs and the number of literary journals plummeted. Popular genres dominated the market, such as detective novels, romance, and fantasy, and Western fiction was imported in high numbers. In the second period (2000–2008), book production skyrocketed with new titles exceeding in numbers those published in Soviet times, but the number of copies continued to drop.<sup>35</sup> All cultural fields showed signs of intense commercialisation with clear focus on profit-making. New literary prizes appeared (Big Book, Natsbest, NOS) appealing to different reading audiences, and the influence of the Russian internet (RuNet) on the literary field was established with the foundation of e-libraries and the increase in internet users. The third period (2008–17) started with the 2008 financial crisis and was characterised by the ‘the re-establishment of ideological and state control of the political leadership as an authoritarian regime’.<sup>36</sup> After taking control of most media outlets, Putin included the promotion of reading in his cultural politics agenda, framing it as an integral part of his nation-building efforts. At the same time, the digital revolution, which has affected reading culture on a global level, is demonstrated by the increasing preference for ebooks, the reduction of bookshops across the country, and the ascent of social reading.

The metamorphosis of mass reading in contemporary Russia has been addressed in length by a study of the Levada Centre published in 2008. On the basis of a national survey that investigated the changes in reading habits, Dubin and Zorkaya reached a number of conclusions regarding the state of literature and the weakening of its social role. First, literaturocentrism was closely connected to the Soviet intelligentsia, which inevitably stepped down as it gradually lost its authoritative place in society. They were representatives of an obsolete system, which was characterised by communist ideologisation, subscription to thick journals, and thirst for repressed and unofficial literature backed by a literaturocentric education. The thirst was quickly quenched in Perestroika and shortly afterwards, thick journals were replaced by glossy magazines and the state quit monitoring what the public read by controlling the production and dissemination of books (at least until the mid-2000s). Second, the disintegration of Soviet society contributed to the loss of confidence in social institutions, including those involved in the promotion of reading. Readers also no longer received organisational support from the state institutions, with one great example being the quick-fading glory of the public libraries, which failed to attract and support readers with their often-outdated collections. However, since 2007 state and non-governmental interest in readership

progressively increased. The Ministry of Culture, along with institutions like the Soros Foundation and the Open Russia Foundation, has actively supported public libraries and various cultural initiatives. For example, the online portal GodLiterature.ru was launched in 2015 by the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications (Rospechat) for the celebration of the Year of Literature but has remained active ever since, organising activities that promote engagement with Russian literature. Third, with the majority of publishing houses being private, the orientation of publishing is, as expected, towards a profitable mass literature. In their quest for profits publishers targeted the different reading audiences and introduced to the promotion of literature various marketing techniques mostly through traditional mass media and social media and supported writers who could fit in this new framework. The publishers' focus is on the literary market of the big cities, neglecting to make even the latest titles available to the large Russian provinces, and consequently widening the gap between the metropolitan centres and the periphery.

It is important to note that the abolition of censorship removed a part of literature's symbolic status, since it ceased being the 'forbidden fruit' and a field where political and ethical boundaries were challenged and redefined. The abandonment of the literaturocentric cultural model also meant that other forms of culture and entertainment could freely develop and contest the traditional dominance of literature. Films, TV-shows,<sup>37</sup> or active engagement with social media not only offer entertainment and amusement but also provide the public with ideals, models, and value systems, a sociocultural function that literature performed in the past. In this way, literature was no longer 'the most prestigious activity, a token of high culture, a self-sufficient and autonomous cultural act'.<sup>38</sup>

In the post-Soviet context, the role of the author and the conditions of writing have also changed. Writers embraced the advent of the capitalist democracy but very soon realised how difficult it is to sustain themselves without state support. The subsidies soon vanished, while the reading public had to face, in the 1990s, the hard economic reality of the transition to the market economy. Buying books was a luxury in the first years after the collapse and then Internet-piracy meant that readers could illegally download most books for free. With no special mission for literature, writers ran the risk of losing their symbolic capital in Russian society. Nonetheless, they were not ready to accept such a possibility. Bradley Gorski studied four cases of Russian authors who responded to the challenges of the new era in their own distinct ways: Boris Akunin with his intellectual detectives as mass literature for highbrow readers; Olga Slavnikova through the strategic pursuit of literary prizes to achieve recognition; Alexei Ivanov with his extra-literary multimedia activities; and Vera Polozkova who created her own poetic audience through online platforms.<sup>39</sup> These different paths to legitimacy suggest the potential replacement of the idealised service to the Truth and the Word with a quest for success and recognition as defined by the newly established book market.<sup>40</sup>

The fall of the USSR coincides with the emergence and expansion of the Internet signifying a new era for mass communication, dissemination of information, and virtual interactions. In RuNet, that is, the Russian-speaking part of cyberspace,

literary websites and communities quickly thrived, providing literature with a new platform for expression and promotion. In 1994, Maksim Moshkov created his renowned and widely popular electronic library ([www.lib.ru](http://www.lib.ru)), where users could download literary works and also act as librarians and upload too. Following that, literary websites proliferated, taking various forms, such as online libraries (ex. the Fundamental Electronic Library of Russian Literature and Folklore), literary portals (ex. [www.stikhi.ru](http://www.stikhi.ru) and [www.proza.ru](http://www.proza.ru)), and literature review sites ([www.livelib.ru](http://www.livelib.ru) and [www.fantlab.ru](http://www.fantlab.ru)), where readers can engage in social reading by sharing their reading experience, and inform themselves about new titles, while authors can get published and reach out to their prospective readers. The abundance of available digitised texts has led to nearly every book published in Russian being found and downloaded for free online.<sup>41</sup> Even though many websites require users to register and pay a fee before downloading a book, especially after the 2014 anti-piracy law, in 2016 80% of readers claimed that they continue to access electronic books for free, often without differentiating between legal and illegal sources.<sup>42</sup>

A significant contribution of RuNet to reading culture has been the formation of a virtual meeting point for Russophone authors and readers regardless of their location. The Web supported the creation of a 'Russian digital readingscape' connecting Russian speakers residing in the metropolitan centres, as well as in the extensive and multi-layered Russian periphery, which includes both remote regions of the country and the Russian-speaking diaspora in the 'Near and Far Abroad'.<sup>43</sup> This global reading network is sustained by the available digital literary content, book-related websites, fora, and virtual events taking place on or being shared through online platforms. Russophone websites with literary content offer migrants an opportunity to interact, debate, and reunite, surpassing the boundaries of diasporic life and establishing a condition of multipresence: 'in this sense we may speak of the Russian Internet as an imaginary geography, including experiences of Diaspora, cultural identities and the spatial concepts that the Internet is'.<sup>44</sup> Even though literaturocentrism ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent shrinking of the reading audience, many Russian speakers continue to read and talk about Russian literature, utilising the endless possibilities of digital media. In this framework, diasporic readers try to carry on a strong literary tradition and engage in practices that invoke themes pertaining to the literaturocentric period when evaluating their reading experience or speaking about the authors.

### Exporting Literaturocentrism

The influence of literaturocentrism has not been limited by state borders. Soviet cultural diplomacy employed Russian literature as an instrument of soft power early in the post-Second World War era, principally utilising the symbolic capital of acclaimed writers.<sup>45</sup> Frederick Barghoorn studied the Soviet cultural exchanges with foreign countries, which showed that the 'culture-conscious Soviet regime' made considerable efforts to promote its culture abroad.<sup>46</sup> Literature had a significant place in these efforts and 'the international political struggle' in general

that was expected to be enhanced as the international reach of Soviet literature was growing and was expected to continue expanding.<sup>47</sup> By investing in cultural diplomats, the Soviet Union hoped to attract sympathisers to its political mission by expanding its influence beyond the marginalised left-wing intellectuals. The public figures that were chosen to act as cultural diplomats included theatre and dancing ensembles, professional athletes, cosmonauts, and writers.

One such diplomat was the Soviet writer Konstantin Fedin (1892–1975), who joined the unofficial cultural diplomatic mission in 1949. Fedin had demonstrated his loyalty to the communist party and possessed the necessary ‘symbolic capital — authority, fame, wide network of contacts abroad’ that would guarantee the success of his diplomatic activities.<sup>48</sup> Fedin’s main diplomatic activity constituted frequent trips to participate in conferences and meetings with international organisations and foreign political actors, partake in cultural events and celebrations, and make presentations about world politics. The writer was regularly assigned exhausting, multi-day trips to both socialist and Western countries without the option to refuse. Returning from the diplomatic expeditions, Fedin had to report on the events that he attended and to publish articles informing his audience about his travel experience abroad. Overall, each delegate writer bore the responsibility to strengthen the relations between USSR and the visited countries, and as a result, the authors personally symbolised liaisons with particular countries.

Another project of Soviet cultural statecraft that gave prominence to writers and projected literaturocentrism was the International Lenin Prize for Strengthening Peace Among Peoples, which was founded in 1949 as the International Stalin Prize but was renamed seven years later under the de-Stalinisation reforms. The international prize was awarded annually to multiple recipients who promoted world peace. Breaking with the general rules of Soviet cultural diplomacy, the award was also given to a number of activists and public figures with significant contributions to peace-making regardless of their political loyalties. Offering an alternative to the Nobel Prize in Literature, among the recipients of the prize almost every year were writers and poets from various countries. Famous laureates included Pablo Neruda, Miguel Ángel Asturias, James Aldridge, and Hervé Bazin. Oksana Nagornaya argues that the Soviet state instrumentalised the international reputation of the recipients to support its ‘foreign policy positions in a particular region of the world and to confirm the peaceful nature of socialist initiatives or the position of a particular leader’.<sup>49</sup> The USSR’s image-making efforts through the awards were also visible within the country in the form of publications and photographs that proclaimed the existence of prominent supporters around the world.

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, some Western countries also approached Russian literature on a cultural statecraft level by offering support to exiled writers and dissidents and assisting the publication of banned literary works. One famous example was the publication of *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak in Italy in 1957, for which he received the Nobel Prize in Literature the following year. Dissident literature offered an opportunity to damage the USSR’s world reputation since it revealed a different side to the promoted image regarding the living and political

conditions within the country. If cultural statecraft is defined as a state's efforts 'to develop and exercise power based [...] on persuasion and attraction and [...] backed by means of information, values, framing, and image-building',<sup>50</sup> the promotion of dissident literature and the employment in later years of famous exiled writers can be utilised to counteract a country's cultural diplomacy strategies. Pasternak's novel was not the only case when the Swedish Academy awarded oppositional literature to criticise the Soviet regime. In fact, among the five Russian/Soviet Nobel laureates, only Mikhail Sholokhov (1965) was aligned with the communist party: Ivan Bunin (1933) was a renowned representative of Russian émigré culture; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1970) was forced into exile in 1974 and Joseph Brodsky (1987) had been expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. Even Svetlana Alexievich (2015), the most recent Russophone Nobel Laureate, has been very critical of the USSR and post-communist Russia.

Coming into power in 2000, Putin aimed at the restoration of Russia's place in world affairs, highlighting the role of diplomacy and cultural statecraft as responses to the remains of the Cold War Western rhetoric. Having identified that foreign leaders and audiences are well disposed to Russian culture, Putin willingly instrumentalised it for image-making purposes.<sup>51</sup> Putin successfully approached Solzhenitsyn and sought his support, 'firstly, to assure the West that Russia had broken with its communist past for good; and secondly, to assure the Russian citizenry that post-Soviet Russia possessed moral and cultural legitimacy'.<sup>52</sup> Even after Solzhenitsyn's death in 2008, the Russian government still regards the anti-communist writer as one of its patron saints and treats him as such. A similar endeavour has been the instrumentalisation of Tolstoy's legacy and global reputation in various ways. Putin recruited as his adviser on cultural affairs Vladimir Tolstoy, a great-grandson of the famous writer and director of the State Tolstoy Museum-Estate at Yasnaya Polyana.

The recruitment of Solzhenitsyn and one of Tolstoy's descendants showcases Putin's effort to legitimise his nationalistic worldview and political choices. For example, in the case of Crimea's annexation in 2014, Solzhenitsyn was cited in support of Russia's position.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, Vladimir Tolstoy, in an interview for the *New York Times*, drew on his forebear's involvement in the Crimean War (1854–55) and stated, 'Of course, as a descendant of the Russian officer Leo Tolstoy, I cannot have any other attitude toward that [than being supportive]'.<sup>54</sup> Tolstoy's work was also chosen as the representative of nineteenth-century Russian culture for the global mega-event, the opening ceremony of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. A scene from the world-famous novel *War and Peace* was the subject of a ballet that was performed at the opening ceremony. According to Sarah Hudspith, 'the ceremony, following a typical paradigm for Olympic opening ceremonies, represents a showcase of how Russia selects and packages its cultural, historical and technological achievements, in order to create a certain image of Russia for international consumption'.<sup>55</sup> In this account, *War and Peace*, one of the most famous Russian novels selectively retold through a ballet performance, was presented as one of Russia's monumental contributions to European and world culture, as a proof of

the country's longstanding greatness and ongoing literaturocentrism. In the closing ceremony, Tolstoy appeared working on his desk alongside other renowned writers and poets, such as Dostoyevsky, Akhmatova, Pushkin, and Turgenev, all played by actors. The writers' desks were placed in a circle and surrounded by a changing photo montage with eleven more authors, while in the centre an ensemble of ninety-six librarians danced. Both Olympic ceremonies endeavoured to remind international audiences of the Russian contributions to world culture, as well as to establish literature as part of the Russian brand.

For the successful promotion of Russian culture, Putin founded in 2007 the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) Foundation and a year later the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, known as Rossotrudnichestvo. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, on the one hand, focuses on the promotion of Russian as both a native and a foreign language providing language classes, while Rossotrudnichestvo aims to mobilise Russian speakers abroad through its cultural programme. Both organisations organise literary events as part of their cultural activities, but only the 'Read Russia' project has its sole mission to promote contemporary and classic Russian literature and Russian book culture to foreign audiences. Established in 2011, Read Russia is based in New York, London and Moscow and is supported by the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications and coordinated jointly by the Institute for Literary Translation (Moscow) and the Presidential Centre of Boris Yeltsin. According to Peter Kaufman, who is responsible for the project's activities in the USA, the project is an 'effort to make up for lost time', an opportunity for international audiences 'to learn a little about Russia and to think about some of the things Russians think about when they think about literature'.<sup>56</sup> Yevgeny Reznichenko, the Executive Director of the Institute of Translation, supported literature's special place in Russian culture and, therefore, its ability to represent what Russia stands for citing the contemporary Russian writer Eugene Vodolazkin:<sup>57</sup>

If you want to learn more about Russia, read its literature. A literary work is created by a writer primarily for their people, and this is the guarantee of the sincerity of this text. Literature is not written for export. [...] True literature quietly indicates the spiritual state of a particular society. But at their best, these testimonies take on a universal meaning.

Read Russia implements an annual programme of events and actions that, for Yevgeny Reznichenko, aims at developing international humanitarian cooperation and establishing business and personal contacts between translators, publishers, and literary agents outside Russia. The organisers denied the project's contribution to the instrumentalisation of Russian literature for political reasons. Reznichenko, on the one hand, admitted that:

Our politicians, like politicians in any other country in the world, try to use successful writers for their own purposes, but it does not work very well — unfortunately, literature doesn't have the influence it used to have on Russian/Soviet life, for example, in the 60s or in the '80s–'90s.

Kaufman, on the other hand, maintained that, a ‘soulless, unemotional, instrumental view of literature’ is highly unlikely ‘because of the importance of literature to anyone who has ever grown up in Russia’. Russian literaturocentrism not only defines the mission of the project but is also used by the organisers to dispel all doubts about the political character of its activities.

The project has been largely oriented towards Western reading audiences, and particularly the US, the UK, France, and Germany. However, during my fieldwork at the London Book Fairs 2018 and 2019, I observed that Read Russia endeavours to reach out not only to the local English-speaking public but also to the Russophone diasporic community in London, thus straying from its official mission. By mobilising the diaspora, the project aspires to enhance the Russian presence abroad and thereby increase its political influence. Reznichenko confirmed my observations that even the anglophone events are mainly attended by Russians speakers without admitting that this is their intention: ‘The writers sometimes complain that only former Muscovites and Petersburgers come to meet them in the United States, France, Great Britain, not to mention Israel — “so we didn’t need to travel that far”.’ According to Kaufman, the Read Russia events are not planned according to a certain political strategy that, for example, intentionally tries to target and mobilise the Russophone audience:

Wherever you see a sense of strategy, I would say chalk it up and ask questions instead about how much time people have to organise something, how important it is to have a photograph of a room that’s full, how much money people have, who the partners are, who the speakers are and with what language they are comfortable.

By emphasising the practical difficulties, Kaufman aimed to devalue any observations stemming from Read Russia’s activities that could reveal a contradiction between the project’s proclaimed mission and its actual practice. Still, Read Russia’s activities demonstrate another aspect of literaturocentrism as a soft power tool, with the potential to influence the relationship between Russia and the Russophone diaspora.

## Conclusion

Going back to the seventeenth century, the history of Russian literaturocentrism follows the cultural developments and political changes of each era. The gradual formation of an intelligentsia enriched the multi-layered myth with the idolisation of authors as the creators of the Word, while the emergence of nationalism and national identities in the nineteenth century demonstrated literature’s potential to influence a population’s cultural imagination. In the same period, the world-famous Russian literary masterpieces were published establishing literature as the centrepiece of Russian culture. The Soviet era is a key period for the development of this cultural discourse, when a literature-centric model of culture was developed involving a centrally organised system that promoted readership and monitored the production and dissemination of literary works. Literaturocentrism was updated with the heroisation of writers and the myth of the most well-read nation.

Following the collapse of the USSR, literaturocentrism abruptly ended. As a result, literary production, on the one hand, was liberated from the political ideologies of the past, while on the other, it was obliged to obey the rules of a market economy oriented to financial success. Without the Soviet cultural policies, the reading public diminished considerably, and the writers had to adapt to the new social conditions. At the same time, the arrival of RuNet permitted the effortless distribution of classic and contemporary Russian literature and the proliferation of online platforms for social reading practices, which led to the formation of a global Russophone network of readers. The survival of literaturocentrism in the diaspora is also supported by institutions that belong to the Russian soft power apparatus. Russian cultural diplomacy in the field of literature relies heavily on the appeal of its most famous writers and their connections to different historical eras, creating a narrative of historical continuity and capitalising on their symbolic capital and their place in world culture. In relation to the diaspora, these cultural institutions promote literature produced in Russia, organise literary events and lectures with Russia-based writers, and support the activities of Russophone book clubs. However, the Read Russia organisers defend the non-political character of the project and its ideological independence from the Russian authorities who aim at the mobilisation of the Russian-speaking diaspora.

### Notes to Chapter 1

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Jonathan Cape, [1957] 1972), p. 143.
2. Berg, p. 188.
3. Vadim Linetsky, 'Nuzhen Li Mat Russkoy Proze? [Does the Russian Prose Need a Checkmate?]', *Vestnik novoi literaturoi*, 5–6 (1991), pp. 142–48 (p. 146).
4. Richard Freeborn, Georgette Donchin, and N. J. Anning, *Russian Literary Attitudes from Pushkin to Solzhenitsyn* (Macmillan, 1976), p. 1.
5. Ivan Kondakov, 'Po tu storonu slova [On the Other Side of the Word]', *Voprosy literatury*, 5 (2008), pp. 5–44 (p. 8).
6. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 168.
7. Andrew Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 12.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
9. Debreczeny also argues that the making of Pushkin's myth is connected to the country's search for a national identity and delves into the conditions and periods of its formation. See Paul Debreczeny, *Social Functions of Literature: Alexander Pushkin and Russian Culture* (Stanford University Press, 1997).
10. Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 4.
11. In the period from 1879 to 1914 four different types of schools operated in the Russian empire: the zemstvo schools, the peasant schools of literacy, the church parish schools and the Ministry of Education schools.
12. That was the case in most societies across the world with regard to highbrow literature. See Wendy Griswold, Elizabeth Lenaghan, and Michelle Naffziger, 'Readers as Audiences', in *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, ed. by Virginia Nightingale (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 19–40.
13. Lubki (the plural of lubok) are a form of Russian folk art and popular literature that emerged in the seventeenth century, characterised by woodcut or lithographic prints featuring colourful, often humorous illustrations accompanied by brief narratives or captions.

14. Brooks, pp. 215–16.
15. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, p. 21.
16. Wachtel, pp. 27–28.
17. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, p. 14.
18. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, pp. 38–39.
19. Birgit Menzel, 'From Print to Pixel: Reading in the Perestroika, Post-Soviet, and Present Eras, 1986–2017', in *Reading Russia: A History of Reading in Modern Russia*, ed. by Raffaella Vassena and Damiano Rebecchini (Ledizioni, 2020), pp. 323–64.
20. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, p. 91.
21. Wachtel, p. 35.
22. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, p. 64.
23. Menzel, p. 325.
24. Valeria D. Stelmakh, 'Reading in Post-Soviet Russia', *Libraries and Culture*, 33.1 (1998), pp. 105–12 (p. 106).
25. Wachtel, p. 28.
26. Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 123.
27. Boym, p. 120.
28. John G. Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union* (I. B. Tauris, 1990), p. 5.
29. Wachtel, p. 34.
30. The public expressions of worship were also prominent in the late Soviet years. Boym recounts the public reaction to the death of the Soviet bard Vladimir Vysotsky in 1980 that 'provoked the largest spontaneous demonstration in Moscow since the death of Stalin' (p. 120).
31. Isaiah Berlin, *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism*, ed. by Henry Hardy (Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 56.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 11. Nadezhda Mandelstam said about the USSR: 'Poetry is respected only in this country. People are killed for it.' See Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against Hope: A Memoir* (Atheneum, 1970), p. 159.
33. Josephine von Zitzewitz, '"Self-Canonisation as a Way into the Canon": The Case of the Leningrad Underground"', *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, 31 (2017), pp. 197–228 (p. 201).
34. Boris Noordenbos, *Post-Soviet Literature and the Search for a Russian Identity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 59.
35. The new titles doubled compared to the previous decade, but the print runs fell by over 25%. Still, in this period 54% of the adult Russian population continued to read books casually, with over 15% reading daily. See Boris Dubin and Nataliya Zorkaya, *Chteniiye v Rossii: tendentsii i problemy* [Reading in Russia: Trends and Problems] (Mezhregional'nyy tsentr bibliotekhnogo sotrudnichestva, 2008), pp. 21–22.
36. Menzel, p. 342.
37. According to Knulst and Kraaykamp, who studied the decline in reading in the Netherlands between 1955 and 1995, 'television viewing is the predominant rival of leisure reading'. See Wim Knulst and Gerbert Kraaykamp, 'Trends in Leisure Reading: Forty Years of Research on Reading in the Netherlands', *Poetics*, 26.1 (1998), pp. 21–41 (p. 39). In the case of Russia, although there were five state-controlled television channels in the Soviet Union (but not all of them were available across the country), it was after the dissolution that the production of TV shows thrived in the numerous national and private channels. See Elena Vartanova and Yassen Zassoursky, 'Television in Russia: Is the Concept of PSB Relevant?', in *Broadcasting and Convergence: New Articulations of the Public Service Remit*, ed. by Gregory F. Lowe and Taisto Hujanen (NORDICOM, 2003), pp. 93–108.
38. Stelmakh, p. 106.
39. Bradley A. Gorski, 'Authors of Success: Cultural Capitalism and Literary Evolution in Contemporary Russia' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 2018).
40. Leypoldt argues that 'Writers of high ambition have always found the relationship between literary authority and economic success rather tense, even in the nineteenth century, the period often identified with literature's financial independence.' See Günter Leypoldt, 'Spatial

- Reading: Evaluative Frameworks and the Making of Literary Authority', *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 9 (2020), pp. 150–76 (pp. 159–60) <<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41290-020-00107-w>>.
41. Eugene Gorny, 'A Creative History of the Russian Internet' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2006), p. 184.
  42. Birgitte B. Pristed, 'Social Reading in Contemporary Russia', in *Reading Russia*, ed. by Vassena and Rebecchini, pp. 407–32 (p. 412).
  43. Henrike Schmidt, 'Russian Literature on the Internet: From Hypertext to Fairytale', in *Digital Russia: The Language, Culture and Politics of New Media Communication*, ed. by Michael Gorham, Ingunn Lunde, and Martin Paulsen (Routledge, 2014), pp. 177–93; Henrike Schmidt, 'Virtual Shelves. Virtual Selves: Russian Digital Readingscapes as Re/Sources of Content and Identification', in *Reading Russia*, ed. by Vassena and Rebecchini, pp. 365–406.
  44. Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, and Nils Zurawski, 'Virtual (Re)Unification? Diasporic Cultures on the Russian Internet', in *Control + Shift: Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet*, ed. by Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, and Natalja Konradova (Books on Demand, 2006), pp. 120–46 (p. 130).
  45. For a more detailed discussion on the role of literature in Russian cultural diplomacy, see Angelos Theocharis, 'Russian literature will fix everything', in *Russia's Cultural Statecraft*, ed. by Tuomas Forsberg and Sirke Mäkinen, Studies in Contemporary Russia (London, New York NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), pp. 98–119.
  46. Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton University Press, 1960).
  47. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
  48. Oksana S. Nagornaya and Tatiana Raeva, 'Stalinskiye pisateli v kogorte poslov sovetskoy kul'tury: keis Konstantina Fedina [Stalinist writers in the cohort of Soviet cultural ambassadors: the case of Konstantin Fedin]', in *Sovetskaya kul'turnaya diplomatiya v usloviyah Kholodnoi voiny, 1945–1989: kollektivnaya monografiya [Soviet Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War, 1945–1989: A Collective Monograph]*, ed. by Oksana S. Nagornaya (ROSSPĖN, 2018), pp. 349–62 (p. 350).
  49. Oksana S. Nagornaya, 'Laureaty mezhdunarodnykh Leninskikh premiy mira v orbite interesov sovetskoy kul'turnoy diplomatii [Laureates of the International Lenin Peace Prizes in the Orbit of Interests of Soviet Cultural Diplomacy]', in *Sovetskaya kul'turnaya diplomatiya v usloviyah Kholodnoi voiny, 1945–1989: kollektivnaya monografiya [Soviet Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War, 1945–1989: A Collective Monograph]*, ed. by Nagornaya, pp. 363–67 (p. 366).
  50. Tuomas Forsberg and Hanna Smith, 'Russian Cultural Statecraft in the Eurasian Space', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 63.3 (2016), pp. 129–34 (pp. 129–30).
  51. Even scholars who are highly critical of Russian imperialism regard positively the classic Russian cultural production. Grigas recognises the potential of Russian high culture, which 'with its classic authors, composers, and choreographers, remains well regarded in most parts of the world and could be a legitimate and effective component of the country's soft power'. See Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (Yale University Press, 2016), p. 30.
  52. Peter Rollberg, 'Solzhenitsyn's Embattled Legacy', *Russian Analytical Digest (RAD)*, 228 (2018), pp. 6–9 (p. 7) <<https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000309181>>.
  53. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
  54. Rachel Donadio, 'In Putin's Nationalist Russia, a Tolstoy as Cultural Diplomat', *The New York Times*, 21 March 2015 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/21/books/in-putins-nationalist-russia-a-tolstoy-as-cultural-diplomat.html>> [accessed 18 October 2019].
  55. Sarah Hudspith, 'Lev Tolstoy and Contemporary Russian Cultural Policy: Negotiating the Canon', in *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, ed. by Vlad Strukov and Sarah Hudspith (Routledge, 2019), pp. 42–67 (p. 51).
  56. Liesl Schillinger, 'The Rise of Bulgakov Diplomacy', *Foreign Policy* (2015) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/08/31/the-rise-of-bulgakov-diplomacy-russian-literature-vladimir-putin-read-russia/>>.
  57. I interviewed Kaufman and Reznichenko for the purposes of this research. Both respondents received my questions beforehand as well as the necessary consent forms. Reznichenko chose to write his answers to my questions, while Kaufman preferred an oral interview.

## CHAPTER 2



# Diasporic Readers and the Waterstones Russian Book Club

Russian speakers in Britain had a variety of options for engaging with Russophone literature up until February 2022. Cultural organisations promoted literary events targeting both general and diasporic audiences, such as book festivals and fairs, meet-the-author events, and book presentations. Community groups and grassroots initiatives organised local book clubs, poetry meetings, and children's poetry reading competitions. Language schools introduced Russian-speaking children to culture and literature, while bookshops catered to readers of all ages. Several cultural organisations in London, including Pushkin House, the Russia Culture House (Rossotrudnichestvo's office in central London) and the Anglo-Russian Culture Club (ARCC),<sup>1</sup> regularly held literary events. Meanwhile, community book clubs represented a grassroots approach to readership and engagement with Russophone literature, shaped by the interests, needs, and priorities of their members.

When I started scouting for active Russophone communities, diasporic festivals, and cultural initiatives, I quickly discovered a vibrant Russophone diasporic literary scene in London. Among the various community initiatives, the Waterstones Russian Book Club stood out, boasting 500 members on Facebook in less than a year since its establishment. After monitoring the WRBC Facebook group for a few weeks, I reached out to Katya, the book club moderator, in February 2018 to introduce myself and request permission to join one of their meetings. Following a warm welcome from Katya, I decided to attend the next book club meeting to learn more about its activities. Katya advised me to write an introductory Facebook post in March 2018 before my first visit.

The lukewarm welcome I received indicated initial resistance from certain book club members. While one member initially offered to assist with my research in response to the post, Oksana<sup>2</sup> expressed concern about my presence at the WRBC meetings and the club's shift from a community literary space to a venue for promoting commercial activities: 'Well, I don't know anymore — mates reach out with their books and research, [and] I hope we don't also see at the meetings people doing network marketing.' Joking with Oksana about her suspicions, Mark added: 'Damn, I've already invited Jehovah's Witnesses.' Even though I was not 'pushing' myself into the group or attempting to convert its members, my presence was compared to that of uninvited and unwelcome visitors, casting me

as an intruder. Fortunately, the WRBC moderator had already agreed to support me and introduced me at the March 2018 meeting as a guest of the club. As Laura Adams observes, 'being a guest means that people will do things for you, give you what you need and see that you are comfortable'.<sup>3</sup> Katya introduced me to potential respondents, explained why I needed to record the book discussion, and, at the end of the meeting, she checked if there was anything else she could do to help.

The moderator's support did not instantly translate into trust from the WRBC members, as they continued to refer to me as a spy during the first few months of my participation in the meetings. Ethnographers are often labelled as spies by research participants as they navigate their fieldwork roles.<sup>4</sup> This characterisation marked my position as an intruder and also 'showed that book group members were interpreting me just as I was interpreting them [...] trying to control my behavior and interpretations of them'.<sup>5</sup> In this context, I was repeatedly asked by attendees what kind of notes I was taking and why I continued to attend the gatherings. Language also posed a barrier to establishing rapport with the readers. Unlike other researchers who have previously studied the Russophone community in the UK,<sup>6</sup> I am not a native Russian speaker or a bearer of post-Soviet cultural heritage. Regardless of my migrant status, I was an outsider when I entered the field and attempted to integrate into the WRBC group. Having presented myself as a non-native speaker, some members assumed that I was not in a position to fully understand discussions in Russian and would speak to me in English. This attitude started to change as I began conducting interviews, chatting with them, or contributing to the book discussions, which demonstrated to the participants that I had the necessary language competence and familiarity with both Soviet and Russian cultural contexts.

The following months, the atmosphere progressively eased and the WRBC members became very friendly and supportive. Personal relationships facilitate the study of a community and its social order on the condition that the researcher deals with potential bias through self-reflection. However, the 'guest contract' has its limits.<sup>7</sup> In March 2019, the book club hosted the invitation-only event 'Breakfast with Guzel Yakhina'. Contrary to my previous experience, I struggled to convince the moderator to allow me to attend since the event was branded as strictly female. Elizabeth Long admits that it is challenging for a male researcher to get access to a female reading group,<sup>8</sup> and even though the WRBC was a mixed group, this particular event was gendered. The new 'clause' of our contract specified that I could only observe while sitting as far from the table as possible and not participate in the discussion. Later, in May 2020, I posted again on Facebook requesting the group's consent to use a picture from the pandemic Zoom meetings. In this instance, the WRBC members responded very warmly, wishing me luck with my research, yet Sofia, one of my respondents, asked me to write 'the truth and only the truth'. I replied to this comment by informing her that I would make a copy of my book available to the group. Sofia's request for a truthful depiction can be interpreted as an effort to control the content of the research output through the expectation of reciprocity towards the generous host.

Painting a picture of a book club requires presenting its meetings, a typology of its members, and an overview of the book selection process. Each group forms a different space for shared reading and collective interpretation, which, in a diasporic context, is strongly influenced by the negotiation processes of transnational life.<sup>9</sup> DeNel Rehberg Sedo views book clubs as small communities with their own culture, norms, and practices, which reflect their history and the type of bonds between the members.<sup>10</sup> For Long, investigating the motivation behind establishing or joining a reading group and determining its programme reveals important aspects of the members' cultural and social identities, as well as their desire for solidarity with like-minded peers. These efforts for cultural and social definition are also reflected in the organisational structure of each book club and especially its decision on 'when and where to meet, how to handle membership (recruitment, conflicts, and departures), how to select what the group will read, and how to organise the discussion'.<sup>11</sup> Since the presentation of the book club comes from a researcher external to the community, the discussion in the following sections is supplemented by interviews with WRBC members, who offer their own perspectives on diasporic membership and community literary practices.

### A Typical Meeting

The description of a typical WRBC meeting draws on an ethnographic narrative of the first event I attended in March 2018. The book club used to meet at 19:00 on the first Monday of each month. Coming up the stairs to the mezzanine floor of Waterstones Piccadilly, the participants would meet in its most spacious corner, a niche reserved for this purpose. Surrounded by three walls and a short glass balustrade, the reserved spot intended to offer to the attendees as much privacy as possible. It also guarantees accessibility to the public and a welcoming feeling for prospective members. Like most cafés of this kind, the mezzanine café was rather noisy, which required added concentration in order for the WRBC members to remain focused on any discussion. The decoration of the walls was simple: a few shelves with indoor plants, various coffee-table art books, photography books and magazines.

A meeting usually attracted twenty-five to thirty members, the majority of them being females between 40 and 65 years old. In contrast to other book clubs, the readers did not bring copies of the month's book with them. Instead, the coordinator would usually bring a hard copy that was passed around the members. They would observe it for a couple of minutes and then pass it on to the next person. Even when Waterstones housed the Russian Bookshop, it rarely had the book under discussion, so the only option for readers was to order the novels online with delivery from Russia. Still, the WRBC members read almost exclusively eBooks, which are available at a small cost from online Russophone libraries or for free on pirate websites. Some members would come early to the meetings to chat with the moderator and their friends, but the majority arrived at the start time or shortly afterward. The latecomers sat at the end of the table, relatively far from

the centre of the discussion. Everyone who came greeted those they knew, often starting with the moderator, and then mingled with the group. They might order food or coffee, but only if they came early enough. I did not sit in the same place every time; although by coming early, I could often choose where to sit. For me, it was essential to sit somewhere where I would be able to count the participants, look around, take notes, and observe.

My first and lasting impression from the WRBC gatherings was that of a welcoming, friendly, and informal environment. The moderator made a start by explaining the structure of the meeting that developed over time:

Usually, the meeting is held on autopilot. Since new faces appear every time, a general introduction like ‘I liked it’, ‘I didn’t like it’, or ‘I read it to the end’ provides a first opportunity for everyone to participate and introduce themselves. It also gives me the opportunity to understand the group better because, as the moderator, I need to include everyone a little bit, even those who read only a little.

Everyone would get to talk briefly in a circle, introduce themselves, and share their reading experience. Then, those who had actually read the whole book or at least a significant part of it took a piece of paper with one question on it, prepared by the moderator. The number of questions varied from twenty to thirty, and sometimes the moderator would draw on the discussion and ask a couple more questions tailored to the recurring themes. In any case, the questions were rarely exhausted, although they tried to answer the majority of them orally. By preparing the questions, the moderator provided a formal but not inflexible framework for the book discussion. The questions were always content-related, yet their aim was to open up a broader historical, political, or cultural dialogue. The participants were welcome to pose their own questions to the group, changing the course of the discussion. Those who did not read the book — and there was always a number of people who hadn’t — were not excluded from the discussion. They could still intervene and share their thoughts and opinions. Nevertheless, there were always a few participants who remained uninvolved until the end of the meeting. Whether they had read the book or not, the members often chatted about book-related or other issues, formed small sub-groups with their friends, and occasionally the moderator had to raise her voice to bring them back to order. At the end of the two-hour meeting, the discussion closed with a short ‘wrap-up’ led by the moderator, during which they discussed possible future books, nominated some for the next discussion, and shared information about other, mostly Russophone, cultural events. The last part was less structured than the previous sections, as the members took the floor without formalities, while others promptly left to return home.

### Membership Types

As the coordinator told me, 'We accept everyone', and for that reason, there is no admission fee and no requirements for membership. From my experience of the meetings, everyone was accepted even if they had not read the book of the month, and the only requirement was that they present themselves during the first part of the discussion. Therefore, fluency in Russian is required, although no one was asked to participate in the book talk if they did not want to. Departures are also voluntary. I further asked the coordinator to give me the typical profile of a WRBC member, and she answered with hesitation:

It is difficult to say, because it is probably one of the few clubs where there is no specific profile. It changes with the book. At different times, I met someone, talked to them, and then a wave of new members followed. For example, Zhenya came, and then a whole wave of young guys joined because we are not reading only women's novels. We have a very dynamic selection of books. We do not set limits; it might be science fiction, detective, adventure, etc. So, the profile here changes with the book. When we read Akunin's detective novel, *The Diamond Chariot*, 40% of the attendees were men because it was interesting to read. Yes, they all came.

The ever-changing landscape of attendees underlines the distinction between the regular core members of the book club and the intermittent ones, who attend only if the book of the month interests them (see Table 2.1). These two membership categories translate into different levels of involvement. Taking into consideration the constant rotation of genres, the intermittent members remain involved by following the Facebook group and voting for the books of their choice. The rotation of genres keeps the regulars motivated and willing to attend every single meeting. In addition to these two types of membership, I have identified three more. The first type is the 'dilettantes' and by that, I refer to members who participate in the book talk although they rarely read the book of the month. Even though he is not the only one, a male member of the WRBC was particularly notorious for this behaviour. He vigorously participated in the discussion and he was often called out for not having read the book on which he expressed his opinion. Another category of members is the 'lurkers', who regularly come to the meetings but never participate. Looking at online fora, Nancy Baym defined 'lurker, as the person who reads but never posts',<sup>12</sup> and whose silence could be ascribed to a variety of reasons, but mainly to the 'feel[ing that] they do not need to post because they get what they need' by reading.<sup>13</sup> As Barbara Fister maintained, membership of online book groups can be 'an important part of the lives of even those who are invisible participants' like the lurkers.<sup>14</sup> Still, I witnessed a couple of cases when a lurker won a quiz and was at the centre of the attention for the rest of the meeting but returned to the usual position in the next gathering.

TABLE. 2.1. Types of membership.

<i>Types</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Regular attendance</i>	<i>Active participation</i>	<i>Diaspora status</i>	<i>Read the book?</i>
Regulars	54	Yes	Yes	Yes	Usually
Intermittents	21	No	Usually	Yes	Yes
Dilettantes	8	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Lurkers	13	Yes	No	Yes	Usually
Peripherals	4	Yes	Occasionally	No	Usually

The last category refers to the non-diaspora members of the WRBC. In this category, I managed to place only one member, an Italian woman in her thirties who lives and works in London. Laura consistently attended the book club meetings from its first year. It was easy for me to spot her quickly due to her Italian accent, although she is quite fluent in Russian. Laura describes her experience as a WRBC member in the following way:

At the book club, I felt very welcomed from the very beginning. All the ladies were surprised and pleased that an Italian wanted to join them. When I started attending, I found a very friendly, diverse, and stimulating group of people. Even though the ‘core group’ consisted of friends who had known each other for decades, they were very welcoming to any new member and didn’t make others feel excluded. They made me feel part of something, a feeling so rare to experience here in London, where people tend to ignore each other, and relationships are often only superficial (at least, that’s been my personal experience here). It’s extremely difficult to build close relationships with locals.

In her account, Laura stresses the sense of community and belonging that she experiences as a book club member despite speaking Russian as a foreign language. New members are welcome and her status as Other did not prevent her from becoming an equal member. Hence, I observed that she often chose to stay away from the spotlight, probably due to this status, of which she was discreetly reminded from time to time through comments challenging her language skills (‘Did you understand the question?’, ‘Would you like us to repeat?’) or a special or ‘differential’ treatment. I noticed this barrier between her and the rest of the members on several occasions. One of the most representative instances occurred in April 2018 during a quiz, when she and I hesitated to join one of the teams. The coordinator asked us to join the team of one of her closest friends who was happy to have us, but quickly wondered if we could understand the rules and requirements. We both confirmed that we could, but this comment apparently intimidated us, and our actual involvement in the game was limited. In the interview, Katya confirmed Laura’s peripheral membership: ‘Laura, for example, I’m sure she has other thoughts, other emotions in relation to others. The fact that she did not live there sort of takes away a part of the discussion, the possibility of it.’

The coordinator drew a line between Laura and the rest of the members, emphasising that it is not the language but the lack of necessary cultural experiences that precludes her from understanding the books in the same way as the others. The shared (post) Soviet cultural heritage is ‘the background, the basis’<sup>15</sup> for the book

talk at the WRBC, but also defines ingroup sameness and otherness. Still, Laura, myself, and any other non-native speaker were welcome to join this Russophone community book club if they were interested in the topics of discussion, but their membership would unavoidably have a peripheral character.

Looking at the statistics of the book club, the first year (March 2017 to March 2018), the WRBC had 68 active members, of whom 17 were males. With an average attendance of 25 members, it is clear that less than half participate in every meeting. Still, it is an impressive number for a book club.<sup>16</sup> As far as the members' age is concerned, there are three groups: in the first one, which is the smallest, we find members from 28 to 38 (9%); most members belong to the second group with ages between 39 and 55 (65%), and the third but still significant group with members up to 70 years old (26%). Although the moderator reported in our interview that men constitute 20–25% of the participants in each meeting, I observed an instability in male membership, often related to the book genre.<sup>17</sup>

The Facebook group illustrates other aspects of book club membership. In the pre-pandemic era, the Facebook group members were easily distinguished from the active members attending the face-to-face meetings, and the Facebook page mostly had an informative character, with most posts made by the coordinator. The members' activity on the page was usually limited to comments and reactions to pictures and videos uploaded from the sessions, as well as book proposals, literary events, and articles posted. The online activity of the 'offline regulars' (a group of 18 to 20 members) was considerably higher than that of the exclusively online WRBC members, including voting for the next month's book, in which the latter rarely participated. At the same time, some of the offline regulars were not Facebook users and relied on personal communication with the moderator or the WRBC WhatsApp group. As far as the place of residence is concerned, Facebook members came from the countries and cities listed in Table 2.2.<sup>18</sup>

TABLE. 2.2. Distribution of WRBC members (April 2019).

<i>Top Countries</i>		<i>Top Cities/Towns</i>	
UK	706	London, UK	575
Russia	38	Moscow, Russia	26
Ukraine	18	Manchester, UK	8
Ireland	8	Mykolayiv, Ukraine	7
USA	7	Reading, UK	6
Belarus	6	Minsk, Belarus	6
Spain	6	St Petersburg, Russia	6
Latvia	5	Northampton, UK	5
Israel	5	Kyiv, Ukraine	4
Germany	2	Riga, Latvia	4

As expected, London is at the top of the 'cities' list, representing the main pool for Russophone readers willing to join the WRBC. Some other British cities are also present on the list, such as Manchester, Reading, and Northampton. What is surprising is the number of online WRBC members living outside the UK, in both post-Soviet and Western countries. The presentation of this data underscores

the spread of Russophone readers across the world who follow the activities of a community book club in London. The online members living abroad are interested in the discussions of the book club, but mostly in the list of books selected and read throughout the year. Some of them might be running their own book clubs,<sup>19</sup> copying the reading lists and the questions prepared for the book discussions.<sup>20</sup>

While being the location of the book club, London also constitutes the centre of Russophone diasporic life in the UK and holds an important place for Russian speakers abroad.<sup>21</sup> What is surprising and indicative of WRBC's character as a transnational network of readers is Moscow's second place on the list with 26 members. As the capital of the Russian Federation, Moscow represents the centre of literary production. The question that arises is why Russian speakers in Moscow and other Russian cities choose to follow the WRBC, a diasporic community club. A second but closely related question is how they were even informed about its existence. An explanation could come from the informal and personal networks of the book club's active members. During one of the meetings I attended, a regular member recalled when her mother visited from Russia and asked to join them in order to participate in the discussion. Looking at the publicity strategies employed by the book club, one can find a handful of articles in the diaspora press mentioning or presenting the WRBC, but only one in a Russian journal.<sup>22</sup> A major contribution to the promotion of the WRBC activities can be attributed to the collaboration with the Moscow-based literary critic Galina Yuzefovich<sup>23</sup> and the director of the Big Book Award, Georgyi Urushadze, from 2018 to 2021. These two literary authorities attracted readers from all over the world to the WRBC meetings and Facebook page.

The dispersal of online WRBC members inside and outside Russia follows the migratory paths and places of settlement of the Russophone diaspora worldwide. In all countries that appear on the list, a significant Russian-speaking community can be found. This transnational map of Russophone literature readers is indicative rather than representative of the actual numbers of Russian-speaking populations in the listed countries. For readers in these locations of Russophone culture, the WRBC stands out as a source of literary news and an alternative literary authority through the selection of a certain book each month. Russian speakers turn to the WRBC for suggestions and recommendations from other readers and reading groups.

### Book Selection and the WRBC Identity

Book selection is of primary importance for book clubs as it defines their identity. According to Long, 'what groups choose to read is at the heart of their identity as reading groups'<sup>24</sup> and by looking at the previously selected books one can follow the development of the book club practice. As already discussed, the WRBC reads only contemporary Russophone literature with rare exceptions. From March 2017 to October 2020, the book club held 48 meetings and read 41 books. Among the 41 books, 38 belong to different genres of fiction and only 3 to non-fiction. Table 2.3 shows the fiction genres chosen by the WRBC.

TABLE. 2.3. Genres of fiction.

Fantasy	39%
Historical Fiction	37%
Thriller	10%
Science Fiction	8%
Short Story	3%
Mystery/Detective	3%

The genres most widely read by the WRBC are fantasy (15 books) and historical fiction (14 books). Taking into account that science fiction is thematically close to fantasy, the book club members show a clear preference towards this genre, when in Russia it represents only 8% of the read books.<sup>25</sup> According to the same survey by the Levada Centre, detective fiction constitutes the most popular genre, which surprisingly is not reflected in the WRBC choices.<sup>26</sup> Notably, there is a relatively even distribution of genres across the book club meetings as the members avoid focusing on a certain style or topic for long periods. Moreover, 66% of the chosen books were from male writers, 29% from female and 5% from a couple (Marina and Sergei Dyachenko). The moderator explained the gender imbalance in the following way: ‘Serious books are overwhelmingly written by men. Women’s novels are mostly detective novels, and their literary value lies in reading, not in discussing.’ For Katya, the WRBC members choose more often novels by male authors with the intention of reading ‘serious’ literature, which can be discussed in a literary gathering, in contrast to women’s literature, which is more suitable for solitary reading. In other words, this criterion of literary taste leads not only to certain genres but also to a certain pool of writers. At the same time, the gendered pattern in book selection reflects the place of contemporary female writers in Russia. For instance, the Russian Book Chamber (2021) listed 11 Russian authors amongst the most published fiction writers for 2020 and 5 of them were women.<sup>27</sup> However, only 6 female writers have received the prestigious Big Book Award since its foundation in 2005 as opposed to 34 males. Furthermore, the WRBC is clearly oriented towards the literary production in Russia reading books from Russia-based authors (83%), and only occasionally from Russophone diaspora writers (10%) or non-Russophone (7%). Masha, a WRBC member and community leader, maintained that even the diaspora writers that they read (Akunin, Rubina, Dyachenko), ‘they still started writing in Russia and became “Russian” recognised writers’. This orientation contributes to the establishment of an active dialogue with the Russian institution of literature and its hierarchy of taste, which is further supported by meetings with writers and literary critics.

The book club followed a hybrid model for its book selection combining elements of voting, consensus, individual choice, and a choice by an authority, which reflects its complex identity as a diasporic community initiative. The book selection for a typical meeting of the WRBC was based on voting among the books proposed by the individual members on the Facebook page.<sup>28</sup> The coordinator might nominate a book or two herself but that is not binding for the club members who often vote for other books. The members’ nominations are often books that were not voted for

in the previous months or new releases that have been discussed on the Facebook page. Only in very few cases did the members unanimously choose a book at the end of a meeting, following up the decision with a relevant online announcement. The coordinator tried to avoid this practice by asking them to vote in favour of the preferred book on the FB page. The list of nominated books is often formed according to the recommendations by a literary authority from Russia. For instance, Urushadze, the director of the Big Book Award, used to join the book club for a single event every autumn to discuss the shortlist for the award. As a preparation for this meeting, the WRBC members were asked to choose one of the books to read. Nevertheless, the meeting was not limited to the discussion of the chosen book and the readers participated in a discussion about the literary developments in Russia. In the case of the literary critic Galina Yuzefovich, who visited London for the Book Fair in 2018, the members chose their next book of the month from her 'Essential Reading List'. The impact of the critics' opinion on the book selection is limited to one or two meetings per year, and even then the members have voted to read a novel not included in the proposed list. Scholars have argued that although critics still influence the consumption of cultural products with their reviews,<sup>29</sup> their long-term role in the canonisation and shaping of cultural values should not be overstated.<sup>30</sup> The moderator also sought recommendations from Russian authors themselves on various occasions. For example, in March 2018, she visited the Paris Book Fair and asked various Russophone writers about their 'must reads' and returned to London with ideas and reviews.

Apart from books voted for by members during the meetings, there is a small number of books chosen by the moderator. Under the category of 'individual choice', I do not refer to a general domineering attitude of the moderator, but rather to her partnerships with cultural institutions and organisations. There are three main examples that illustrate the selection of the month's book by the coordinator in collaboration with a third party. First, for the January meeting of 2019, the members were asked to read Nikolai Gogol's short story *Diary of a Madman* (1835), a deviation from the norm of reading contemporary Russian literature. The director, producer, and actors of the London based Russian theatre company Xameleon Theatre were invited to the very first literary and theatrical meeting of the book club to discuss their upcoming show 'Diaries of Madmen'. The well-attended event included readings from the play by the actors and a discussion about the preparation of the show. Following the event, the book club members received a discount on the tickets of the show. Second, in March 2019, the WRBC hosted a meeting with the Russian writer, Alexei Salnikov, in collaboration with Read Russia project, which represents Russia at the London Book Fair. Fascinated by his debut novel, the moderator asked the organisers of Read Russia to invite Salnikov on the occasion of the publication of his new book. Therefore, the book of the month was not chosen by the members but directly by the coordinator. Third, in June 2019, the book club meeting was co-organised with the Pushkin House in London, where it also took place. The rare occasion of hosting a meeting outside the Piccadilly Waterstones was justified by the fact that the Waterstones Russian Book Club was a sponsor

of Pushkin House's Book Prize 2019. The meet-the-author event was dedicated to Mark Galeotti whose monograph *The Vory* (2018) about the Russian mafia was shortlisted for the award. The event was held in English with a discounted fee for the book club members, which contradicts the rule of free and unconditional membership.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, there was no mention about a partnership with the book club on Pushkin House's website.

The above observations suggest that the coordinator followed different strategies to guarantee the sustainability of the book club. The variety of book genres, formats, and style of events kept the members motivated, offered them an overview of contemporary Russophone literary production, and engaged them in an ongoing dialogue with Russophone writers. This literary activity was constantly being reshaped and enriched through collaborations with critics, community initiatives, and Russian and diasporic organisations, transforming the WRBC into a multidimensional community cultural space. The following chapters capture how the WRBC members embrace the book club's functions by looking for an immersive literary experience that is not limited to readership and book discussions.

### Diaspora Membership and the WRBC

Central to the understanding of the WRBC and its literary activities is the study of the relationship between the book club members and the Russophone diaspora in Britain. Some readers accept community membership unconditionally, while others challenge its existence. Participation in the WRBC is understood by some members as an expression of their diasporic identities, while others prefer to distance themselves from this interpretation. Byford has pointed out that although 'they patently form a linguistically cohesive group, the Russian-speaking migrants [...] are not easy to define as a group in ethnic, national or diasporic terms'.<sup>32</sup> Drawing on interviews with book club members, I explore the variety of transnational identifications found within the WRBC in reference to the Russian-speaking diasporic community, focusing on the following themes: disassociation from the traditional understanding of diaspora; shared language and post-Soviet heritage as foundations of a diasporic identity; active diasporans and community leaders; Global Russians and Russians 2.0. The interviews offer a glimpse into transnational life as experienced by Russophone readers with different migratory paths, ethnic origins, and places in British society.

Victoria, an ethnic Russian from Ukraine in her late forties, migrated to England in 2005 and worked as an accountant for a few years before becoming a housewife. In a discussion about the Russophone diaspora in London, she explained that the concept of diaspora is not appealing to her:

My understanding of diaspora might be a bit outdated. I think about all the diasporas, like those of people who left after the Revolution or after World War II. I heard that diasporas exist. When I moved here, I was not looking for any diasporas. I live in the city of Northampton. Of course, we have a large and enthusiastic community. There is a Russian school. I have not thought much about it. I decided to look for friends based on shared interests. Perhaps there

is a diaspora at the book club. There are a lot of clubs made up of people who came from Russia and the CIS countries.

In her response, Victoria disassociated herself from the Russophone diaspora and clarified that she had not felt the need to engage with it. Upon moving to Northampton, she decided to socialise with people who shared the same interests and passions as her, rather than solely based on a common cultural heritage. Although she observed an enthusiastic community in Northampton and was aware of the existence of a local Russian school, Victoria still associated the concept of diaspora with the first two waves of Russian migration in the twentieth century, the White migration and the post-World War II.<sup>33</sup> Even though she referred to WRBC — of which she is a core member — as a diasporic group, it is clear that Victoria did not identify with fellow post-Soviet migrants in Britain, who are purposefully seeking diaspora-oriented initiatives.

Dina also expressed her dissatisfaction with the term ‘diaspora’ and its connotations proposing what she considered as the most appropriate for Russian speakers abroad:

I would probably not use this word because it belongs a little bit to another century. It refers to people who are forever separated from their homeland. In this case, it seems to me that this permanence is not felt so much when you can safely return or move to another country. What we have here I would call a community. I feel I am part of the Russian community.

Dina rejected the applicability of diaspora today for signifying victimhood and trauma related to permanent displacement from the country of origin. This definition of diaspora as synonymous to uprootedness reflects what Cohen has called the ‘classic use of the term’ which is connected to victim diasporas, such as the Jewish and the Greek.<sup>34</sup> In the age of global mobility, migrants participate in a multangular transnational social structure that includes networks and relationships with people and organisations established in the country of origin, the country of settlement, and all the other places of onward migration.<sup>35</sup> The rejection of a diasporic identity by Dina does not affect her status as a member of the Russophone transnational community, which she willingly embraces. As a Russophone migrant, she participates in transnational media practices supported by global cultural flows that allow her to stay in touch with the sociocultural life in Russia.<sup>36</sup>

In our time, saying that a person who goes abroad completely changes is not true at all, because now cultural exchange is continuous. In the past, this did not happen, and the feeling of being cut off from home was much stronger. But now, you can use the Internet to watch all the TV series, read all the books, and follow the news if you really want to stay connected with pop culture. One TV show, *Vecherniy Urgant*, is particularly valuable because it contains all the cultural news. It doesn’t feel like you’re cut off from home.

Media consumption appears to reduce the effect of what used to be seen as the trauma of displacement and permanent separation from one’s kin.<sup>37</sup> By repeating that migrants are not ‘cut off’ anymore, Dina highlights the radical change in the migrant experience today. Transnational media facilitate migrants’ dual presence in

both home and host societies<sup>38</sup> and even the creation of new transnational ‘spaces where multiple remote localities and the experiences generated and shared by their inhabitants come together and become synchronized and related to each other’.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, communication technologies mediate intimate relationships across borders through long-distance acts of care and emotional support.<sup>40</sup> Dina’s historical example from a pre-revolutionary Russian diasporic community further illustrates the difference between the old paradigm (victim diasporas) and the current one:<sup>41</sup>

I know that, for example, in San Francisco in the 1970s, the Russian community that moved there before the revolution was still dressed in pre-revolutionary clothes and spoke the pre-revolutionary language. Because they did not have the opportunity to communicate with their country, the country developed and moved forward, but they remained at the pre-revolutionary level.

The Russian language is a significant unifying factor not only for the 1970s Russian community in San Francisco but also for post-Soviet migrants in Britain, as suggested in their interviews. Vera, a Russian housewife in her mid-forties, migrated with her husband in the late 1990s first to Belgium, then to Greece and Ireland, before settling in London in 2017. She proudly identified with the Russophone community in London:

How good it feels to be a member of the Russian-speaking diaspora in London. Language makes me a member, and then interests vary. Here, it is the books. I am also a big theatregoer. We have theatre clubs, and I found many friends there. For me, it is about the language and common interests.

Language is an entry point for the community, but people socialise based on shared interests. Mark, a Russian speaker from Lithuania in his early thirties, has struggled to find ‘compatible’ companions among his fellow diasporans: ‘I periodically hang out with the Russian-speaking Diaspora. Of these people, there are very few like-minded people with whom there are common themes and common interests.’ In Vera’s case, her interest in literature and theatre has drawn her to Russophone book clubs and theatre clubs. The abundance of cultural clubs supports her enthusiasm and further activates her engagement with diaspora life in London. Although she has lived outside Russia for over twenty years, Vera admitted to the persistent influence of her home culture:

I lived in Russia for most of my life. I have been reading since I was a child, and I went to school. It is close to me, that’s what I know. No matter where you went, it’s still in your head and your soul.

Familiarity with certain cultural practices and well-established habits affect the migratory experience by promoting the formation of diasporic identities and by bringing together people with a common heritage. Irina, a Russian speaker from Belarus, stressed the parameter of commonality amongst post-Soviet migrants:

They have a common history, a shared past that unites them, including a common language. The fact that people speak the same language brings them together, as does their mentality. When people have lived in the same country, there is much that connects them. It is easier for people to communicate and understand each other when there is a common past and mentality.

For Irina, common history, culture, and mentality unify the Russian speakers in Britain. The shared post-Soviet cultural heritage establishes sameness amongst Russophone migrants, as well as difference from other communities within the host society.<sup>42</sup> The suggested ingroup solidarity relies on a sense of easiness and comfort in communicating and understanding with each other, as also described by Dina:

The historical and cultural heritage unites them; what surrounded them in their childhood. What we ate as children. We watched the same cartoons, read the same books. The school curriculum was exactly the same. We were dressed in the same way. Perfumes were about the same. The food was often the same. Therefore, there is a set of codes that we can exchange without having to explain them. You immediately know that a person is yours when they quote the same famous movies.

Soviet childhood is presented as a significant common ground for Russian speakers, as a time experienced in the same or similar terms through entertainment, education, books, food, and smells. Dina does not idealise her memories resurrecting the myth of the 'Happy Soviet Childhood', according to which Soviet children were growing up in a country that provided more and treated them better than any other.<sup>43</sup> Instead, she attempts to depict the origins of a sense of belonging within a multi-generational post-Soviet migrant community. The ability to appropriately use references from Soviet life demonstrates who is 'One of us' and who is not, setting cultural boundaries around Russophone migrants within British society. In other words, shared cultural memory forms the basis for boundary work,<sup>44</sup> leading to the construction of symbolic differences between bearers (insiders) and non-bearers of Soviet heritage (outsiders).

Influenced by his decade-long transnational experience in Britain, Anton used an English word ('background') to indicate what brings Russian-speaking migrants together and helps consolidate the relevant diasporic community: 'I identify more with the Russian-speaking diaspora than with Russia itself, in terms of nationality. All people who speak Russian have a lot in common — memories, a Russian and Soviet "background".' Although Anton is a Russian citizen, he is not ethnically Russian, which allows him to identify more with Russian speakers with whom he shares a Soviet cultural background.<sup>45</sup> The common background also includes personal and collective memories that create bonds of kinship and a feeling of belonging. Nevertheless, according to Anton, sharing language and heritage is not sufficient for considering someone a diasporan: 'For me, diaspora is the existence of cultural ties.' A diasporan engages with the local transnational community, as well as the cultural homeland, transforming into an actor in the global Russophone ideoscape.<sup>46</sup> The 'presence of cultural ties' can be interpreted as an active diasporic network supporting cultural flows between the different locations of Russophone culture. In this framework, Irina maintained that a shared diasporic identity does not equal membership in the Russophone community:

I can't say that I am a full-fledged member of the Russian-speaking diaspora because I am not so actively involved in its life. There's just not enough time. We have a cultural centre called Rossotrudnichestvo, which represents Russian

culture. I often go to events there. The Waterstones Russian Book Club — I participate actively there.

Irina produces her own definition of who 'qualifies' as a member of the Russophone diaspora by associating membership with active participation in official diasporic structures. Even though she understands that this approach potentially deprives her of diaspora status, Irina assesses energetic participation positively and thereby discursively aligns with Rossotrudnichestvo's mission to unite compatriots around its cultural events and national messages. She also regards her WRBC membership as an example of her participation in diasporic cultural life without distinguishing the club from state-driven initiatives. In this way, the transition from the discourse of the 'shared background' to that of the 'active diasporan' brings to the discussion the presence of diasporic organisations on the transnational Russophone map.

The discourse of the 'active diasporan' also appears in the narratives of Masha and Sasha, two community leaders who participate in the WRBC. Sasha migrated from Ukraine in 1997 and has been active in Russophone cultural life in London ever since. Both Masha and Sasha emphatically declared their membership in the Russophone diaspora and linked it to their diasporic cultural activities. The affirmative expression of the respondents' diasporic identities resonates with what Byford observed about the existence of a Russophone community-at-large in Britain: 'Those most active in staging "community" performances are, as is to be expected, the ones most likely to be interested in rhetorically (and thus also performatively) investing "community" with legitimacy and reality.'<sup>47</sup> Even though Sasha and Masha regarded their successful cultural endeavours as proof of a thriving diasporic community, Klavdia, the book club's deputy moderator, tried to disassociate her participation in the WRBC from its possible diasporic interpretation: 'No, I don't believe in the diaspora. I come here because I am interested in Russian literature, not because there is a diaspora here. It is not important to me.' For Klavdia, diaspora identification represents the need to socialise with other migrants with common origins and homeland orientation. Still, not everyone shares this need even in the case of a community book club with diasporic underpinnings. Klavdia further admitted that she would be interested in attending an anglophone book club in which members read Russian literature. The activity itself attracts members to a community of practice regardless of their national loyalties, as is the case with Laura, the dedicated Italian WRBC member. Anastasia also expressed her disagreement with being identified as a member of the diaspora, since she regards herself a cosmopolitan:

I don't really like the label 'member of the diaspora', but I guess I am one. I am a person of the world. I really like living in different countries and continents. I love coming to a new country, not knowing a single word or a single person, and starting from the beginning.

Anastasia approaches diaspora membership as a limiting label that she prefers not to assign to herself. Having lived for fifteen years in South America, she identifies as a 'person of the world' capable of encompassing her living experiences in Russia/Soviet Union, Argentina, and England, and her desire to visit and

learn more. The word *cosmopolitan* derives from the Greek *kosmopolítēs*, which means citizen of the world, as opposed to citizen of a certain local community.<sup>48</sup> Cosmopolitanism as a worldview refers to ‘openness to all forms of otherness’,<sup>49</sup> accepting difference and willingness to get acquainted with other cultures and their representatives.<sup>50</sup> By identifying as a cosmopolitan who reads literature in English, Russian, and Spanish, Anastasia potentially is what has been called a ‘Global Russian’. A Global Russian ‘is the deterritorialised, transnational Russian-speaking person [...] who resides primarily outside the Russian Federation’.<sup>51</sup> The discourse of Global Russians describes highly mobile individuals representing both traditionally elite and working-class cosmopolitanisms, who know how to move and familiarise themselves with new cultures, while preserving a certain, non-nostalgic commitment to Russian language and culture.

In her turn, the WRBC moderator, Katya, claimed that diaspora membership requires permanent residence of migrants in a particular host society as the necessary condition for the hybridisation of their transnational identities:

People become diasporans when they decide not to go home. Otherwise, there is no fusion of the two cultures. You can never get rid of your own culture; it never goes away. And the mentality, it manifests itself at all levels. The people who stay and become diasporans are those who live under the influence of the two cultures. The culture of Russians abroad arises. And this completely unites them.

Katya recognises the shared hybrid culture that combines elements of the local British and the post-Soviet/Russian cultures as a binding factor for the Russophone transnational community. In her opinion, the creolisation of their cultural identities, their ‘mentality’, is only possible if they reside in the UK long enough to receive and sustain the influence of British culture: ‘Those girls who arrived three years ago and are going home, they will not become members of the diaspora.’ Diasporic membership is discursively constructed as a privilege of migration, access to which is granted to those who experience the same hybridisation processes. The resulting culture and identities are not static, yet they are ‘constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference’.<sup>52</sup> The effects of cultural globalisation<sup>53</sup> on sociocultural identities are positively assessed by Dina:

The identity does not disappear, yet the linguistic identity is enriched because you still have your language and your literature, but at the same time, you discover the beautiful cultures and literatures of other countries. Your horizons are expanding. You are not just Russian; you’re Russian 2.0, the improved version.

Russophone<sup>54</sup> migrants are not deprived of their national culture while residing outside their homeland(s) but instead they benefit from the enrichment and therefore ‘improvement’ of their cultural identities. The idealisation of the migrant experience is highlighted by the versioning, that is, the choice of the term ‘2.0’ used by software developers to indicate an updated and significantly improved version of the original. The ‘Russian 2.0’ version is described by Katya as the ‘Russian-speaking person’, which in contrast to Dina’s presentation, does not happen

‘naturally’ but requires significant effort:

You may not identify yourself as Russian, but the English will definitely identify you as Russian. You have to try to show the best that there is. So, there is a part of the diaspora that understands the responsibility and is trying to develop culture, heritage, and create a completely different Russian person. The Russian speaker.

Katya situates the discourse of Russian 2.0 in the context of the British society maintaining that each diasporan represents the whole Russophone transnational community. In her view, there is a part of the diaspora, like herself, which understands the responsibility of forming Russophone culture abroad and thereby being its bearer. Recognising that the construction of transnational Russophone identities takes place in the framework of community practices, Katya along with other community leaders assumes the role of organising cultural activities for the diaspora.

Multiple and heterogeneous diasporic identifications within the WRBC reflect a complex relationship of Russophone migrants with their countries of origin, cultural heritage, collective memory, and fellow ‘compatriots’. These dispositions informed the shared reading practice and were continuously integrated into the cultural performances of the book club. The identity of the WRBC as a community initiative is a product of negotiation between its members, which has defined its journey from a local book club to an online reading platform during the pandemic, to hibernation and closed-door sessions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## Conclusion

Established as a community reading group in a bookstore housing a collection of Russophone literature, the Waterstones Russian Book Club developed a literary practice that offered equal opportunities for its members to discuss and select books, interact with diasporans, connect with cultural organisations, and meet with writers and critics. Although everyone who speaks Russian is welcome to the club, the absence of a shared post-Soviet cultural heritage translates to a peripheral membership and ingroup otherness. Within this framework, offline members showed varying levels of participation, preparation for discussion, and regularity of attendance, leading some to take on a more central role in shaping the book club’s activities. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, online members usually limited their activity to staying informed about new book releases and following the dialogue between the WRBC and Russophone literary production from a distance.

For book club members, diasporic identity is an intentional stance, a personal choice to socialise with other Russophone migrants. This stance can be selective, focusing on the most familiar or stimulating activities, clubs, and cultural initiatives rather than pursuing everything ‘Russian’. At the same time, membership in the Russophone diaspora in Britain derives from having Russian as a first language and post-Soviet cultural competency. Membership also requires permanent residence in the host society, along with commitment and active participation in events put on by diasporic organisations and initiatives. Overall, the Russophone diasporic identity

oscillates between two discourses. On one side stands the Global Russian, a highly mobile, deterritorialised cosmopolitan, not bound by the inherent limitations of the old-fashioned concept of diaspora (victimhood and trauma). On the other side is the Russian 2.0, who preserves elements of national identity, hybridised and ‘improved’ by the transnational experience, yet understands and bears the responsibility of (re) presenting the national culture in the host society. Both models are products of globalisation and the global mobility of populations, reflecting the emergence of new imaginaries about the multifaceted relationship of migrants with their home and host societies.

## Notes to Chapter 2

1. The institutions’ actual interest in literature was limited and impermanent as they tried to capture the wider spectrum of Russian culture following a top-down approach to event organisation with minor community engagement.
2. All names of WRBC members have been replaced with pseudonyms.
3. Laura Adams, ‘The Mascot Researcher: Identity, Power, and Knowledge in Fieldwork’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28.4 (1999), pp.331–63 (p. 341).
4. Ibid., p. 353; Steve Herbert, ‘From Spy to Okay Guy: Trust and Validity in Fieldwork with the Police’, *Geographical Review*, 91.1–2 (2001), pp. 304–10 (p. 304); Maxine Simmons, ‘Insider Ethnography: Tinker, Tailor, Researcher or Spy?’, *Nurse Researcher*, 14.4 (2007), pp. 7–17 (p. 13) <<https://doi.org/10.7748/nr2007.07.14.4.7.c6039>>.
5. Long, p. 86.
6. Kopnina; Morgunova, ‘Discursive Self-representations in Russian-Language Internet Forums’; Aldona Judina, ‘Performing Russianness: Narratives and Everyday Conversations of the Russian Communities in Scotland’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2015); Malyutina; Pechurina.
7. Adams, p. 342.
8. Long adds the parameter of race to the demographics influencing access to the book clubs. See Long, p. 86
9. James Procter and Bethan Benwell, *Reading across Worlds: Transnational Book Groups and the Reception of Difference* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
10. DeNel Rehberg Sedo, ‘Badges of Wisdom, Spaces for Being: A Study of Contemporary Women’s Book Clubs’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2004), pp. 169–70.
11. Long, pp. 94–95. See also David Peplow, ‘“Oh, I’ve known a lot of Irish people”: Reading Groups and the Negotiation of Literary Interpretation’, *Language and Literature*, 20.4 (2011), pp. 295–315 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947011401964>>; David Peplow and others, *The Discourse of Reading Groups Integrating Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives* (Routledge, 2016).
12. Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Polity, 2010), p. 87.
13. Jenny Preece, Blair Nonnecke, and Dorine Andrews, ‘The Top Five Reasons for Lurking: Improving Community Experiences for Everyone’, *Computers in Human Behavior*, 20.2 (2004), pp. 201–23 (p. 210) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2003.10.015>>.
14. Barbara Fister, ‘“Reading as a Contact Sport”: Online Book Groups and the Social Dimensions of Reading’, *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, 44.4 (2005), pp. 303–09 (p. 305).
15. From the same interview with the coordinator.
16. In comparison, the number of regular members attending the meetings of a major crime fiction book club in Athens varies from 12 to 15. See Danai Tselenti, ‘Ta dora tis anagnosis: anagnostikes praktikes se mia leschi astynomikis logotechnias stin Athina [The Gifts of Reading: Reading Practices in a Crime Fiction Book Club in Athens]’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Athens, 2015).
17. In the March 2018 meeting, 28 members were present and 6 of them were men (21.4%); in April 2018, 20 members in total and 3 men (15%); and, in May 2018, out of 23 members only 2 were

- men (8.6%). The following year, in March 2019, 35 members attended and 2 of them were men (5.7%), while the following month, 20 members were present with just two men (10%). At the same time, in 2019, 82.1% of the Facebook members were female and the rest 17.9% male.
18. The moderator prepared the present tables in April 2019, but since then, the number of members rose. The data presented here are the most representative of the pre-pandemic phase of the book club.
  19. The coordinator mentioned briefly during an informal conversation about this practice without offering any examples.
  20. All questions from September 2017 until October 2018 are available on the blog: <<https://russianbookclub.wordpress.com/blog/>>.
  21. Maljutina; Ryazanova-Clarke, "'Londongrad" as a Linguistic Imaginary'.
  22. In June 2019, the WRBC moderator posted on the Facebook group an article with the title 'What are Book Clubs and Why are they Needed?' published in the *EKSMO Zhurnal*, the journal of the leading publishing house in Russia (Khanukaeva, 2019). See Raisa.Khanukaeva, 'Chto takoe knizhnye kluby i zachem oni nuzhny [What Are Book Clubs and Why Are They Needed?]', *EKSMO zhurnal*, 19 June 2019 [accessed 9 December 2024] <<https://eksmo.ru/trends/chto-takoe-knizhnye-kluby-i-zachem-oni-nuzhny-ID15495069/>>. It included a short interview with the moderator and a presentation of the book club in London as an example to be followed.
  23. Yuzefovich is very active on social media, participates in popular TV-shows, produces her own podcast and YouTube videos with writers, and co-leads the book club fora that I discuss in Chapter 7.
  24. Long, p. 114.
  25. Dubin and Zorkaya, p. 23.
  26. See also Joanne M. Shelton, 'The Role of Literature in Post-Soviet Russia, 1996–2008' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bath, 2010).
  27. The bestselling Russian writer of the year was Darya Dontsova, who was second on the list behind Stephen King but before Fyodor Dostoevsky.
  28. As part of my offline and virtual ethnography, I observed closely the selection process starting from January 2018 to October 2020.
  29. Phillipa K. Chong, *Inside the Critics' Circle: Book Reviewing in Uncertain Times* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
  30. Shyon Baumann, 'Intellectualization and Art World Development: Film in the United States', *American Sociological Review*, 66.3 (2001), p. 404 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3088886>>; M. P. Allen and A. E. Lincoln, 'Critical Discourse and the Cultural Consecration of American Films', *Social Forces*, 82.3 (2004), pp. 871–94 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2004.0030>>.
  31. Surprisingly, there was no comment on Facebook about the entrance fee.
  32. Byford, 'Performing "Community"', p. 115. Pechurina (p. 34) notes: 'while the term 'Russian-speaking migrants' is generally used to refer to the multiethnic body of post-Soviet migrants, it is important to bear in mind the contextual nature of this assumption. For instance, such external factors as the recent Russian–Ukrainian conflict should be considered when analysing relationships within diasporic sub-communities.' A number of the interviewees come from Ukraine and I took that into consideration in the present analysis.
  33. Morgunova, 'Discursive Self-Representations in Russian–Language Internet Forums'; Isurin; Kliuchnikova.
  34. Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2008), p. 2.
  35. Faist, p. 14.
  36. Appadurai; Adrian Athique, *Transnational Audiences: Media Reception on a Global Scale* (Polity Press, 2016).
  37. Brinkerhoff.
  38. Dufoux, p. 98.
  39. Tsagarousianou and Retis, p. 5.
  40. Mary Holmes, 'Intimacy, Distance Relationships and Emotional Care', *Recherches sociologiques et anthropologiques*, 41.1 (2010), pp. 105–23.

41. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*.
42. Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration*.
43. Rebecca Knight, 'Representations of Soviet Childhood in Post-Soviet Texts by Liudmila Ulitskaia and Nina Gabrielian', *The Modern Language Review*, 104.3 (2009), pp. 790–808.
44. Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, 'The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28.1 (2002), pp. 167–95 <<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.28.110601.141107>>; Mark A. Pachucki, Sabrina Pendergrass, and Michèle Lamont, 'Boundary Processes: Recent Theoretical Developments and New Contributions', *Poetics*, 35.6 (2007), pp. 331–51 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2007.10.001>>.
45. Oksana also stressed the existence of a shared background for all Russian speakers who grew up in the Soviet Union: 'I think because the background was the same for everyone. Armenians, Ukrainians, Moldovans, Belarusians, and Latvians. Russian migrants from Estonia, Latvia, and Kazakhstan. This is the sphere of the Soviet Union, for people my age'.
46. Appadurai.
47. Byford, 'Performing "Community"', p. 125.
48. Gerard Delanty, 'Not All Is Lost in Translation: World Varieties of Cosmopolitanism', *Cultural Sociology*, 8.4 (2014), pp. 374–91 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975514532261>>.
49. Ayona Datta, 'Places of Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: East European Construction Workers in London', *Environment and Planning A*, 41.2 (2009), pp. 353–70 (p. 353).
50. Daniel Hiebert, 'Cosmopolitanism at the Local Level: The Development of Transnational Neighbourhoods', in *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*, ed. by Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 209–23; Hiebert.
51. Ryazanova–Clarke, "'Londongrad" as a Linguistic Imaginary', p. 235.
52. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 235.
53. Robin Cohen, 'Creolization and Cultural Globalization: The Soft Sounds of Fugitive Power', *Globalizations*, 4.3 (2007), pp. 369–84 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14747730701532492>>; Jan N. Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture*, 2nd edn (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).
54. Dina explained at the beginning of her interview that she uses 'Russian' and 'Russophone' interchangeably.

## CHAPTER 3



# Transnational Games and Gifts

From my very first book club meeting at Waterstones in March 2018, I had the opportunity to witness the playful and joyous side of the WRBC through its literary games and celebrations. Literary games, an unusual activity for book clubs, add variety to book discussions through individual and group activities inspired by the book of the month. Rituals and festivities that acknowledge people, places, and anniversaries are routine parts of community life. These events bring members together to celebrate life and reaffirm community bonds through social interaction and the exploration of shared identity. Although games and celebrations are not mentioned in the WRBC description on social media, I quickly realised that they are a significant aspect of the WRBC, which set it apart from other Russophone book clubs that focus solely on book discussions. The study of these cultural practices and their structures involves ‘looking at what and who is included or excluded; examining the assumptions, rhetoric, and symbolism surrounding the celebrations’,<sup>1</sup> all of which indicate power structures, value systems, and dominant discourses. Zooming in on three book club meetings, the chapter explores the transnational character of the games and the network of transnational relationships sustained through the gifts given to winners and participants.

### Playing (with) Literature

For the first anniversary of the book club in March 2018, the moderator assiduously prepared a special meeting, which was widely attended. The WRBC members arrived cheerfully, greeted the moderator, and found a place to sit with their friends. Compared to later meetings that I observed, some members had dressed up for the occasion. One of the regulars was wearing a typical Russian shawl, which she kept adjusting to ensure it looked good on her. Various Russian chocolate treats were on the table, and gifts in old-fashioned coloured paper, reminiscent of Soviet wrapping papers and decorations, were lying on a chair. Russian honorary diplomas were prepared for the session to be given to participants and winners and were kept in a folder.<sup>2</sup> The meeting was carefully planned and comprised a book discussion, two literary games, and concluded with gifts, group pictures, and an open invitation for drinks at the top-floor bar. At the beginning of the session, the moderator announced its structure and mentioned its special character due to the celebration. The discussion had to be succinct to allow sufficient time for the games and the celebration.

The first activity was a role-playing game involving the main characters in the book of the month. This was Zotov's *Apocalypsis Welcome* (2009), an existential post-apocalyptic novel. According to the rules of the game, the members who had read the book were randomly assigned one of its eleven main characters, which included God and the Devil. The participants had to answer questions prepared by the moderator, receive questions from other members of the book club, or debate actively with each other on a certain subject on behalf of the characters they represented. The game lasted for forty minutes and ended abruptly with an intervention by the moderator due to the unexpected escalation of the discussion. Although the atmosphere was initially cordial and relaxed, it quickly turned into a heated philosophical and existential debate between some of the more opinionated and passionate book club members. Trying to make sense of the book's plotline, the members drew examples from recent history in Russia and Britain, discussing political upheavals, brainwashing, and the general public's agency and readiness to raise its voice. One of the central examples was the 2011 London Riots, which received wide coverage in Britain and was a shared experience for many members. A role-playing game was not repeated in future sessions, and no winners were announced. The rising tension and the subsequent departure of a book club member after that meeting must have been a warning to the coordinator that a book discussion needs to be carefully moderated and held within a certain framework.

The second game of the evening was the 'Anniversary Quiz'. It consisted of fifteen multiple-choice questions, and the participant with the most correct answers would win the game. All attendees, including me, were invited to participate, regardless of how many meetings they had attended. The atmosphere was festive, and all tensions from the previous game quickly disappeared. The first year of literary meetings concluded successfully, and the quiz was planned to celebrate a grassroots community initiative that managed not only to survive but also to flourish. The quiz questions ranged from 'getting to know our book club' to 'a summary of the past year', reminiscent of an end-of-semester secondary or high school quiz. By grouping the questions, three different themes emerged: membership, topics of discussion, and the transnational/diasporic life of the book club. For every correct answer, participants received one point. However, for questions about the actual members of the book club, they would receive additional points equal to the number of meetings they had attended themselves, as a reward for consistent participation. Regarding membership, participants were asked about the number of online members, the number of actual members who attend meetings, the gender balance among members, and, playfully, the ages of the oldest and youngest members of the club. Concerning the topics of discussion, the questions included the first book read by the WRBC, the list of all the discussed books, the gender balance of the authors read, and the most popular book (and therefore meeting) as determined by attendance. While the first group of questions sought to identify the book club, the second looked at the past year as if holding a portfolio or a photo album that captured the achievements of the WRBC. The third category explored the book club's relationship with literary production in Russia, as well as

the diasporic communities inside and outside Britain.<sup>3</sup> These questions indicated an awareness of the transnational character of the WRBC and its connection to the global Russophone community. As expected, the winners of the Anniversary Quiz were the most loyal members of the book club, those who attended the majority of the meetings and regularly checked the club's Facebook page.

After almost two hours of book talk and gaming, the festive atmosphere was evident in the room. The book club members participated eagerly in the gift and award-giving ceremony, applauding cheerfully for the winners and gift recipients. After the gifts, the group picture followed, and I was asked to join them as well. The moderator informed them that she was planning to post all the pictures on Facebook, with that particular one being used as the background for the WRBC account. Laura (the Italian book club member) had brought a cake with a candle for the one-year anniversary, which they forgot and eventually did not have time to cut and share. The core members decided to continue the celebration informally at a pub, since the bookshop's bar had to close earlier that day.

In April 2018, I attended another literary game during the monthly book club meeting. Integrating her experience from a community intellectual games club, the moderator adapted their game 'Nobody's Fool' to a quiz called 'Outside the Brackets' about Andrey Gelasimov's novel *Kholod* (2015),<sup>4</sup> which was the book of the month. For the promotion of the game, the moderator digitally edited a previous group picture from a book club meeting, replacing the members' faces with those of famous Russophone writers. She also arranged for the game to be filmed and later posted on the Facebook page. This game had a more personal character for the moderator, as she had asked her young son to come in the middle of the meeting to assist her during the quiz, which he did with no enthusiasm. Although he did not speak Russian and his mother had to translate for him, he was assigned the task of writing down the score for every round of the game. The participants had to form teams of three people, and one of them was designated as the leader responsible for writing down the team's choice on the answer sheet. All attendees were welcome to join one of the five teams and play. Despite receiving an invitation from the moderator earlier that day to play the game, I was reluctant because I had only managed to read a detailed summary and a couple of chapters of the book, which did not seem like sufficient preparation for the literary game. The moderator approached Laura, who also hesitated, and insisted that both of us play, so we joined the team of one of her closest friends.

The game consisted of five rounds, with the first three being content-related. In the introductory round, participants had to choose the correct answer to five questions about the main events of the novel. In the second round, they were asked to fill in the missing words in six citations from the book, while in the third round, called 'Numbers', they had to identify the numbers that were the correct answers to six textual questions. For this round, the point system was more complicated, and only the team that found the correct answer received any points. If all teams found the correct answer, they all received the same points. The first three rounds tested how thoroughly the participants had read the book by the participants and

were highly demanding. In the fourth round, participants had to guess the names of authors based on their portraits. Works by most of the depicted authors had been discussed in previous club gatherings, so it was not particularly difficult to identify them. Everyone seemed to enjoy this round because of its visual nature, and there was laughter about not being able to recognise a couple of famous writers or mistaking a female writer for a male. The final round consisted of a single question proposed by Gelasimov himself. The moderator had met with the author at the Paris Book Fair in March 2018 and informed him of her intention to organise a literary game inspired by his book to follow the book discussion. For this question, Gelasimov provided a reference from his book:

In my novel, there is an episode where the hero wakes up in an ice bath in a hotel room. This scene is inspired by Stephen King's *The Shining*. However, in the American novel, the macabre events take place in room number 217, whereas in my book, the room number is 237. Why?

The question intrigued the participants but also puzzled them. Kubrick directed *The Shining* (1980) based on King's novel. For that scene, Kubrick had to change the room number; otherwise, future guests would not want to stay in that hotel room anymore. So, Gelasimov decided to follow Kubrick's film version instead of King's novel. No one managed to find the right answer to the riddle, although the moderator offered a hint that she thought would help them. The participants protested heavily against such a difficult question and were completely dissatisfied with the writer. The deputy moderator of the WRBC even suggested that they should complain to Gelasimov about his overly challenging question. At the same time, Gelasimov must have expected a different reaction by offering insight into his writing process and the influence that popular American fiction has had on his work.

A year later, without a formal second-anniversary celebration, the Waterstones Russian Book Club held an informal event to celebrate their Soviet heritage and cultural memory. This April gathering, coinciding with Fool's Day, featured a structure similar to the previous anniversary (discussion, game, awards, group picture/video) but was more relaxed and light-hearted. The chosen book was Alexei Ivanov's *Pischeblok* (2018),<sup>5</sup> a contrast to the dense novels of prior months. Inspired by the WRBC meeting with Ivanov during the 2019 London Book Fair, the evening's game, 'Nostalgic Game "Pioneer Childhood"', allowed members, mostly born before the 1980s, to reflect on their Soviet childhoods. The game had five rounds, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Following the end of the literary game, the winners received their awards, and one member, who did not participate but helped with the game, was rewarded with a special prize, suggesting that 'celebration rituals often recognise just being and are a way to express gratefulness and gratitude'.<sup>6</sup> A short video summarising the game was uploaded to the book club's Facebook page a few weeks after the meeting.<sup>7</sup>

### The Transnational Character of the WRBC Games

Some works of literature have a playful side and have inspired both analogue and digital games. Robert Detweiler studied around sixty American novels and short-story collections from 1965 to 1976 and identified three types of fiction that incorporate gaming elements.<sup>8</sup> The first category is ‘playful or whimsical fiction’, characterised by liveliness and exaggeration, but it does not depict a specific game or engage the reader in gameplay. The second category is thematic, featuring novels where specific games are portrayed and are often central to the plot or imagery (e.g. sports). The third type is most closely aligned with the concept of a game, involving stories with puzzles, inside jokes, or retellings of old narratives, designed by the author as a game with the reader. Escaping the format of the book, literary works have been adapted to video games such as *Agatha Christie the ABC Murders* by Artefact Studios (2016) or *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* by GSC Game World (2007). There are also games like *What Remains of Edith Finch* by Giant Sparrow (2017) that combine literary with ludic elements ‘to deliver a hybrid readerly/playerly experience’.<sup>9</sup> Digital literary games represent a well-regulated, rule-based, and structured form of literary play that combines literary elements with interactive, ludic structures of digital environments.<sup>10</sup> All types of literary play regardless of the format provide readers/players with the opportunity to claim agency and to immerse themselves in a story by engaging with the characters, exploring its fictional world, and sometimes taking on temporary identities.

Book clubs rarely include any form of games in their meetings. Regardless of how formal or informal a book club meeting is, book discussion constitutes the main activity. Deviating from the usual book club practice, the WRBC described mainly consists of celebrations and various types of games, from quizzes and competitions to role-playing games, which are not always related to the book of the month. The WRBC’s gaming activities fall into the genre of literary games, as they combine both ludic and literary elements, promoting engagement and interaction with literary works and their creators on a community level. Unlike the in-text games created by authors, the observed literary games were designed by Katya, the book club moderator, for special and regular meetings. The interviews with the WRBC members shed light on how the games were experienced and evaluated in terms of their contribution to the book club activities:

VERA I’m afraid these games had nothing to do with the discussion of the book itself, but they added an element of entertainment to the club meeting. I was happy to participate in such games. Naturally, such games cannot replace a full-fledged discussion and exchange of opinions about the book we read, but as a fun addition to the discussion — why not?

VICTORIA Games offer new directions and keep our meetings from getting boring. Sometimes they bring a venturesome mood and team spirit when we play in pairs.

OKSANA A game gives you the opportunity to diversify the discussion process and help people loosen up, especially if they are new members of the club. It’s a chance to see each other from a new angle and spend time in a relaxed atmosphere. It’s primarily a step towards socialising with each other.

Literary games offer members of a reading community the opportunity to build bonds through shared practice, to become ‘effective participants in ‘identity talk’ in their exchanges during and surrounding game playing’,<sup>11</sup> and to prolong their engagement with literary texts and narratives. For Vera, the games cannot replace book discussions, yet they constitute a valuable and enjoyable addition to the book club meetings, framing the ongoing discussion. Rehberg Sedo expands on Anderson’s notion of imagined communities and argues that, parallel to ritualised reading, ‘the exchanges of letters, books, and interpretations serve as both real and imagined community building blocks, taking their place as markers of membership of a community but also acting as barriers’.<sup>12</sup> Gaming can be included in this list of potential forms of shared involvement with literature that can play a community-building role, as theorised under the concept of ‘community of play’. A community of play refers to a group of people participating in a more or less structured group game, under the condition that they continue to play other games after the initial one has been completed. In her account, Victoria recognises the community-building capacity of the games when they involve playing in pairs, while Oksana views them as opportunities to socialise and become acquainted with fellow members in a relaxed and informal environment.

During and around the book club games, WRBC members perform their transnational cultural identities by engaging in discourses from both their home and host societies, creating and recreating memoryscapes, following and contesting the rules of the games, and expressing ideas about books, writers, and the cultures they represent. In the case of the two literary games that were filmed and uploaded to the Facebook page (the ‘Outside the Brackets’ game in April 2018 and the ‘Nostalgic Game “Pioneer Childhood”’ in April 2019), the discursive construction of identities continued digitally, involving the actual participants of the games as well as all online book club members from various locations within the Russophone culture. The current discussion of the WRBC literary games centres on their role in constructing hybrid transnational cultural identities within a community of play.

All WRBC games, except for the ‘Apocalypse Welcome’ role-playing game, resemble British pub quizzes. The history of quizzes in public houses dates back to 1959 in Bootle, near Liverpool, when various pub teams formed a quiz league.<sup>13</sup> However, the strong tradition of gaming in British pubs extends as far back as the thirteenth century.<sup>14</sup> A pub quiz is an informal knowledge game where small groups of people (usually 4–6) compete against each other for a small monetary prize or a bar tab. Participants in this relaxed community of play are typically regulars of the pub, groups of friends, and visitors attending for the occasion. While there are different formats for pub quizzes, most consist of two or more thematic rounds of questions, written or announced by a quizmaster. These rounds can include factual rounds (e.g. general knowledge), picture rounds (e.g. identifying brands, places, people), and audio rounds (e.g. excerpts from songs or tunes).

The WRBC games incorporated elements of pub quizzes mainly at a structural level, although they do not share some of their distinctive characteristics. The games are organised into rounds, each with a different theme and/or format. For instance, the ‘Kholod’ quiz (April 2018) consisted of five rounds, some of which included

multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-gaps exercises, and identifying portraits, similar to pub quizzes. There is always a quizmaster present. The setting at the Waterstones café differs from that of pubs, as patrons can order hot beverages and light food, but not alcohol. Only on one occasion did a book club member drink beer during a literary game. The awards also differ significantly. In pub quizzes, winners often receive a certain 'drinking allowance' for the evening, whereas in the WRBC, awards are typically books. Nonetheless, both types of games share a light-hearted, leisurely, and knowledge-testing nature, suited for small to medium-sized groups of players. There are also plenty of intellectual and general knowledge games in Britain in the form of quiz shows such as University Challenge, a long-standing TV quiz programme. This show first aired in 1962 and follows a straightforward format: two teams from different universities or colleges in Britain compete in tournaments by answering questions in various rounds, including two picture rounds and one music round. Since this game is played at a university level with undergraduate and postgraduate students, the questions are more sophisticated and demanding than those found in a typical pub quiz.

The WRBC literary games not only draw from the culture of British pub games and knowledge quiz shows but also bridge it with the Soviet and Russian tradition of intellectual games, such as the competitive game 'Chto? Gde? Kogda?' (What? Where? When?) based on the TV game show of the same name. The show first appeared in 1975 and was initially called the 'Family quiz 'What? Where? When?', but since the 1980s, it has taken its current form and title. A competitive variant of the original TV game has been adopted by Russophone communities worldwide and takes the form of tournaments at local, national, and international levels. This community version of the game has the following format: two or more teams of four to six players each, known as 'znatoki' (experts), compete by answering a series of questions in rounds related to various topics, ranging from literature to the natural sciences, requiring intellectual skills such as logical thinking. In contrast to British pub quizzes, 'What? Where? When?' is a highly demanding and competitive game with a relatively more 'highbrow' character, necessitating a high level of literacy and significant gaming experience from the participants.

Combining gaming traditions from both the UK and the Soviet Union/Russia, the WRBC formed a new type of group game, a cultural hybrid suitable for a book club. The 'Anniversary Quiz' (March 2018) was a straightforward quiz about the club's anniversary, similar to school learning quizzes. Meanwhile, the 'Outside the Brackets' game (April 2018) incorporated elements of a pub quiz (rounds of content-related questions and a picture round) and 'What? Where? When?' (with Gelasimov's question about the room number referencing Stephen King's *The Shining*) in the moderator's effort to create a game about a book without being limited to it. The 'Pioneer Childhood' game (April 2019) was inspired by nostalgia for the Soviet childhood, with four out of the five activities exploring the relevant intangible cultural heritage. These four activities are closer to the 'pub quiz style', while the 'find-the-odd-one' activity about fantasy fiction writers (like Gelasimov's question) is more reminiscent of the riddles found in 'What? Where? When?' or

'University Challenge' rather than in a pub quiz. The elements of cultural hybridity in the book club games suggest that the transnational experience of everyday diasporic life resonates in the community's practices. The progressive development of the literary games into more coherent and focused activities results from carefully selecting different fragments that constitute the transnational experience (i.e. British social life, post-Soviet cultural capital, and intellectual interests). This selection promotes those elements or combinations that would most appeal to the book club members who gather at Waterstones to connect with Russophone literary production and its creators.<sup>15</sup>

A common ground for the British and Soviet/Russian games that have inspired those of the WRBC is their thematic focus on world culture. To some extent, all of them test the participants' knowledge of facts, historical figures, and cultural references, suggesting a transnational character. The level and intensity of competitiveness in these games may vary, the prizes might be symbolic, and their rules and content can range from simple to complex. They aim to entertain participants by 'playing' with tangible and intangible forms of culture. Themed editions of these games are common, especially for pub quizzes, which try to appeal to different target groups (e.g. 1990s pub quiz, Eurovision pub quiz). In their turn, the WRBC games engage with Russophone book culture and the Soviet and post-Soviet heritage, given the clear orientation of the book club. Engaging with Russophone literature through games promotes the creation and enhancement of the post-Soviet ideoscape, with symbols and narratives sustaining the migrants' sociocultural imaginary. The games result from and connect to a global cultural flow that follows the migration of populations from the post-Soviet world.

A community practice like the WRBC literary games preserves and shapes the cultural memory of the participants, updating and synchronising their imagination with that of Russian speakers in Russia and other diasporic locales. For example, quizzes about famous contemporary Russophone writers not only test the knowledge of the participants but, more importantly, inform and acquaint them with the literary canon, guiding them through the complex Russian literary field. Furthermore, the 'Pioneer Childhood' game transcends time and space, transporting the participants to the chronotope of their Soviet childhood, a constitutive element of their cultural heritage. Unlike themes of world cultures, popular music, and sports, the WRBC games draw inspiration from the fragmented global Russophone culture, forging a temporary and asynchronous space where participants interact with literary worlds, writers, and the discursive and semiotic systems in which they are created. In other words, the gaming experience places the book club members within the Russian-speaking ideoscape, engaging them with different aspects of their cultural heritage.

The literary games are not only products of WRBC's transnationalism but also actively contribute to the consolidation of its diasporic identity. The Anniversary Quiz highlighted the achievements of the community initiative in terms of growth in numbers, diversity of topics and books discussed, as well as connections with diasporic organisations and Russian cultural institutions. The quiz questions related to the book club members, whether online or not, from the Russophone diaspora

inside and outside Britain<sup>16</sup> depict the WRBC as a transnational community by emphasising that it consists of members from all around the globe, who join the book club meetings physically or virtually (e.g. 'Although the book club is based in London, representatives from other cities attend our meetings. From which?'). Minimising the significance of the distinction between offline (physical presence) and virtual participation, the moderator used leading questions to guide WRBC members towards identifying with the global Russophone community. The offline members were asked to imagine themselves as part of the online Facebook group, a constantly growing transnational group primarily consisting of Russian speakers settled in Britain.<sup>17</sup>

An illustration of the moderator's intention behind these questions comes from a short verbal exchange between herself and Mark that took place during the quiz. Halfway through the anniversary quiz, Mark interrupted Katya and asked, 'What is the point of the quiz if we already know the answers to some questions and only you know the answers to the rest?' By distinguishing between two categories of questions (questions about past activities and questions about the book club members), Mark called out the moderator for the design of the game. Katya responded, 'To let the participants of the quiz know about the past year and our members. And of course, to have fun.' The quiz continued, and no one else appeared to have further objections. Reflecting on that dialogue, I asked the moderator at the end of the event about the aim of the game's final question: 'What is the most important section of the WRBC blog for the absent members?' The correct answer was the section dedicated to the questions for the book discussion. According to Katya, this question invited the participants to think beyond the premises of Waterstones Piccadilly, drawing their attention to a meeting point with the virtual members.<sup>18</sup> Despite the moderator's efforts to raise the transnational awareness of the WRBC members, Mark's objection highlighted the participants' agency in interpreting the content of the games.

Question No. 11 of the Anniversary Quiz asked the players about the countries where the online book club members reside. This leading question highlighted Russia's place among the various loci of the global Russophone scape, which can be interpreted as an indirect recognition of the significance of having representation among the members from the cultural homeland for the success of the book club. This interpretation of Katya's question about Russia's symbolic place is supported by its discord with the rest of the questions that regard Waterstones Piccadilly as the point of focus and thereby centre, while other locations inside or outside the UK, where other members live, are considered the periphery.<sup>19</sup> A centropерipheral model is to be expected from a self-referential quiz, but the prominence given to Russia by the moderator through this leading question differentiates the book club from other community initiatives that do not manage to achieve such appeal back 'home'. After the April 2018 meeting, I had an opportunity to briefly discuss this observation with Klavdia, the deputy book club moderator, who participated in the game. For Klavdia, Russia not only provides the WRBC with the majority of contemporary Russophone literary production but also 'remains the cultural

homeland for all Russian speakers, no matter where they live', and 'we are proud that people in Russia follow us'. In her view, the question under discussion showcases the WRBC members' sense of belonging to the Russophone diaspora and primarily their orientation towards Russia. Thus, the interest of readers in Russia indicates the success of the club's literary activities.

Another aspect of the WRBC games related to the transnational character of the book club is the opportunity for members to be multipresent in both Britain and Russia. The WRBC serves as a platform and space that allows Russian speakers to stay in touch with developments in Russian literature, learn about trends, and follow the continuous formation of the literary canon. Instead of experiencing a diasporic absence from the homeland or an asynchronous relationship, the book club supports the multipresence of its members, enabling them to be here and there simultaneously.<sup>20</sup> The readers are not limited to discussions about books and authors, but they actively engage with literary awards, book reviews, competitions, and literary events in Russia. They are both here and there as a well-informed diasporic audience that closely follows the long-distance dialogue with Russia.<sup>21</sup> Masha mentioned in the interview, 'It's great that we read books from the list of the Big Book, because this list shows all the paths of Russian literature development at present.' In that sense, the quiz question about the members' favourite Russian literary award indicates that the function of the book club is to offer an overview of contemporary Russophone literature, as well as the established relationship with the director of the Big Book Award.

As for the multipresence in Britain and Russia, the primary literary game of the book club that promotes this aspect of transnationalism is the role-playing game based on the fantasy novel *Apocalypsis Welcome*. Role-playing games have received academic interest as early as the 1970s, primarily for games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, and later for video and computer games of a similar nature.<sup>22</sup> Peter Stromberg describes a role-playing game as 'a set of special conventions through which recognizably fictional suspense is created and eventually resolved', 'a hybrid, a combination of game and drama'.<sup>23</sup> The gamers either create a character or adopt one provided by the game, and they act and react based on their hypothetical characteristics, fears, emotions, and goals.<sup>24</sup> The experience of the fictional world in which the characters operate is similar to that of novels for readers. However, there is a significant difference between games and books: the agency of the players, who decide the actions of their characters, in contrast to the absence of agency for readers who are guided through a book by the author's strict narrative.

The WRBC role-playing game aimed to provide its members with an alternative role-playing experience that promoted their agency and individual voices, with the limitation of having to choose from eleven available characters from the book. Within this fictional world, players engaged in debates against each other, acting according to their characters' main traits as developed and presented in the novel. Through these debates, gamers had the opportunity to continue or alter the storyline, support or confront other characters, and most importantly, to transport themselves imaginatively back to Russia, where the action of the book took place.

Role-playing games allow players to inhabit two places at the same time — the physical and the fictional — and to ‘appropriate the “there” of the story and make it one’s “here”’.<sup>25</sup> In this case, multipresence in Britain and Russia, the host society and the cultural homeland, has a particular symbolic value given that the WRBC is a diasporic community book club that consumes literature mostly produced in Russia. Even in a fictional, post-apocalyptic version of the country, the players could manage to be present for the duration of the game, to enact and perform their take on the characters’ identities, while still being among their fellow WRBC members. Nonetheless, the participants did not appear to realise the symbolic character of the game and one could hardly say that they embraced this new activity. Gary Fine argues that ‘players must invest their characters with meaning’ for a full gaming experience;<sup>26</sup> they should commit both to the game setting and to their character before playing. Apart from the expected awkwardness and reticence caused by the first encounter with this type of game, the players gave the impression that the game was only interesting to them as an alternative setting for book discussion. They did not manage to join the ‘shared fantasy’<sup>27</sup> of the post-apocalyptic novel as a simulation of a (fictional) life in Russia, failing not only to play the game, but, more importantly, to achieve a temporary imaginative return to the post-Soviet space.

The ‘Outside the Brackets’ and ‘Pioneer Childhood’ games are unique cases of uploaded videos on the Facebook page of the book club. In both cases, the videos showcased the innovative nature of the book club meetings and the variety of its literary activities to online and prospective members. Given that the book club operated exclusively offline until the Covid-19 pandemic, the online videos from the literary games made the meetings more accessible to members outside London and the UK, members who missed a particular meeting, or those who follow the club’s Facebook page to get a glimpse into the gatherings. For instance, a WRBC member living in Ukraine commented under the ‘Outside the Brackets’ video: ‘Katya! What a wonderful gift you have prepared for us — I mean this video! You have a wonderful club, and its value lies in its members. Such enthusiasts! Good luck and creativity to you!’

The posted video is regarded as a gift to the online members who cannot join the meetings; it allows them to connect with the participants in some way. For the active offline members, the uploaded videos serve as platforms for continuing book club discussions or as memorabilia of the ‘happy moments’ at the book club. Even though the digital impact of the videos seems limited,<sup>28</sup> they contributed to the transnational character of the book club by offering a digital afterlife to the games, whose significance and influence would have otherwise been limited to the setting of Waterstones Piccadilly.

The design of the WRBC games incorporated elements from both British and Soviet gaming traditions, tailored to the specific needs of each event. The Anniversary Quiz celebrated a successful first year and aimed to raise the members’ transnational awareness by focusing on what the moderator considered to be the club’s achievements. In the case of the role-playing game, the players were presented with an activity that had a significant transnational character but found it difficult to immerse themselves in it. The ‘Kholod Quiz’ was a demanding intellectual

game that brought writers closer to readers, while the ‘Pioneer Childhood’ game transported book club members to an idealised Soviet childhood, recreating a shared memoryscape.

### The Gifts of the Waterstones Russian Book Club

Gift exchanges take place in all communities and societies defining the relationships and power structures between the parties, the givers and the receivers. The work of Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss brought gifts and gift-giving practices to the forefront of anthropological enquiry supporting their fundamental role for community formation and, subsequently, social solidarity.<sup>29</sup> For Mauss, there are no ‘pure gifts’, as Malinowski supported,<sup>30</sup> and reciprocity is one of the foundations of the gift-giving contributing to the building of trust, bonds, and networks on a societal level. Exploring American Christmas giving rituals, Carrier argues that a gift is often a commodity but ‘also a vehicle of affection that expresses sentiment within a relationship that is personal and probably familial’.<sup>31</sup> In this framework, the WRBC games, celebrations, and other functions provided gift-giving opportunities from four different sources (givers): the book club moderator, visiting writers, the Read Russia project, and Rossotrudnichestvo. In all four cases, the recipients of the gifts are the WRBC members, in their various but interconnected capacities as members of a community initiative, the Russophone reading audience, and the Russian-speaking diaspora. The WRBC gifts represent and objectify reciprocal relationships, as the givers expect certain behaviours, actions, or loyalties in return from the recipients.

The main gift-giver towards the book club members has been Katya, the WRBC moderator. Katya volunteered her time coordinating the operations of the community initiative, writing up the questions for each book discussion, selecting books, communicating with writers and institutions for the organisation of events, responding to members’ queries, and creating book club games and quizzes with little or no help from others. In addition to that gift, she has been buying chocolate treats and various sweets for the meetings from the inception of the book club, as well as gifts and decorations for the celebrations. Her generous attitude towards the book club and its members drew my attention from the first meeting I attended. In our interview a few months later, she explained this to me, using the English word ‘charity’ twice, even though we were speaking in Russian:

This is my *charity*. This is an English penetration into my life. Well done to them. The English believe that if you have received something from society and it has helped you to have a certain standard of living, and you have a good life, you need to help others to live better. This is my small contribution to society: to help other people live better lives, so that people come and we all try to make them laugh. It seems to me that people leave with a better mood than they came with. And it stays with you, the feeling that you had a good two hours. This is very important. This is moral *charity*.

Katya’s account is illuminating on two different levels that derive from her positions

as a Russian-speaking migrant in London and as the WRBC coordinator. First of all, she documents the hybridisation of her own identity by admitting a certain influence of English culture on how she perceives her social role in British society. Katya feels a strong sense of duty to give something back to society, expressing her gratitude for the good and comfortable life she enjoys. Therefore, she decided to assume the role of a community leader and coordinate a cultural initiative where people can relax and enjoy themselves, giving back not to the general public but to other migrants like herself. By describing her charitable activity as 'moral' and ethical, she highlights the fact that she is not trying to offer any material support but rather recreational support, which would lift their spirits. Although there is no mention of the living conditions of migrants in Britain or the particular needs of the Russian-speaking population, it is understood that Katya regards diasporic life as challenging and requiring support. Still, her acts of charity are described as the infiltration of the host culture into her life rather than a duty to a certain community. Katya's contested sense of belonging combines loyalties to the host society in general (British), the Russophone diasporic community (a subsection of the British), and the home society (Russia or the USSR), indicating the hybridisation of her cultural identity.

The book club might be Katya's gift at large to the community, but it does not cover the other tangible gifts and awards that she gave to the members. For the Anniversary meeting of March 2018, Katya had prepared a special gift-giving ceremony for the book club members. She first counted the points of each participant in the Anniversary Quiz and announced the winners. The first winner could choose between two categories of gifts: a classical novel or 'something unconventional'. The rest of the participants congratulated and applauded the winner, who received the gift and started unwrapping it slowly, clearly enjoying the process. The second winner, Vera, did not have a choice with the book she received as an award, but she also received applause. Interestingly enough, Vera had asked the moderator at the beginning of the quiz if she qualified to participate, as she had attended only three other meetings. Two members shared third place, and therefore had to share the award, consisting of a two-volume book with the recommendation to exchange them with each other after finishing reading them.<sup>32</sup>

At the end of the award ceremony, the moderator announced that she would like to express her gratitude to certain book club members by recognising their contribution and offering them a gift. The first one to receive a gift ('the only honorary diploma in black and white') was Mark 'for expressing the most alternative and irreconcilable opinions'. Following him, several other book club members received diplomas as well: Laura, the Italian but fluent in Russian, for her enthusiasm and participation; Vera, for coordinating the WhatsApp group of the book club for those members who do not have access on Facebook (she was also given a box of chocolates); Klavdia, for being a good deputy moderator; and Anna, for traveling a long distance to come to every WRBC meeting. The separation of the two groups of recipients by Katya, in her capacity as the giver, underscores the connection of the gifts to the motives and scope of the practice. Barry Schwartz

suggests that ‘gifts as ceremonial tokens of regard may be distributed analytically into two overlapping categories: those presented in recognition of status and those presented in recognition of achievement’.<sup>33</sup> The winners were rewarded with prizes for their achievement in playing the quiz, while the distinguished book club members received gifts in recognition of their special status within the WRBC. In both instances, the gifts served as symbols of attention and attentiveness, but particularly for the second category, the honorary diplomas showed the members’ recognition as valuable social actors. Jennifer Patico argues that ‘with the gift, the giver expresses her own social value and, indeed, “attentiveness” to the social relations in which they have engaged’.<sup>34</sup> The sustainability of the WRBC as a grassroots initiative relies heavily on the continuous involvement of its members by sharing responsibilities, such as coordinating the WhatsApp group. With the gift-giving ceremony, Katya invites the WRBC community as a whole to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of these ‘special’ members to its functions, thereby transforming the book club into a place of affective engagement that supports the formation of shared diasporic identities.<sup>35</sup>

Taking a closer look at the gifts, one can see that the majority of them are hard copies of Russian novels, contemporary or not. Books are a rather expected gift for book club members, but they also hold a symbolic place in (post-)Soviet culture. In Soviet times, books and book collections were fetishised, which demonstrates their high symbolic and material value and their transformation into a status symbol in Soviet society. In this context, Benjamin Tromly maintains that ‘it was mandatory for a true intellectual to have a novel on his or her bedside table’, while ‘party-state elites also made “claims to culture” by keeping classical literature on their bookshelves next to their collection of agitprop materials, even if only for show’.<sup>36</sup> Studying Russian diasporic households, Pechurina found book cabinets and bookshelves in many living rooms, styled after Russian and Soviet flats and houses.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the gift-giving ceremony at the March 2018 meeting constituted one of the rare occasions when book club members engaged with printed books rather than digital, since most of them read the month’s book on their electronic devices. Victoria expressed her satisfaction for receiving hardback copies of books from some of her favourite writers, given that she usually reads eBooks: ‘It is always a pleasure to receive gifts. I was able to get books that I won in competitions. I have already accumulated a small collection.’ Attachment to eBooks is weaker than to print books, as most readers continue to collect physical copies and treat them as beloved possessions.<sup>38</sup> In this framework, print books receive added value as gift choices by the WRBC moderator, and they can be displayed at home as the newest additions to the book collections of the members.

Gifts also epitomise the giver’s view of the recipient,<sup>39</sup> or as Barry Schwartz maintained, ‘to accept a gift is to accept (at least in part) an identity, and to reject a gift is to reject a definition of oneself’.<sup>40</sup> By offering books, the WRBC moderator promotes the members’ identities as readers of Russophone literature, both classic and contemporary, belonging to a global reading community. The gifts enhance the feeling of loyalty to the book club and to Russian-speaking culture. Oksana

admitted her pride in winning a book of classical Russian literature that she could add to her collection, but more importantly, that she could later pass on to her grandchildren who are growing up in England: 'I hope that when my grandchildren open this book and read it, turning the pages, it will help them in life, to make sense of something, to understand, to learn.' In this way, the gifted book not only reaffirms the member's sense of belonging to a literature-centric post-Soviet culture but is also imbued with the hope of instilling the same attachment to the classics and Russian literature in general in her descendants, who are being raised in a transnational environment.

Another occasion when the moderator paid for a gift given to a book club member was in April 2019, following the 'Nostalgic Game "Pioneer Childhood"'. After giving the prizes to the winners of the game, Katya announced that she would give a special prize to Laura for 'participating in the book club from the very first meeting, despite not being a native speaker of Russian, and for constantly helping out'. The prize that Laura received was a large Superman figure. Superman is an icon of American culture, the mythologised 'great American hero'. He first appeared in 1938 but was fully developed as a character and established as a cultural figure during the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> Umberto Eco was one of the first scholars to study Superman in 1962 and approached him as an American archetype of righteousness, justice, and invincibility.<sup>42</sup> As a superhero appearing in comics, TV shows, and movies, Superman is in a constant fight for 'truth, justice, and the American way'.<sup>43</sup>

In the context of a WRBC meeting, and especially in the form of a gift to a book club member, Superman's symbol takes on new meanings. As signs of attention and appreciation to certain book club members, the WRBC gifts were chosen carefully to fulfil this objective. Books were given to the winners, and diplomas were awarded to distinguished members. In Laura's case, the significance of the chosen gift drew from its symbolism. Superman is effectively an alien living with a double identity, initially in Smallville, a small American city, and later as an adult in Metropolis. By choosing an alien superhero who lives as a human, the moderator addresses an element of Laura's identity and distinguishes her from the rest of the members on that basis: being a fluent but non-native Russian speaker. Laura's command of Russian provides her with access to the book club, but it is her dedication that is awarded; a dedication that is considered superhuman. Still, her membership is treated as peripheral compared to the rest of the readers who are Russian native speakers and migrants from a post-Soviet country. In the interview, Laura appears conflicted about the attention she receives through the gifts:

I am not sure myself why Katya decided to gift me the Superman figure. I sometimes feel ashamed and embarrassed by the attention and mentions I receive at the Russian Book Club. I don't do anything special apart from being a non-native Russian speaker attending all the book club meetings. I don't contribute to the discussions; I just sit very quietly and listen to what the others have to say. At the beginning, I tried to read the books, but by the time we voted for the book and I got it delivered, there is very little time for me to read it before the next meeting. I think the Superman figure was a nice way for Katya to acknowledge my efforts in keeping up my interest in Russian while

living in a third country and working very long hours every week. But I believe the main reason for the Superman figure is related to my job. Katya knows I am extremely busy, if not completely overwhelmed, at work, and she knows I work many hours every day.

Laura's efforts are appreciated, and she is highly praised for them, although both of her gifts (March 2019 and April 2019 celebrations) are non-literary. The Superman figure, in particular, is radically different from the Soviet-themed gifts given to the other book club members, highlighting her peripheral position in the book club. In other words, gift-giving can act as an identity formation mechanism by defining otherness even within a community. For the WRBC members, community identity relies upon high competence in the Russian language and (post)Soviet culture, in most cases deriving from a living experience in the USSR or its successor countries.

The visiting writers constitute the second source of gifts to the WRBC community. For this category of givers, it is necessary to make a distinction between the gifts they give themselves and those representing them and their creative identities. In the first case, a writer offers selected readers a copy of one of their books, while in the second case, books by this writer are gifted to the book club members by the Read Russia organisers. Starting with the first case, in April 2018, the winners of the 'Outside the Brackets' quiz received copies of Shamil Idiatullin's award-winning book *Gorod Brezhnev* (2017). The moderator handed the books to the readers, mentioning that the following day the bookshop would be hosting a meet-the-author event with Idiatullin and they were invited to attend and have their copy signed. The winners attended the event and had an opportunity to be introduced to the writer by the moderator, be photographed with him, and receive a personalised dedication. Idiatullin was invited to the London Book Fair by Read Russia and participated in a number of events with the Russophone community in London before embarking on a book tour to other British cities with considerable Russian-speaking populations.

Idiatullin's gifts, and other events targeting the WRBC community as part of the global Russophone literature market were promotional in nature. It is not uncommon for writers to connect with book clubs to promote their work.<sup>44</sup> In this case, the unsigned books represent an invitation to meet and talk to the writer, reminiscent of VIP access to a concert that includes a meet-and-greet privilege. Contemporary Russian-speaking writers have had to adapt to the conditions of the post-Soviet literary landscape, characterised by the emergence of cultural capitalism looking for different and often innovative paths to success and recognition.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, this marketing approach to gift-giving reflects the resourceful cultural strategy of Read Russia to connect with foreign and diasporic audiences. As part of its annual programme, Read Russia used to organise official representations consisting of writers and translators at international book fairs around the world. The invited writers were also asked to present their work at local Russian cultural centres and institutions, which gives them the opportunity to expand their reading network. There are always cases of famous authors with a pre-existing audience whose events are well attended without much promotion being particularly

necessary. Overall, gift-giving helps to build connections, enhance reputation, and generate obligations, and writers can instrumentalise it to connect with a prospective reading audience and capitalise on the benefits of direct contact.

The WRBC gifts assume a political dimension when the discussion reaches those given by the Read Russia project. Even though its official scope is to promote Russian literature and Russian book culture to foreign audiences, the Read Russia project also targets local Russophone diasporic communities. During the London Book Fair 2019, I observed various gift-related strategies from Read Russia that demonstrate how the project's organisers are trying to weave a transnational network of Russophone readers. The previous year, Katya met with the organisers at the LBF and informed them about the WRBC as a community book club, which led to a collaboration between the international cultural project and the grassroots initiative. The collaboration included two literary events specifically for the members of the club with writers invited by Read Russia. The first was the rebranding of the monthly book club meeting to a meet-the-author event with Aleksey Salnikov, whose invitation to the LBF was a direct request by the WRBC members. In contrast to their usual practice, the Read Russia organisers decided to reach out to a community initiative for the selection of the Russian writers of the year. Representatives of the project attended the writer's event, and an hour later, they reminded the moderator that they had to leave together with Salnikov. The writer's presence at the WRBC gathering was a gift, a privilege, but with limited duration.

The second event of the Read Russia–WRBC collaboration took place two days later and was entitled 'Breakfast with Guzel Yakhina'. Being the most famous among the invited writers, Yakhina had already had a sold-out book presentation at Waterstones. The ticketed event attracted a wide audience from the Russophone community, and despite its initial advertising, it was held exclusively in Russian. In contrast to the book presentation, the 'Breakfast' was a free, informal, strictly female, and invitation-only event. The invited participants were the female core members of the WRBC, along with representatives of other small Russophone book clubs (RCW Book Club and the London Literary Club). I learned about the event from the Read Russia programme, as there was no reference to it on the WRBC Facebook page. Katya hesitated when I tried to register for the event, but she finally allowed me to attend. Nonetheless, I was instructed to sit as far as possible from the table without the right to participate. The fourteen attendees sat around the table and conversed with Yakhina about her work over tea, coffee, and pastries. Despite the intimate and private nature of the meeting with the writer, a member of Read Russia's organisation committee was present as an observer and recorded the discussion.

The 'Breakfast with Guzel Yakhina' was received by the members of the Russian-speaking reading community as a gift, a perquisite offered exclusively to them. The organisers had added a second event of the same nature to Yakhina's busy schedule for a subgroup of the original audience, in the same building, and for free. Patico argues that 'Gifts are part of people's strategies for getting things that they

need and want, and which they might not get otherwise.<sup>46</sup> Like most gifts, these two were not unconditional, and the expectation for reciprocity was expressed already when they were granted to the WRBC members. Read Russia benefited from these two gifts, first of all, by gaining access to the WRBC meetings. In both cases, the discussions were recorded, an advantage that was constantly negotiated in my case. The combination of the recording and the observations by the project's representatives allowed them to collect data about the literary practices and reading habits of the post-Soviet diaspora in Britain. Furthermore, the reference to the 'gifted' meeting with Yakhina in the official Russian program promoted the public image of the project as being well connected with the local transnational community, thereby influential and successful. In other words, the announcement of the gift articulated the 'objectification' of the social relationship between Read Russia and the WRBC.<sup>47</sup> The projected relationship translated into the existence of a diasporic network based on 'a kind of intimacy or closeness among those considered to be "one's own", *svoi*'.<sup>48</sup> By claiming its presence in both public ('Meeting Alexei Salnikov') and relatively private literary events ('Breakfast with Guzel Yakhina'), Read Russia tried to establish itself as an actor on the level of diaspora politics and instrumentalise gift-giving in order to mobilise the Russophone community in London.

Read Russia also provided the WRBC with books as awards and gifts for the games and celebrations. In April 2019, the winners of the 'Nostalgic Game "Pioneer Childhood"' received the following gifts: for third place, each member of the team received a signed copy of Salnikov's latest novel; for second place, the contestants got a novel by Ivanov; while one member of the winning team received a copy of Yakhina's novel *Deti moi* (2021), and the other received a copy of the month's book, *Pischeblok*, with notes for all the quiz questions by the author himself. All books were donated by Read Russia during the LBF the previous month and were signed by the respective writers. The recipients seemed to be very pleased with their gifts,<sup>49</sup> and the playful comment of the winner who received a copy of *Pischeblok* was indicative of the atmosphere in the book club: 'Fifty years from now, I will definitely sell it!'

As discussed earlier, books are well-expected and appropriate gifts for readers, especially those participating in literary communities, but Read Russia's books have an additional symbolic value. By being brought from Russia for the occasion, signed by the writers, and given to the readers following a Soviet-themed group game, the books are transformed from ordinary to 'migrant' or 'diasporic objects'.<sup>50</sup> Migrant/diasporic objects materialise cultural or collective memory<sup>51</sup> and assist in the preservation of the diasporans' long-distance relationship with their homelands, enhancing the feeling of multipresence.<sup>52</sup> The gifted books encapsulate and intend to reinforce the personal and collective relationship with reading inherited from Soviet literaturocentrism and related cultural practices, continued in the country of settlement.<sup>53</sup> One could argue here that the WRBC's book-giving practices promote their fetishisation and their re-emergence as status symbols in a book club that reads almost exclusively eBooks, but this argument requires a longer study

of the book club's practices. More importantly, in this context, the signed books acquire the status of tangible symbols of contemporary Russophone culture, and their possession manifests their reading identities, imaginatively connecting the winners of 'The Nostalgic Game' with the wider transnational reading community.

The last WRBC gift that I identified comes from the London office of Rossotrudnichestvo. Rossotrudnichestvo provided the book club members with access to one of the largest online libraries for Russophone literature, where one can find and download eBooks, including the latest releases. The free subscription to this paid literary website allows WRBC members to read any book they choose for their book club meetings without the limitations that other transnational book clubs might face, such as the cost of ordering a physical copy or downloading an eBook. During an interview with a book club member, I learned that there is no announcement on the Facebook page regarding the account details for the website in order to prevent misuse of the subscription by non-WRBC members. For this reason, book club members discreetly share the eBooks with each other, and in some cases, they also share the account details. The internal distribution of eBooks constitutes a form of online gift-exchange among the WRBC members, which builds intergroup solidarity and supports the formation of a transnational community 'rooted not only in shared interests or collective projects, but also in shared values',<sup>54</sup> such as mutual support. Although Rossotrudnichestvo's gift reflects its political mission to promote Russian culture abroad and to build up a diasporic loyalty to Russia, the further sharing of it reflects the 'spirit' of a community of practice guaranteeing equal access to all members and thereby the necessary mutual engagement with the joint literary initiative.

## Conclusion

Straying from book discussion, the Waterstones Russian Book Club enriched its activities with games, celebrations, and gift-giving practices that respond to its character as a vibrant community space. The experimentation with different gaming styles involved hybrids of pub quizzes and intellectual British/Soviet games, transnational role-playing, collective memory recreation, and long-distance engagement with writers. These activities reaffirmed and enhanced the diasporic identity of the book club, providing opportunities for WRBC members to engage physically or virtually with transnational processes. At the same time, the WRBC gifts represent complex and multifaceted relationships between the recipients and the givers: the book club moderator regards her gift-giving practices as 'moral charity', and by organising the WRBC, she is giving back to the Russophone migrants in London. Idiatullin used gifts as a promotional tool for his books and events. Read Russia offered books and organised meetings with writers as part of its cultural agenda to mobilise the Russian-speaking diaspora. Rossotrudnichestvo's gift to the WRBC was further shared carefully and furtively with newer book club members, marking the existence of a sense of communality within the book club. Games, gifts, and celebrations constitute influential factors for the formation of a

shared Russophone diasporic identity by spinning a transnational, meaning-centred ‘web of significance’.<sup>55</sup>

### Notes to Chapter 3

1. George E. Weddle, ‘National Portraits: The Columbian Celebrations of 1792, 1892–93 and 1992 as Cultural Moments’, in *The Cultures of Celebrations*, ed. by Ray B. Browne and Michael T. Marsden (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), pp. 111–26 (p. 111).
2. In contrast to other meetings, the majority of the book club members did not contribute in kind (with sweets and gifts) or financially to the organisation of the meeting and the moderator purchased everything herself.
3. The questions were: which is your favourite Russophone literary award; from which country do the WRBC come from after the UK; from which British cities have we had representatives at the meetings; who does free advertising of the book club and its events and where on the website can anyone find each meeting’s questions for discussion.
4. The novel has been translated into English by Marian Schwartz with the title *Into the Thickening Fog* (2017).
5. The title can be translated to English as ‘The food court’.
6. Ronald Hustedde and Betty King, ‘Rituals: Emotions, Community Faith in Soul and the Messiness of Life’, *Community Development Journal*, 37.4 (2002), pp. 338–48 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/37.4.338>>.
7. The video was filmed and edited by the same book club member who prepared the video for the ‘Outside the brackets’ literary game in April 2018.
8. Robert Detweiler, ‘Games and Play in Modern American Fiction’, *Contemporary Literature*, 17.1 (1976), pp. 44–62 (pp. 48–49).
9. Mona Bozdog and Dayna Galloway, ‘Worlds at our Fingertips: Reading (in) What Remains of Edith Finch’, *Games and Culture*, 15.7 (2019), pp. 789–808 (804).
10. Astrid Ensslin, *Literary Gaming* (MIT Press, 2014), p. 41.
11. Frans Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture* (Sage, 2008), p. 27.
12. DeNel Rehberg Sedo, ‘An Introduction to Reading Communities: Processes and Formations’, in *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace*, ed. by DeNel Rehberg Sedo (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 1–24 (p. 5).
13. Arthur Taylor, *Played at the Pub: The Pub Games of Britain* (English Heritage, 2009), p. 162.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
15. Despite its benefits, the format of the ‘Apocalypsis Welcome’ role-playing game was quickly abandoned, because it highlighted the differences between the members and the different expectations they had from the WRBC instead of bringing them together and investing in what they share.
16. These are: Question No 1 about the number of the book club members with the available choices directing the players to the number of online members; Question No 11 about the countries where the online book club members reside; Question No 12 about the British cities that have been represented through visiting Russian speakers at the meetings; and Question No 15 about the section of the book club’s blog where the questions are posted after each session.
17. On the day of the anniversary quiz, there were 520 members.
18. Interestingly enough, the WRBC blog has not been updated since October 2018, putting an end to this generous contribution of the moderator to Russian speakers around the world.
19. Dufoix.
20. See Mikhail Suslov, ‘Geopolitisation of the Post-Soviet Diaspora in the Baltic Sea Region’, *Global Affairs*, 4.4–5 (2018), pp. 521–35 (p. 527).
21. Athique.
22. Gary A. Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (University of Chicago Press, 1983); Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (MIT Press, 2009).

23. Peter G. Stromberg, *Caught in Play: How Entertainment Works on You* (Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 54–55.
24. Fine.
25. Stromberg, p. 56.
26. Fine, p. 214.
27. I am paraphrasing the title of Fine's monograph *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983).
28. The video of the 'Pioneer Childhood' game had 450 views, 4 shares, and 21 comments, while the "Outside the Brackets" game had only 3 shares and 5 comments. The second video was uploaded by the member who created it and I cannot see the number of the views.
29. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Routledge, 1922); Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Norton, 1967).
30. Mauss, p. 93.
31. James G. Carrier, 'The Rituals of Christmas Giving', in *Unwrapping Christmas*, ed. by Daniel Miller (Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 55–74 (p. 55).
32. In all cases, Katya did not mention the title of the books or the writers when she was handing them to the winners.
33. Barry Schwartz, 'The Social Psychology of the Gift', *American Journal of Sociology*, 73.1 (1967), pp. 1–11 (p. 7) <<https://doi.org/10.1086/224432>>.
34. Jennifer Patico, 'Chocolate and Cognac: Gifts and the Recognition of Social Worlds in Post-Soviet Russia', *Ethnos*, 67.3 (2002), pp. 345–68 (p. 362) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184022000031202>>.
35. Maruška Svašek, 'Introduction', in *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*, ed. by Maruška Svašek (Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. 1–40 (p. 19).
36. Benjamin Tromly, *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life under Stalin and Khrushchev* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 9.
37. Pechurina.
38. María A. Thumala Olave, 'Book Love: A Cultural Sociological Interpretation of the Attachment to Books', *Poetics*, 81 (2020), pp. 1–11 (pp. 6–7) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101440>>.
39. Aafke E. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).
40. Schwartz, p. 2.
41. Ian Gordon, *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (Rutgers University Press, 2017).
42. Umberto Eco, 'The Myth of Superman', *Diacritics*, 2.1 (1972), pp. 14–22 (p. 16) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/464920>>.
43. Gordon, p. 41.
44. Long, p. 208; Clayton Childress, *Under the Cover: The Creation, Production, and Reception of a Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2017).
45. Gorski.
46. Patico, p. 362.
47. Schwartz.
48. Michele R. Rivkin-Fish, 'Reproducing Russia: Women's Health and Moral Education in the Construction of a Post-Soviet Society' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 1998), p. 294.
49. 'Of course, it is very pleasant to receive gifts, especially books signed by the author', 'A book signed by the author becomes more important and valuable'.
50. Caroline B. Brettell, 'Material Culture, Memory and Commemoration: Family and Community Celebrations and Connections to "Home" among Asian Indian Immigrants', in *Memory, Migration and Travel*, ed. by Sabine Marschall (Routledge, 2018), pp. 45–65.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
52. Pechurina, p. 91.
53. 'In my book, Katya's notes have been preserved after [using it] to prepare for the literary evening. This is very valuable, because the book also becomes a monument, a memento of the evening.'

54. Anca Metiu, 'Gift-Giving, Transnational Communities, and Skill-Building in Developing Countries: The Case of Free/Open Source Software', in *Transnational Communities: Shaping Global Economic Governance*, ed. by Marie-Laure Djelic and Sigrid Quack (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 199–225 (p. 204).
55. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz's famous phrase from *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

## CHAPTER 4



# Reconciliation and Nostalgia for the Soviet Past

The book discussion at the Waterstones Russian Book Club meetings moves freely across genres, topics, and generations of Russophone writers inspired by the book of the month. Collective reading and book discussions are inherently social practices as ‘books become the language through which people narrate their own experience and understand the experience of other group members’.<sup>1</sup> Book clubs provide readers with a certain discursive context influenced by the connection with an institution, bookshop, or publisher, the relationship with cultural authorities, and even a national or diasporic orientation. As the book club members ‘reexperienc[e] a book through other readers, the author, other media, and through visits to physical places’, their opinions and interpretations of the book under discussion are being informed, confirmed, or contested.<sup>2</sup> Central to the diasporic reading experience is the negotiation of personal and collective memory, often through historical novels that examine specific eras or events. In a book club context, the discussion of such texts is shaped by the personal experiences of the readers and their relationship with their homelands. With different ethnic origins and varying positions within Soviet society, the dispositions of the WRBC members towards the Soviet past are complex and multi-layered, which is reflected in the shared reading practice.

The shared Soviet past was approached in two different ways in the book club meetings. On one hand, there were efforts to negotiate and, in some cases, reconcile with dark and controversial periods of Soviet history (e.g. the Gulag, dekulakisation) through interpretations of contemporary historical fiction, benefiting from the physical distance from the post-communist space. On the other hand, games and celebrations served as opportunities to reconstruct memories of childhood and youth, expressing nostalgia and a longing for an imaginary return. Therefore, the chapter is divided into two parts: the first zooms in on the discussion of the historical novel *Obitel'* (The Monastery) by the award-winning writer Zakhar Prilepin, which depicts life in a Gulag forced labour camp at the end of the 1920s. Given the topic of the novel, that meeting was the first in over five months that did not include games or other literary activities and centred exclusively on discussion. The second part focuses on celebratory events and literary games that foster community through performances of cultural heritage and Soviet nostalgia that create a shared sense of identity and belonging. Continuing from the previous

chapter, the performances of Soviet nostalgia are explored through the uses of the past in ‘The Nostalgic Game “The Pioneer Childhood”’, which included Soviet songs, dictation exercises, and pioneer camp slang. This discussion is complemented by an exploration of the decorations for the book club’s first anniversary and the March 2020 meeting dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the Soviet poet Joseph Brodsky.

### Part I: *Obitel’* and Cultural Memory of the Gulag

The writer Zakhar Prilepin is a controversial figure in the Russian political and literary scenes. He is a critically acclaimed, bestselling author and recipient of many literary awards, as well as a former National Bolshevik, Chechen war veteran, and most notably, an ‘active celebrity combatant’ in the war in Donbass from 2017 to 2018.<sup>3</sup> Prilepin has criticised non-military writers ‘for their lack of first-hand experience of warfare’ and for not supporting ‘patriotic’ initiatives, such as the above-mentioned war.<sup>4</sup> In *Obitel’*, Prilepin aimed to offer a new interpretation of Gulag history based on archival research he conducted at Solovki, challenging the representation of the Soviet forced labour camps in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s work. Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), a Nobel laureate in Literature (1970), Gulag survivor, and dissident, published, among other works, the seminal non-fiction text *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), which traced the history of the Soviet camp system from 1918 to 1956. Solzhenitsyn wrote *The Gulag Archipelago* as ‘a literary memorial to those who suffered and died in the camps and who had no one else to write on their behalf’.<sup>5</sup> In an interview, Prilepin called this work ‘a collection of camp mythology, stories’, arguing that ‘Solzhenitsyn could not find documentary evidence of what he wrote, because everything was classified; he wrote simply from hearsay’, and that due to its lack of accuracy, it should not be taught in schools.<sup>6</sup>

Prilepin’s novel *Obitel’* chronicles the imprisonment of Artiom for patricide in the Solovki special purpose camp, the first of its kind, located at the Arctic Archipelago of the Solovetsky islands. Artiom’s crime differentiates him from the counterrevolutionaries and representatives of the old political regime in the monastery-turned-prison-camp. The main character manages to survive most aspects of prison life at Solovki, listens to the philosophical conversations between members of the intelligentsia, meets priests and monks, and starts an affair with the Chekist Galina,<sup>7</sup> who is the mistress of the camp’s first director, Fyodor Eichmanis. The novel presents the camp’s transition from a laboratory that experiments with the ideological transformation of the prisoners to a place that brutalises everyone, both inmates and guards. While belonging to the genre of camp prose, *Obitel’* combines elements of documentary prose, the Russian philosophical novel, and a romance between two of the main characters.<sup>8</sup>

The Special Purpose Camp of the Solovki (known as SLON) retains a special place in the history of the Soviet system of incarceration and internal exile.<sup>9</sup> It is the Solovetsky archipelago that inspired Solzhenitsyn to describe the Gulag camps as islands dispersed in the vast territory of the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> The Gulag camp was

established in 1923 in the premises of a prestigious Russian Orthodox monastery, founded in the fifteenth century and operating until the revolution.<sup>11</sup> In the early years of the Gulag, the prisoners were whoever the Bolsheviks considered as enemies: representatives of the Tsarist regime, members of oppositional political parties, White Army officers and soldiers, pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, religious leaders, and common criminals.<sup>12</sup> At that time and as mentioned above, the aim of Solovki was to re-educate the political prisoners, which explains the permission to engage in cultural activities in the camp. A theatre operated in Solovki that also toured to other camps, as well as a press, a research centre and a library with over 30,000 books.<sup>13</sup> The SLON constitutes the “‘exemplary” camp’ where the system of prisoners’ exploitation and punishment was developed and mastered, ‘a metonym for all Soviet camps — a part that stands for the whole and embraces all the horror and suffering of the Soviet victims’.<sup>14</sup> From the 1930s to the 1940s, the Gulag prisoners were used as a free labour force for the acceleration of the country’s industrialisation, the building of transportation infrastructure, and the exploitation of natural resources.<sup>15</sup>

Collective and individual memories of the Gulag have been downplayed, sidelined and even silenced, with the exception of a brief period of condemnation of Stalinist mass repression and the anti-Stalinist and victims’ rehabilitation movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In Soviet times, cultural memory was treated as a monopoly of the state and public silence represented a long-term state policy maintained to some extent today.<sup>16</sup> The enforced silence was connected to the fear of the Gulag survivors that they would face further persecution, as well as to the absence of trials and public accountability.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the post-Soviet society has not had an opportunity to mourn, reconcile, and recover from the collective trauma caused by the Soviet terror.<sup>18</sup> The struggle to remember and memorialise is manifested by the small number of Gulag memorials, museums, and sites of memory in Russia,<sup>19</sup> as well as the public’s interest in these topics in novels, films, and other forms of culture. Until 2021, in Russia only the Perm-36 camp<sup>20</sup> and the Solovetsky monastery were restored,<sup>21</sup> the sole operating museum was the GULAG History Museum in Moscow, while the first memorial to the victims of Soviet political repression, the Wall of Grief, was established in 2017.<sup>22</sup>

### Shared Reading of *Obitel’* and Collective Reconstruction of the Solovki Camp

On 7 May 2018, the book club gathered for its monthly meeting at Waterstones Piccadilly. The discussion followed the usual structure of the WRBC meetings: first, Katya, the moderator, asked the participants to introduce themselves and briefly share their reading experience. Then, the members discussed the book by answering questions in rounds, and at the end, they made plans for the next session. During the book discussion, the moderator proposed splitting into teams to hold debates on a list of topics, but this suggestion was not met with enthusiasm and did not take place. Book clubs often have to deal with participants who have not read the chosen book. In the case of the WRBC, there was one notorious ‘dilettante’ who never read the books and joined the discussion for the benefits of a community

gathering, while there was a shifting number of attendees who might not have had the time to read the specific book. Katya acknowledged this phenomenon at the beginning of the session, considering that *Obitel'* is over 700 pages:

The book is serious and difficult, so let's start with the simplest question: Did anyone read it to the end? Almost to the end? Half of it? Some of it? Not at all? I know that many people have read other works related to the topic, so it will be interesting to hear their thoughts if the questions are more general.

Before identifying who had read the book of the month and to what extent in order to distribute the prepared questions accordingly, the moderator framed the discussion by calling *Obitel'* 'a serious, difficult' book. Katya's hesitation to elaborate on what makes this novel challenging resonated with the decision of most WRBC members throughout the meeting to refer to the Gulag camps and the Stalinist political repressions in a vague, abstract manner. The Stalinist era is repeatedly described by the participants as 'hard time,' 'such a time,' 'terrible conditions' and characterised by its 'level of brutality' without going into details or rarely giving examples from the novel. The theme of 'brutality' covers a spectrum of reader responses from distancing or detachment from 'that time' to startlement and shock at the horrors described in the book.<sup>23</sup> However, the common discursive strategies towards the living conditions in the Gulag camps did not translate into shared assessment of *Obitel'*, positive or negative. Two members decided not to read the novel because of its subject<sup>24</sup> and one due to Prilepin's political activism in Ukraine.<sup>25</sup> The moderator cautiously intervened suggesting that they leave aside the writer's divisive political views and non-literary career, and focus on the novel, which is an almost impossible task when discussing a political novel.<sup>26</sup>

Among the majority of the WRBC members who perused *Obitel'* or flipped through its pages, there were two who struggled to read it and did not enjoy the experience. Klavdia, the book club's deputy moderator, confessed that she treated the reading of this novel as an assignment since the descriptions of the living conditions particularly in the first half of the book made her feel uncomfortable.<sup>27</sup> Even though Klavdia did not explain what in the book made her feel uneasy, Oksana, a core member of the WRBC, gave more details about her 'difficult' reading experience:

I read it to the end. I know this topic well and have read many books on it, but this one was hard to read. I have to say that I was pleased I read it when it was +35 degrees. Reading these stories about freezing conditions while sitting at home made me think about it. I seriously went and turned on the heating. Honestly. [Everybody laughs]

Even though Oksana was well acquainted with the topic of the Gulag, she still found it hard to finish *Obitel'*. The most striking effect was caused by the description of the Arctic cold that the characters faced in Solovki, which contrasted with the extraordinarily high temperature she was experiencing in London while reading the novel. The embodied reception of the suffering depicted in *Obitel'* is highlighted by Oksana's admission that she ended up turning on the heating during a heatwave. Ika Willis argues that a text can 'produce affective and bodily responses:

tears, nausea, arousal, the feeling of the hair rising on the back of the neck', yet even these responses 'are learned, and are just as historically and culturally variable as the interpretative and social dimensions of reading'.<sup>28</sup> Oksana's response to the literary depiction of the camp's freezing cold suggests, on the one hand, that she could personally relate to the embodied effect of such weather conditions, while on the other hand, the novel triggered cultural memory events connected to the Gulag camps. According to Uilleam Blacker and Aleksandr Etkind, memory events are 'acts and products of memory' produced, promoted, or censored by certain actors and 'are secondary to the historical events that they interpret'.<sup>29</sup> Gulag narratives reproduced in fiction and non-fiction often refer to the harsh living conditions in the camps and influence how relevant communities remember, imagine, and discuss the past. By trying to be convincing and stressing her 'honesty', Oksana aimed to transfer her reading experience from the private sphere to the public and transform the members of the group from listeners to participants in her embodied and affective interpretation of the novel.

Other WRBC members expressed their enjoyment of reading *Obitel'*. Irina, who was still a new member of the book club at the time, shared her enthusiasm about reading *Obitel'*: 'This is my second book in the club, and I can say that this book impressed me. I live through the books. In my head, I argue with myself while discussing each book.' Irina admitted to immersing herself in the books she reads by holding conversations and even arguing with herself. She further discussed how this novel allowed her to complete the picture of Gulag life depicted in other texts. In her turn, Anna found the first part of *Obitel'* more interesting than the rest of the novel for its successful representation of 'brutality': 'I liked the first book better, it's pure brutality. Of course, I skipped some paragraphs there, especially where all sorts of assaults were described. I'd put it on a bookshelf.' Despite finding it difficult to read the novel's first part in its entirety, Anna praised it for its credibility and believability and stated that she would add *Obitel'* to her book collection. The distinction between books placed on the shelf and the rest that might be given away shows a material practice connected to the personal hierarchy of taste and the afterlife of read books. A reader might keep those books that they value highly and/or enjoy the most to reread them or show them to guests.

Sofia explained that she relished the novel because she could relate to its topic as a retired army officer, though she did not clarify if she had served in a relevant post. In contrast to other participants, who based their familiarity with the novel's topic on having read other camp novels, Sofia referred to her work experience, which equipped her with a first-hand understanding of the Soviet correctional system. Interestingly, no one among the twenty-three participants mentioned relatives who were sent to the Gulag to serve time, despite the estimated figure of 25 million Gulag prisoners. The non-disclosure of any information about repressed relatives during the book discussion could be interpreted as a manifestation of the prolonged public silence on the topic. Notably, 71% of the respondents who participated in the VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Centre) 2017 survey on repressions answered, 'No, no one in my family was subjected to repressions.'

The first question of the book discussion was about the purpose of Prilepin's novel in comparison to that of the works by writers Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov. The two writers are the most famous representatives of *lagernaia literatura* or Gulag literature, which refers to literature that addresses Soviet repression and is authored by former Gulag prisoners or writers who have been directly or indirectly affected by Soviet repression.<sup>30</sup> Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov have been praised for their ability to distance themselves from their experiences, which allows them to construct a narrative and to assert their right to claim victimhood through their written works.<sup>31</sup> Sofia, who enjoyed the novel, maintained that Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov 'gave us documentaries about the camp with real characters', while Prilepin wrote fiction and 'gave life to the heroes and showed that the conditions in the camps were terrible, but a lot of positive things happened there, including theatre and much more'. One difference between *Obitel'* and works by Gulag survivors is the genres that they represent: fiction on the one hand and non-fiction on the other. Historical fiction affords writers greater freedom to create characters that serve the purpose of their novels, which in Prilepin's case was to show that the camp life in Solovki provided the characters with 'all the opportunities to be bright, merciful, and kind'.<sup>32</sup> Although the case of Solovki was unique and short-lived, Sofia seems to welcome such a reading of Gulag history, as well as the many references to God and the Orthodox Church, which are less prominent in the works of Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov ('Unlike the old books we read back then, in Prilepin's novel there is more Church, more God'). With historical distance growing, Russian society is progressively losing interest in the Soviet guilt.<sup>33</sup> Based on the following excerpt from the book discussion, the collective guilt over the Stalinist repressions, which divided the Soviet Union into 'those who were in prison and those who put them there',<sup>34</sup> is still negotiated by Russophone diasporic communities:

VICTORIA If you compare it with Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* is a manifestation, a reflection of the negative side. Here the situation is described from both perspectives, from the viewpoint of the guards and the inmates. Everyone has their own truth, everyone has their own falsehood.

KATYA Then, Prilepin's task was to show both sides of the truth, if possible.

OKSANA In principle, the author wanted to show that everyone had their good sides. He created certain characters specifically to depict this aspect of life, how security officers lived.

IRINA Everyone in the camp has sinned, everyone got caught for something, and we can say that this is a time to rethink yourself, rethink your actions. It seemed to me that in any case, everyone was sinful and deserved punishment.

According to the above dialogue, Prilepin endeavours to construct a new discourse on Gulag history that redistributes and balances the responsibility for the creation of the forced-labour camps between the wardens/guards and the prisoners. For the book club members who support such an interpretation of the Soviet past, Solzhenitsyn concentrated on the side of the prisoners and did not capture the recreational activities taking place in the Gulag camps nor did he fairly depict the

characters of the guards. Oksana read *Obitel'* as Prilepin's effort to mitigate the perpetrators' guilt by showing that in the grand scheme of things 'everyone was good', while Irina understood it as extending guilt to the prisoners, since 'everyone was sinful and deserved punishment'. Alexandra Smith argues that 'given that Russia has had no comprehensive memorialisation of its trauma from Stalinism, post-Soviet readers are likely to read any texts related to Gulag experiences and Stalin's terror as accusatory',<sup>35</sup> which in the case of the WRBC translates into approval of Prilepin's 'balanced' narrative. In the following excerpt, Klavdia explores Prilepin's role as a promoter of memory events:

It seems to me that the novel has two tasks. One is clearly political: it appears as though the novel was written in response to Solzhenitsyn. Prilepin criticised Solzhenitsyn and believed that he wrote *The Gulag Archipelago* based on his own archives and imagination. That is, he did not have access to documentary data, so he referred to interviews with prisoners who could have made up something or left something out. Solzhenitsyn divided the country, and Prilepin is trying to unite and justify everyone and justify our history. The second thing I thought was that he had very big literary ambitions, in particular, to create a monumental novel and even to get a prize.

For Klavdia, the proposed discourse on Gulag memory resonates with Prilepin's political goal to reconcile victims and persecutors, accomplices, and bystanders, as well as 'to justify everyone and justify our history', a long history of atrocities and repressions. To support this goal, Prilepin devalues the work of Solzhenitsyn, which provided evidence of events that deeply traumatised Soviet society,<sup>36</sup> and replaces it with an archive-based fictional narrative promoting unity and amity through collective guilt. Collective guilt can foster reconciliation in a divided society by undermining the victims' experience and reducing perpetrators' responsibility for the harm done.<sup>37</sup> In Klavdia's account, the writer chooses collective guilt as the easier path to much-needed closure instead of advocating for sincere repentance, 'individual accountability, and retroactive justice'.<sup>38</sup> The WRBC member also connected Prilepin's political position in *Obitel'* with his aspirations for a successful literary career. His 'monumental novel' managed to win the Big Book prize in 2014 and the Award of the Government of the Russian Federation in the field of culture in 2017, highlighting the official recognition of the novel's value by literary critics and the state alike.

Zooming in on the main characters of the novel, the WRBC members discussed Galina, a Bolshevik and Chekist who worked for the Information and Investigation Department. Specifically, the participants examined whether Galina's actions related to the interrogation and conviction of prisoners were '*understandable and justified*'. For most of the novel, Vera struggled to sympathise with Galina and understand her ability to be so brutal, especially since she saw her as a fellow woman.<sup>39</sup> The brutalities described initially prevented Vera from connecting with the character on the basis of gender identity, but these concerns were later set aside when the reader reached Galina's diary in the novel: 'After reading the diary, I kind of liked her and understood her brutality, although I do not know if this is a historical, real thing, or an invention of the author.' The diary offered a glimpse into the inner

world of Galina and provided background information on Prilepin's effort to justify her actions, which represented those of many other Chekists and accomplices. Vera enjoyed the diary, as she believed it explained the character's choices, but she was puzzled about its authenticity, given that the writer claimed to use archives and primary resources for the writing of *Obitel'*. At that point, Andrei asked Vera if the origin of the diary would make any difference to her, and she answered, 'I do not know, but in my opinion her actions are justified.' Galina's deeds are also justified by Anna, who identified the existence of gender bias in the discussion of the main female character:

ANNA It was interesting to read about her, because this is the twenties, the first women in power. She didn't do anything that her male co-workers didn't. Maybe she shocks us more because she is a woman. We have a different way of understanding women.

KATYA And her participation in the shootings?

ANNA Yes, but she had to participate, or they would have shot her. And then, this is all happening after the civil war. They shot everyone.

Anna maintains that Galina was not different from her male counterparts in the exercise of power at Solovki, and therefore she should be judged equally with them regarding her involvement in Gulag history. In Anna's opinion, the acts themselves do not seem to shock the WRBC readers as much as the fact that they were conducted by a woman. When Katya questioned this position by stressing Galina's participation in executions, Anna claimed there was no choice and a routinisation of killings in the post-Civil War USSR. These claims correlate with the observations of Etkind and Ulturgasheva regarding the proliferation in Russian media and public discourse of narratives on the inevitability or even functionality of Soviet terror. The controversial narrative of inevitability and equal culpability of perpetrators and victims demonstrates the efforts not only of the WRBC members but also of Russian society to make sense of the Soviet past with as little accountability as possible.

The book club meeting was also attended by Inna, a Russophone community leader from Liverpool, who was visiting London at the time. In her introduction at the beginning of the session, Inna explained that she did not represent a book club but a broader community group that organised diasporic cultural and social events. Since she had not read *Obitel'*, Inna remained silent for most of the meeting until she decided to contribute to the subject and share with the participants an experience from an event her group organised earlier that year:

In February 2018, a priest, who is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, visited our club and spoke. Their services are held in English, as he does not speak Russian himself. He had visited Solovki the previous year, and we invited him during Maslenitsa to join us for a meal and tell us a bit about his trip. He didn't share much about his personal impressions, but he spoke at length about the museum and the living conditions in the camp.

Inna's brief non-literary contribution to the discussion of *Obitel'* and the Solovki camp provides a valuable snapshot of diasporic community life in Liverpool.

The community group celebrated the Russian Orthodox custom of Maslenitsa (Cheesefare/Shrovetide week)<sup>40</sup> and invited the head of the local church for the occasion, asking him to share his travel experience from his recent visit to the Solovetsky Monastery. By noting that the priest speaks no Russian, Inna highlighted the significance of his travel impressions for the group. Diasporic communities are often interested in news from their homeland, but the priest's visit to Solovki fascinated this group due to its unique nature, combining pilgrimage to a very old monastery with 'prison tourism' to one of the most famous Gulag camps. Dark tourism or thanatourism refers to the visitation of sites and exhibitions connected to death and suffering, such as Nazi concentration camps,<sup>41</sup> while prison tourism involves travels and visits to penal institutions and detention centres.<sup>42</sup> 'Gulag tourism' merges these two types of visits, and its origins can be traced back to the 1950s when the USSR invited foreigners to camps and other penal sites to witness the innovations and excellence of the Soviet penal system.<sup>43</sup> After the fall of the Soviet Union, gulag tourism developed quickly in Russia and the successor states, and various types of tours to sites commemorating the victims of Stalinist repression became available to domestic and foreign tourists.<sup>44</sup>

Solovki's unique case among the Gulag memory sites derives from the fact that the old monastery has been restored as part of the UNESCO Cultural and Historic Ensemble and operates today continuing its long religious tradition. Visitors first arrived at Solovki in the mid-1960s, and the historical site quickly turned into a tourist destination.<sup>45</sup> The interest of the Liverpool community members in the priest's visit to Solovki does not differ from that of visitors to Gulag and Nazi concentration camps: 'Tourists visit the (in)famous and iconic Holocaust sites to explore and experience for themselves previously imagined places.'<sup>46</sup> Visitors are driven to the camps by a desire for a direct sense of place linked to a pilgrimage organised for remembrance (usually by the kin of the victims) or curiosity to see the sites where suffering took place.<sup>47</sup> Deviating from the book discussion and inspired by Inna's story, Sofia shared her own, unmediated experience of Solovki in the 1980s:

I visited Solovki 35 years ago and there was a monastery where veterans and disabled people were exiled. We walked around the island, and everywhere were remnants of the monastery's greenhouses, gardens, walls. In the window I looked at an elderly man, his eyes. Many years later, I read about the place, and saw those eyes again, that face. When we went there, we were young and of course we did not understand those sad eyes. This place is creepy.

During book discussions, the WRBC members often share their experiences or memories from home enriching their interpretations of the month's novel. In this case, Sofia recounted her visit to Solovki focusing on the effect that the place had had on her and how her feelings about it intensified when she later read about the gulag camps. The central element of Sofia's narration constitutes the description of the old man, probably a disabled veteran, and particularly of his sad eyes, which she saw through a window. This powerful moment is probably a reflection of the Valaam myth, according to which at some point from the late 1940s to the early

1950s, Stalin ordered the removal of numerous impoverished, disabled ex-servicemen who were begging in public places of Soviet cities, who were subsequently sent to remote locations in the country including the Valaam archipelago in the north-western part of Lake Ladoga.<sup>48</sup> Based on his archival research, Dale argues that there is not sufficient evidence to support this story and he traces the formation of the Soviet cultural myth to social imagination and literature.<sup>49</sup> The proximity of Valaam to Solovki and the presence of monasteries in both places might explain the emergence in the Soviet popular memory of a similar urban myth for the latter.<sup>50</sup> In this framework, Sofia's description of the old man can be interpreted as a case of vicarious witnessing experience, which refers to the imaginative reconstruction and living off someone else's powerful experience,<sup>51</sup> given that the island has been operating as a tourist attraction since the 1960s. This phenomenon has been observed in visitors to Holocaust sites and constitutes an intense emotional response to a traumascapes, a physical place of violence and loss.<sup>52</sup> The mnemonic revisitation of Solovki informed Sofia's reading of *Obitel'* and contributed to the imaginative recreation of the place by the WRBC members during the book discussions.<sup>53</sup>

The discussion of Prilepin's novel highlights the intergenerational differences within the book club regarding the Gulag legacy and the role of camp literature in the post-Soviet era. Representing the generation that grew up in Soviet times, Klavdia admitted that *Obitel'* 'did not have that terrifying effect' on her that *The Gulag Archipelago* had. A WRBC member in her late twenties responded, 'I was in shock. For me, it was the first book about camps and everything was new. Maybe for those who have already read Solzhenitsyn, that's why *Obitel'* is so easy for you. Just because of the age and the number of books read.' Having lived through Perestroika and the dissolution of the USSR, the older generation of readers approached *Obitel'* as another text on camps that could unsettle or disgust but not shock them. Supporting the younger generation, the book club moderator agreed that *Obitel'* was written specifically for them:

KATYA The new generation needs new books. The meaning of what we read was completely different and for a completely different reader. I think Prilepin writes for the new reader from a different point of view.

KLAVDIA Do you think people younger than you will pick up this book? I think that in the first part, there is so much knowledge that was taught only in the Soviet Union.

OKSANA No, I assume a lot has changed over the course of a generation.

KLAVDIA Katya and I studied together at the university and wrote notes together about the Politburo. When everything fell apart, our generation was very interested in finding out what really happened and what Lenin meant.

Looking at the two different generations — the last Soviet or early post-Soviet generation and the younger one — it becomes clear that the relationship between literature and cultural memory has changed significantly over the years. On the one hand, there are readers who lived through the last days of the USSR and relied on fiction and non-fiction for previously undisclosed information on political

repressions and atrocities.<sup>54</sup> For them, *Obitel'* is in dialogue with Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, attempting to amend or replace the well-established narrative with a conciliatory account. On the other hand, the younger generation views the Gulag legacy from a historical distance and with shock at the Soviet terror. Prilepin's novel reconstructs the era with its brutality and horrors, interpreting the circumstances that led to its formation. As Katya said, the gap between the two age groups can be bridged 'when the new generation reads these authors' (Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov) and obtains a more comprehensive picture of Soviet times.

The WRBC constitutes a transnational locus where Russian speakers negotiate their relationship with the controversial Soviet past and its legacy. Book discussions facilitated the collective reconstruction of Gulag memory through reader responses to *Obitel'* and some of its characters, revealing the legacy of the camps today, the participants' approaches to traumatic memory, and the intergenerational differences within the book club.

## Part 2: Soviet Nostalgia in Games and Celebrations

Celebrations, festivals, and fairs enrich community life by allowing members to remember milestones, observe national holidays, uphold traditions, and commemorate eminent people. These events help build social capital by uniting communities and continuously refreshing the communal experience.<sup>55</sup> During such occasions, social relations and connections are revived or enhanced due to heightened participation and a more relaxed atmosphere compared to other community functions. As a community setting, the WRBC welcomes rituals and ritualised practices as 'purposive and expressive ceremonialised performances' of group identity and membership.<sup>56</sup> These rituals help guide readers through the transnational space formed by diasporic life in Britain and the Russophone reading experience. Additionally, gaming as a shared cultural practice engages players in identity construction and meaning-making based on the subject of the game and various types of interaction with fellow players. Through playful action, players create fictional worlds, revisit historical eras, and engage with the codes and symbols of each game.

The celebrations and literary games of the WRBC were inspired by the book of the month, famous Russophone writers, as well as the Soviet past and culture. Kevin Platt argues that 'far from being a lost object of desire, the Soviet past has come for many to constitute an important social and political prehistory, a treasure house of timeless elements of a shared identity'.<sup>57</sup> This 'treasure house' of the common past, a source of discourses and narratives, can be selectively utilised by migrants in the search for a collective identity and in the formation of their diasporic present.<sup>58</sup> As a discursive and bodily experience, nostalgia is produced by and reacts to memory stimuli through restorative (reconstruction of home) and reflective (re-experience of displacement) processes, which in the post-Soviet context are connected to longing for the Soviet past.<sup>59</sup> The second part of the chapter examines expressions of Soviet nostalgia in the decorations of the 2018 Anniversary meeting, 'The Nostalgic Game

“The Pioneer Childhood” (April 2019) and the anniversary meeting dedicated to Joseph Brodsky (March 2020).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the book club voted for Alexei Ivanov’s ‘enjoyable and funny’ novel *Pischeblok* (2018)<sup>60</sup> for its April 2019 meeting, in contrast to the ‘dense’ philosophical and existential novels they had read in previous months. The novel is set in the pioneer camp ‘Burevestnik’ on the banks of the Volga river near Samara during the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympic Games. With the majority of the participants born before the 1980s, ‘The Nostalgic Game “The Pioneer Childhood”’, specially designed for this session, offered an opportunity to reflect on their past — childhood and early teenage years in the Soviet Union. Pioneer camps were recreational and health centres in the Soviet Union where children aged between ten and fifteen spent part of their summer vacations, and were associated with the Pioneer movement, the Communist Party’s children’s section.<sup>61</sup> The literary game drew on the cultural memory of the summer camps and other representations of the ‘happy Soviet childhood’,<sup>62</sup> reimagining the experience of these rites of initiation and passage.<sup>63</sup>

The game consisted of five rounds or konkursy, and seven teams of two to three people participated. In the first round, named ‘Skoro leto’ (Summer is coming), the participants had to recognise familiar tunes that played at the summer camps of the Pioneers and write down their titles. The tunes came from different Soviet periods, from the early post-revolutionary period to the pre-Perestroika era. To challenge the gamers, the moderator used the introduction of the songs, so they could not identify them easily from the lyrics. Nevertheless, each participant got at least four out of six songs right,<sup>64</sup> and the meeting kicked off joyously. In the second round, ‘Posledniy ekzamen’ (The last exam), the participants had to pass the last ‘Soviet-style’ exam:

Let’s go back to school for a moment and remember that schools had exams before the Pioneer camps arrived. One of the most terrifying exams in Russian was Dictation. At the same time, it serves as preparation for the ‘Total Dictation’ which takes place in London on 31 April, for anyone interested. The text for the Dictation consists of one sentence.

The introduction to this exercise was necessary because its connection to the game’s theme was not as clear as in the previous quiz. The moderator asked the gamers to ‘time travel’, revisiting their school years, particularly the last days before they went to the summer camps, after finishing their end-of-year exams. Dictation was a typical exam in many countries at the time and tested pupils’ literacy levels. In this kind of exam, a text is dictated to students to test their ability to understand and spell correctly in the given language. In Russia, dictation has recently turned into an international annual educational event (Total’nyi diktant/ Total dictation), in which anyone who wants to test their knowledge of the Russian language can participate.<sup>65</sup> Every year, the organising committee appoints a famous Russian-speaking writer to choose a small extract from their work as the text to be dictated for the event. For example, in 2018, the chosen writer was Guzel Yakhina, and the competition drew participants from seventy-six countries.<sup>66</sup>

The 'Dictation' round of 'The Nostalgic Game' was less successful, as most teams made numerous orthographic mistakes. Nevertheless, the participants were not intimidated by having their language skills tested. They were laughing most of the time, which led the moderator to dictate the text two more times. In the third round, 'Zdravstvui, Lager' (Hello Camp), the gamers were invited to immerse themselves in Ivanov's book and the 'Pioneer' experience through five content-related questions and five 'fill-in-the-blanks' phrases from the text. In the following round called 'Obshchestvennaya deyatel'nost'' (Public Activity), the participants were given six words/phrases from the novel, representing slang or terminology related to the Pioneers and the camps, and they were asked to define the meaning of each word.<sup>67</sup> This round about the Pioneers' vocabulary was the most challenging for the participants, despite having read the book and the chosen six words appearing multiple times in the text. For most, the 'Pioneer' slang was a distant memory from childhood, brought to the surface by the book.

The fifth and final round titled 'Korolevskaya noch'' (Royal night) did not relate to the game's theme. Participants were given a sheet of paper with portraits of six famous Russophone writers. They had to identify their names and then determine which writer did not fit with the rest. The gamers reacted to the last round with grumbling and complaints, mostly because they were tired after playing for over an hour. Some participants could not find the names of more than two or three authors.<sup>68</sup> The key to identifying the 'odd one out' was noticing that five out of six writers wrote novels belonging to fantasy literature, while one did not.

Starting from the main WRBC activity, which was branded as nostalgic, 'The Nostalgic Game "The Pioneer Childhood"' was the only one among the four games I observed that directly addressed the Soviet heritage of the book club members and drew on memories of their childhood and teenage years. Ivanov's 'light-hearted, relaxing and funny'<sup>69</sup> novel allowed the book club members to engage in play and evoke memories from the Pioneer camps with the help of various activities. Among the five activities, which were designed as different rounds for the game, three of them — 'Summer is coming', 'The last exam' and 'Public activity' — were directly related to Soviet cultural memory and drew material and inspiration from the book.

The 'Summer is coming' activity, a sonic time capsule dedicated to the Pioneer camps, opened the gaming session triumphantly, imitating the use of songs for the beginning of ceremonies or athletic competitions, and initiated the participants into a gaming ritual with a mnemonic and performative character. After a short introduction to the game and its rules, the moderator asked the book club members to remain silent and pay close attention to the six songs that were about to play consecutively. In this way, the first activity transformed the players into an audience, introducing them to an immersive soundscape quite similar to what they experienced when they participated in the camps. The recreated 'pioneer' soundscape tested the players' ability to recognise and decode the sound signs as if they were part of a rite of initiation, a necessary step before entering the gaming world. For that reason, the video from the game that was posted on the Facebook page was edited in a way that underlined the ceremonial sense of the songs, giving the impression that the pioneer songs were the soundtrack of the game.

Zooming in on the pioneer songs and anthems, the first striking impression is the use of only the intro parts for the game. As mentioned in the presentation of the game, the decision to edit the songs for the game was made to avoid giving away the answer to the question about the songs, since the lyrics usually include or refer to the title of the song. Despite the challenging nature of the activity, the successful identification of the songs suggests their mnemonic power and their ability to act as soundmarks in the cultural map of everyday Soviet life. At the same time, the persistence of these symbols in the memory of the participants thirty years after the break-up of the USSR indicates that the Soviet experience and the narratives related to it have proven to be 'resistant pasts'.<sup>70</sup> Victoria's account illustrates how 'resistant' the Soviet childhood is even for non-nostalgic individuals:

The 'Pioneer summer' is not my favourite memory. I do not associate the Era of stagnation and socialism with any rosy, naive memories. I know the songs and slogans, the leitmotifs, etc., but for me, this is a radiant utopia that did not lead anywhere but only traumatised the lives and souls of people. I do not feel any nostalgia for those times. I try not to discuss it with my friends, and I do not like Soviet food. I prefer to discuss Russian pre-revolutionary literature, as well as contemporary Russian writers in our club.

Victoria distances herself from her Soviet heritage by avoiding conversations, food, and literature from that era. Specifically, she describes the Soviet past as a collective traumatic experience for which she cannot feel nostalgic. However, Victoria decided to participate in the game and was one of the winners of 'The Nostalgic Game'. In this way, the resistant past represents surviving discourses as part of her cultural memory and hybrid diasporic identity, which the WRBC game addressed and resurfaced. The book club member further explained that she tried to approach 'The Pioneer Childhood' as any other WRBC game or literary activity, disregarding its nostalgic character.

The songs themselves represent different periods of Soviet culture and have more or less direct connections with the Communist Party and its pioneer camps. The song 'Vzveytes' kostrami, sinie nochi' (Blue nights raised with bonfires) was released in 1922, 'Pesnya o Shchorse' (Song about Schors) in 1936, 'Na zaryadku' (To morning exercise) in 1959, 'Kreyser Avrora' (Cruiser Aurora) in 1973, 'Orlyata uchatsya letat!' (Eagles learn to fly) in 1965, and 'Pesenka Roberta' (Robert's Song) in 1936. Of these six songs, only 'Vzveytes' kostrami, sinie nochi' was commissioned for 'pioneer' purposes, while the rest were adopted by pioneer camps later after their release. Apart from being the anthem of the pioneer camp Orlyonok, the song 'Orlyata uchatsya letat!' has significant symbolic value since its release coincided with Yuri Gagarin's first human journey into outer space in 1961. Meanwhile, the song 'Pesenka Roberta' appears in the 1936 Soviet film *Deti kapitana Granta* (The Children of Captain Grant),<sup>71</sup> while 'Kreyser Avrora' is the theme song for the 1973 animation *Aurora* (Aurora).

The pioneer songs, which were often performed by choirs at camps and school functions, encapsulated Soviet ideology with clear or subtle communist messages and symbols appropriated for an underage audience. Some of them are still popular today (i.e. 'Na zaryadku') and are part of the school music tradition, creating

cultural continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. This particular list of pioneer songs captures the intangible Soviet heritage shared by the participants, irrespective of their age and when they attended school or pioneer camps. Although the majority of the WRBC members belong to the fourth migratory wave that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, some older members moved to Britain in the 1980s, limiting their exposure to cultural references from the Perestroika period. These were songs that all of them were expected to have sung in their childhood and therefore remember well enough. Oksana admitted that the WRBC game helped recall the songs and the scope of the pioneer upbringing, even though she did not feel nostalgic about them:

I am not very nostalgic for those times, because along with the good, there were a lot of negative things, but I remember them. All the songs that we sang as children were imbued with love for the Motherland, a sense of friendship, collectivism, and no individuality. The pioneer camp system in the USSR was not primarily concerned with raising a healthy child, but rather with how the state could raise a citizen devoted to their Homeland.

The WRBC member appears critical about the messages that the songs conveyed but still found that ‘the common culture and a common upbringing bring us closer together’. The demythologisation of Soviet childhood does not prevent Oksana from recognising its role as an underpinning of community identity. In other words, the songs promoted and simultaneously tested the participants’ membership in the Soviet/post-Soviet sensory community. The notion of sensory community<sup>72</sup> originates from sensory studies and expands the concept of acoustic community,<sup>73</sup> as a symbolic entity created by and within an acoustic space, a soundscape. The soundscape of the ‘Skoro leto’ activity represents a recreation of the original Soviet and pioneer soundscapes, and for that reason, the sensory stimuli of the game serve the function of membership criteria for the formation of a new sensory community within the premises of the Waterstones bookshop.

It is worth mentioning the moderator’s endeavour to disregard the clear political subtext of ‘The Pioneer Childhood’ game. As she clarified on multiple occasions (including in the Facebook description of the book club), Katya promoted the book club as an apolitical space and intentionally steered clear of any conflicting political loyalties, whether against or in support of the USSR. Masha, an active community leader, observed that, ‘In this particular club, there are no conflicts between nationalities, there is no hostility. I have seen conflicts in other clubs because we are all Russian speakers, but from other countries.’ The calm and amicable environment of the WRBC gatherings is regarded as Katya’s success and is attributed to her ability to transcend political differences and conflicts connected to the ethnicities and (pre-migration) nationalities of the book club members. Drawing on her fieldwork with the Russophone community in Scotland, Morgunova (2013) maintained that there is an ‘unwritten rule’ to downplay the differences between the participants and accentuate the shared Soviet heritage. Similarly, Barbara Fister noted that the online mystery book club 4MA avoided topics related to politics and religion, which often cause discord in social gatherings. In ‘The Nostalgic Game’,

the moderator renegotiated the pioneer experience as a politically neutral cultural discourse with community-building potential, centring on childhood memories.<sup>74</sup> The members responded positively to the Soviet-related nostalgic stimuli, enjoying the game and reminiscing about their childhood.<sup>75</sup> Vera described 'The Nostalgic Game' as her favourite among the WRBC games, highlighting how the common past defines sameness within the global Russophone community:

The game 'Pioneer Childhood' was great entertainment. It was nice to remember those carefree times when we were children. Although I cannot say that I am nostalgic for them. For me, that was the past, and I live in the present, not in the past. I think that our pioneer past unites all Russian-speaking people around the world because only we had such childhood and youth, and you cannot share these memories with those who did not experience them. After all, they will not understand, roughly speaking, when to laugh and when to cry.

The feelings evoked by the game are presented as outcomes of resurfacing childhood memories, which for the respondent should not be considered expressions of Soviet nostalgia. In her account, Vera distinguished between participating in a diasporic community activity and being nostalgic for the communist regime and asserted that she lives in the present and not the past. Irina explained this attitude by stressing that 'Every person is nostalgic about the times when they were a child. As a child, everything was perfect and you did not care about any political or economic issues.' In this way, childhood is conceptualised as an apolitical period of life, where one can imaginatively return without engaging with the political system that governed it. The apoliticisation of Soviet childhood is also apparent in Dina's account, which compared the pioneer camps to the Scout movement: 'I think that, for the most part, everyone who was a scout in America or Europe also remembers their experience with delight.' In contrast to the non-political Scouts, the Pioneer camps preserved their political character throughout their history.<sup>76</sup> Yet, the disconnection of the pioneer childhood from its political subtext allows the book club members to identify with the global Russophone diaspora and affirm their sense of belonging without declaring their loyalty towards the former Soviet Union.

The second round of the 'Pioneer Childhood' game, 'Posledniy ekzamen' (The Last Exam), addressed another discourse related to Soviet identity: the high level of literacy and language competence. Having battled massive illiteracy in the early years after the revolution, the Soviet state proudly supported the myth that it was the 'most well-read country in the world'.<sup>77</sup> The Soviet reading myth was a hard-earned success story that not only proved the high levels of literacy in the country<sup>78</sup> but, most importantly, its superiority compared to Western countries, the eternal Other of Russian and Soviet cultures. The dictation exercise tested both that the students fully understood the dictated literary text and that they could spell it correctly. Therefore, the dictation was a double celebration of the Russian language: for its corpus of highbrow literature and the skill and competence of its speakers. This linguistic practice survived in the post-Soviet era and is thriving as a cultural practice with a strong nostalgic character in the form of the 'Total Dictation' competition. Although it started in 2004 as a university challenge in Novosibirsk,

the 'Total Dictation' has grown into a global Russophone phenomenon with increasing success.

The dictation activity 'Posledniy ekzamen' did not borrow the text or the form of the 'Total Dictation', yet it clearly relates to the competition. The chosen text was short (one sentence), full of long and complex words, and alliterations, with various cultural references, and unexpectedly did not come from Ivanov's novel. By framing the activity as the participants' very last school exam, the moderator created a personal connection and invested in positive memories from Soviet schools to ensure they would be entertained and 'caught in play'. In fact, the players' literacy was being voluntarily tested, and the collected points added up to those already collected for the prize of the WRBC game. The coordinator clarified just before she started dictating: 'Whoever can find the strength inside them, writes.' Although it seems like a rhetorical device, this phrase underlines the agency of the participants in regard to the nostalgic time travel. Paul Willis writes that 'cultural practices of meaning-making are intrinsically self-motivated as aspects of identity-making and self-construction: in making our cultural worlds we make ourselves'.<sup>79</sup> The players actively engaged with the Soviet cultural world as it was selectively remembered and recreated for the purposes of the game, participating in a meaning-making process. Vera admitted that the dictation round was interesting because it was 'an old method, familiar to many from childhood, which was often used in schools', but in the book club's case, it was just a game.

The fourth round of the game, 'Obshchestvennaya deyatelnost'/Public activity', shifted from high literacy and the ability to understand a literary text to the examination of slang 'competency' as part of the everyday Soviet lexicon. The game's title supports an interpretation of Soviet slang as the necessary vocabulary for operating in the public sphere. This unexpected and unconventional quiz for a highbrow book club constituted the final test of the WRBC members' ability to navigate successfully in the cultural map of everyday Soviet life, marking the meeting point of Sovietness and post-Sovietness. In this framework, post-Sovietness or post-Soviet identity represents, among other things, the semiotic, linguistic, and cultural competency of a person or a population that allows them to revisit mnemonically the Soviet past, create and recreate their personal space incorporating elements of Soviet culture, and perform in speech and action in accordance with Soviet cultural discourses. Given that all 'tested' words<sup>80</sup> appeared in Ivanov's novel, the players already had the opportunity to refresh their memory and look for definitions or examples.

Moving to the WRBC celebrations, for the Anniversary meeting in March 2018, the book club had to transform the aesthetically neutral environment of the bookshop's café into a festive one to mark the occasion. Pechurina, in her visual ethnography of 'Russian' homes in Britain, argues that migrants tend to recreate their habitus through material objects representing Russian culture. The WRBC was restricted in creating a diasporic environment in the bookstore, given that it received a physical location only once per month for a two-hour time slot. The participants had just a few minutes to prepare the space for the book club session,

and for that reason, the elements suggesting Russianness or (post) Sovietness are always limited. In most meetings, the only signifiers of the group identity were the Russian sweets on the table and the paper sign with the name of the book club in both English and Russian.

In celebratory events and game sessions, the visual diasporic character of the book club is intensified, pointing to those elements that the members consider representative of their culture. According to Victor Turner, 'objects speak',<sup>81</sup> and their use in rituals contributes to 'binding for the moment the opposing forces within the community and tying together the past with the present'.<sup>82</sup> The Soviet-style wrapping paper can still be found in Russia, as well as the honorary diplomas, but their choice indicates USSR-related nostalgia rather than the reproduction of contemporary practices in post-Soviet countries. Most of these items could be considered less significant symbols of Soviet culture, but as Pechurina suggests, 'the relationship between the meaning and the look of the thing can be rather complicated; and the meaningless items around the house can reveal meaningful and significant stories'.<sup>83</sup> The bits and pieces found in this particular celebration, recalling pre-migration times, acted as 'nostalgic stimuli'<sup>84</sup> and managed to reconstitute a Soviet sensescape visually (with the decorations), haptically (touching and opening the gifts), orally/gastronomically (eating the chocolates and candies), and aurally (discussions in Russian language), hybridised by the transnational experience of the attendees (for example, the cake and the books imported from Russia). The transnational (post-)Soviet sensescape (re)created for the occasion facilitated the festivities and enhanced the celebratory atmosphere in the bookshop.

The final example of Soviet nostalgia to be discussed here comes from the March 2020 book club meeting. Instead of the usual third-year anniversary celebration, the WRBC planned an unusual session. The book club decided to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the Soviet poet Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky (1940–96) was a Nobel Laureate in literature (1987) and a dissident who was forced into exile from the USSR in 1972. The moderator had been consistent with her decision not to repeat the celebration in the same format as the one in March 2018. The initiative came from Masha, a WRBC member who is a poet herself and a Brodsky enthusiast. Masha led the event and also invited the London-based director Konstantin Kamensky, who had produced a theatre play about Brodsky titled *Brodsky Station* for 274 Company in 2016. The WRBC had previously organised a meeting in collaboration with the theatre company Xameleon, which staged Gogol's *Overcoat*, but it was the very first time that they transformed one of their sessions into a poetry gathering. During our interview, I had asked Katya about their focus on novels, and she had been quite adamant that the WRBC members had no interest in poetry. Nevertheless, the members' desire to celebrate and commemorate one of the most significant representatives of Soviet literary culture justified the format of the session under discussion, which was significantly different from the previous celebrations.

The meeting lasted almost two hours and centred entirely on Brodsky's commemoration. The moderator briefly introduced the presenters, and then Masha

assumed the duty of hosting the event. She joyfully retold Brodsky's biography, connecting it to his most famous poems and focusing on his life in exile. Then, Konstantin presented his theatrical play and gave some insight into the creative process behind it. After Konstantin's talk, the actor Oleg Sidorchik joined them and sang his favourite of Brodsky's poems while playing guitar, which seemed to be the culmination of the whole event. Oleg's singing received very warm applause from the attendees and was also filmed to be uploaded on the Facebook page. At the end of Oleg's performance, the book club members had a brief opportunity to recite their favourite poems by Brodsky and share their impressions. The four-part celebration continued informally at the bar of the bookstore.

In the case of Brodsky's commemoration event, the book club members did not have time to change the decoration of the room for the celebration because the café decided to close earlier that day. Still, Soviet nostalgia was expressed through the two newly introduced practices: on the one hand, the live singing performance by a guest of the club, and on the other, the shared recitation of poems by the participants. The singing was reminiscent of emotional performances by Soviet bards setting poems to music and accompanying themselves on acoustic guitars, a practice that continues in the post-Soviet era.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, the poetry reading evoked memories of the Soviet in-house ('kvartirniki') literary gatherings. Focusing on the latter, the celebration ritual under discussion recreated the 'Soviet-specific counterculture' of private and informal meetings in kitchens, flats, and clubs within the premises of Waterstones Piccadilly.<sup>86</sup> Elena Zdravomyslova and Victor Voronkov write: 'In these places, people could take off their bodily and spiritual official uniforms and behave authentically in an atmosphere of mutual trust that was in opposition to official norms.'<sup>87</sup> Literature played an essential role in these friendly gatherings by sparking discussions about various socio-political and philosophical topics.<sup>88</sup> In the framework of a diasporic community event, the singing of Brodsky's famous poems and the shared reading practice resonated with nostalgia and longing for a private, friendly, and intellectually stimulating Soviet-style setting.

Overall, the literary game 'The Pioneer Childhood' and the celebratory events in March 2018 and March 2020 each demonstrated the presence of Soviet nostalgia in the book club meetings. During the multimodal 'Nostalgic Game', the players tested their semiotic, linguistic, and cultural competency, which allowed them to revisit a symbolically and discursively reconstructed pioneer camp, engaging with restorative nostalgia. Interviews with book club members suggest a critical stance towards their childhood and youth in the USSR, with a clear distancing from its political aspects. Simultaneously, the two celebrations incorporated symbols, material acts and practices inspired by the cultural heritage of the participants that offered a discursive and emotional experience of Soviet nostalgia by recreating a familiar sensescape and memoryscape.

## Conclusion

For a diasporic community group, collective memory is not merely a common ground and identifying marker for its members but also a unifying thread woven through all cultural practices. The Soviet past has left the populations of Russia and the other successor states with a controversial legacy, which is continuously interpreted, manipulated, embraced, and rejected according to the needs and goals of each group. In this context, the historical novel *Obitel'* provided WRBC members with an opportunity to discuss the Gulag forced-labour camps and their place in Soviet collective memory. The shared reading of the novel demonstrated that issues related to post-Soviet cultural memory are still relevant for the Russian-speaking diasporic community in London, and that both fiction and non-fiction literary works serve as sources of information on the Soviet past and occasions for negotiating the members' transnational identities. Relying on the historical and physical distance from the post-communist space, the readers' desire to make sense of the controversial Soviet past led them to embrace Prilepin's narrative of reconciliation and need for closure. In turn, 'The Nostalgic Game "The Pioneer Childhood"' and the described celebrations (March 2018 and 2020) not only reflect the cultural heritage and nostalgia of the WRBC members but also serve as a means of forging a transnational Russophone community. Through imaginative 'time travel', the book club members revisited apoliticised communal times from their childhoods and adult lives, reminding them of their shared background and what binds them together. The game and celebrations demonstrate how literature and related cultural practices can bridge geographical and generational divides, offering a space for shared identity and discourse among Russian-speaking migrants in London.

## Notes to Chapter 4

1. Long, p. 18.
2. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (Routledge, 2013), p. 206.
3. Julie Fedor, 'Spinning Russia's 21st Century Wars', *The RUSI Journal*, 163.6 (2018), pp. 18–27 (p. 18) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2018.1562015>>.
4. Therefore, in May 2017 he founded the *Russkii khudozhestvennyi soiuz* (Russian Artistic Alliance) with the intention to bring together like-minded artists, and three years later the political party *Za pravdu* (For the truth). See Fedor, pp. 19–21.
5. Douglas Kries, 'Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: How and Why he Chose to Remember', in *History (1933–48): What We Choose to Remember*, ed. by Margaret Monahan Hogan and James M. Lies (University of Portland, 2011), pp. 231–40 (p. 235).
6. The Priest Viacheslav Umniagin, editor of the Solovetsky Monastery's *Memories of Solovki prisoners* (2016), maintains that Prilepin's desire to create a psychological thriller resulted in a novel that 'cannot be considered a carefully conducted historical representation, despite a lot of overlaps'. See Viacheslav Umniagin, 'Roman "Obitel'" v svete vospominaniy solovetskikh uznikov [The Novel "The Monastery" in the Light of the Memories of the Solovetsky Prisoners]', *Vestnik slavyanskikh kul'tur*, 41.3 (2016), pp. 105–12 (p. 106). Ivan Pomidorov, *Zakhar Prilepin predlozhil ubrat' is shkol'noy programmy "Arkhipelag GULAG"* [Zakhar Prilepin suggested removing the "Archipelago Gulag" from the school curriculum] (Rotfront, 2014).

7. Chekist is an agent of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, commonly known as Cheka, the first Soviet secret-police organisation, but it is often used also for the successor organisations.
8. Benjamin M. Sutcliffe, 'Beyond the Monastery: Prilepin, Putin and the Gulag', in *The Monastery*, ed. by Zakhar Prilepin (Glagoslav Publications, 2020), pp. 7–19 (p. 11).
9. Roy Robson, *Solovki: The Story of Russia told through its Most Remarkable Islands* (Yale University Press, 2004); Kate Brown, 'Out of Solitary Confinement: The History of the Gulag', *Kritika*, 8.1 (2007), pp. 67–103 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2007.0001>>; Yuri Brodsky, *Dvadsat let osobogo naznachenia [Solovki. Twenty Years of Special Purpose]* (Mir Isskustv II, 2008).
10. Wilson Bell, 'Was the Gulag an Archipelago? De-convoyed Prisoners and Porous Borders in the Camps of Western Siberia', *The Russian Review*, 72.1 (2013), pp. 116–41 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.10683>>; David R. Shearer, 'The Soviet Gulag — an Archipelago?', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 16.3 (2015), pp. 711–24 (p. 711) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2015.0046>>.
11. Andrea Gullotta, *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923–1930: The Paris of the Northern Concentration* (Legenda, 2018).
12. Andrea Gullotta, 'The "Cultural Village" of the Solovki Prison Camp: A Case of Alternative Culture?', *Studies in Slavic Cultures*, 9 (2010), pp. 9–25 (p. 11).
13. The difference between Solovki's 'intellectual miracles' and similar activities in other Gulag camps was that they did not produce proletarian art and culture but that of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia massively concentrated in the camp (Gullotta, *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923–1930*).
14. Aleksandr Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 5.
15. Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (Penguin, 2003); Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivisation to the Great Terror* (Yale University Press, 2004); Golfo Alexopoulos, *Illness and Inhumanity in Stalin's Gulag* (Yale University Press, 2017).
16. Jehanne M. Gheith, "'I never talked": Enforced Silence, Non-narrative Memory, and the Gulag', *Mortality*, 12.2 (2007), pp. 159–75 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13576270701255149>>.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
18. Etkind; Angelos Theocharis, 'Polyphonic Memory and Narratives of Resilience in Svetlana Alexievich's Secondhand Time', *Journal of Languages, Texts, and Society*, 3 (2019), pp. 185–206.
19. Irina Shcherbakova, 'Karta pamyati o GULAGE — problemy i lakuny [Gulag Memory Map: Problems and Gaps]', *Laboratorium*, 7.1 (2015), pp. 114–21 (p. 119).
20. In 2013 the Ministry of Culture assumed control of the Museum of the History of Political Repression Perm-36, which was previously operated for almost twenty years by a local NGO, 'removing mention of Stalin and turning it into a museum to the Soviet penal system as opposed to a memorial to political repression. See Gavin Slade, 'Remembering and Forgetting the Gulag: Prison Tourism across the Post-Soviet Region', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*, ed. by Jacqueline Wilson and others (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 37–54 (p. 43).
21. The monastery houses various exhibitions about its history that includes one about the Solovki camp. In August 2020, the GULAG History Museum and Memory Fund in Moscow filed an application to the Government of Magadan Oblast to assign the cultural heritage site status to the territory of the former Dneprovsky Camp.
22. Margaret A. Comer, 'The Heritage of Repression: Memory, Commemoration, and Politics in Post-Soviet Russia' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019).
23. According to a Russian survey conducted by VTsIOM in 2017 in collaboration with the Gulag History Museum and Memorial Fund, 24% of respondents belonging to the 18–24 age group and 18% among the 25–34 group had never heard of Stalinist repressions. Among the total number of respondents (1800), only 10% was unaware of the repressions. At the same time, 43% believes that it was impossible to maintain order in the country without these repressions, while 49% disagrees with this opinion. See VTsIOM, *Stalinskiye repressii: prestupleniye ili nakazaniye? [Stalinist Repressions: Crime or Punishment?]* (2017) <<https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/stalinskiye-repressii-prestuplenie-ili-nakazanie->> [accessed 20 July 2024].
24. 'I didn't read the book. I don't like the subject', 'I like historical books, descriptions of historical events, but I didn't want to read this one'.

25. 'I had read a couple of his things before, but I was very displeased when he fought in Ukraine'.
26. 'If we are interested, we can discuss his political views at the end. Today, let's talk about him as a writer'.
27. 'I'll be honest, I forced myself, I set a goal to read one-third, but then I decided that I should read half of it. It will be uncomfortable to discuss'.
28. Ika Willis, *Reception* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 129, 131.
29. Uilleam Blacker and Aleksandr Etkind, 'Introduction', in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Uilleam Blacker, Aleksandr Etkind, and Julie Fedor (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1–22 (p. 6).
30. Andrea Gullotta, 'A New Perspective for Gulag Literature Studies: The Gulag Press', *Studies in Slavic Cultures*, 8 (2011), pp. 95–111 (p. 95). See also Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Indiana University Press, 2000) and Alexandra Smith, 'Russian Gulag Poetry and its Reception', in *Poetic Canons, Cultural Memory and Russian National Identity after 1991*, ed. by Katharine Hodgson and Alexandra Smith (Peter Lang, 2020), pp. 227–86.
31. Olga Ulturgasheva, 'Gulag Legacy: Spaces of Continuity in Contemporary Everyday Practices', *Laboratorium*, 7.1 (2015), pp. 5–14.
32. Zakhar Prilepin, *O novom romane "Obitel", Solovkakh i lagernoy zhizni [About the New Novel "The Monastery", Solovki and Camp Life]* (Moskva 24, 2014) <<https://www.m24.ru/articles/literatura/05052014/44085>>.
33. Etkind, p. 42. The March 2020 survey of the Levada Centre on the memory of the Soviet Union showed that 76% of the respondents assessed positively the legacy of the USSR (ex. the stability, quality of life, social benefits etc) and only 1% associated it with the repressions (which is part of the 7% of negative associations). See Levada Centre, *Struktura i vosproisvodstvo pamyati o Sovetskom Soyuze v rossiyskom obshchestvennom mnenii: Po rezul'tatam initsiativnykh reprezentativnykh obshcherossiyskikh oprosov naseleniya [Structure and Reproduction of the Memory of the Soviet Union in Russian Public Opinion: Based on the Results of an All-Russian Survey]* (Levada Centre, 2020).
34. Lidia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi [Notes about Anna Akhmatova]* (Soglasie, 1997).
35. Smith, 'Russian Gulag Poetry and its Reception', p. 245.
36. Anja Tippner, 'Worlds Apart? Cross-Mapping Camp Literature from the Gulag and Nazi Concentration Camps', in *Narratives of Annihilation, Confinement, and Survival: Camp Literature in a Transnational Perspective*, ed. by Anja Tippner and Anna Artwińska (De Gruyter, 2019), pp. 30–48 (p. 31).
37. Mark Ferguson and Nyla Branscombe, 'The Social Psychology of Collective Guilt', in *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology*, ed. by Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmella (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 251–65.
38. Anatoly M. Khazanov, 'Whom to Mourn and Whom to Forget? (Re)constructing Collective Memory in Contemporary Russia', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 9.2–3 (2008), pp. 293–310 (p. 298).
39. 'At first I couldn't understand the character of Galina as a woman because of her brutality'.
40. Maslenitsa is an Eastern Slavic holiday that takes place in the eighth week before Eastern Orthodox Pascha.
41. J. J. Lennon and Malcolm Foley, *Dark Tourism* (Continuum, 2000); Carolyn Strange and Michael Kempa, 'Shades of Dark Tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30.2 (2003), pp. 386–405; Philip R. Stone, 'Dark Tourism, Heterotopias and Post-Apocalyptic Places: The Case of Chernobyl', in *Dark Tourism and Place Identity: Managing and Interpreting Dark Places*, ed. by Leanne White and Elspeth Frew (Routledge, 2013), pp. 79–93; Justin J. Lennon and Guillaume Tiberghien, 'Kazakhstan Gulag Heritage: Dark Tourism and Selective Interpretation', *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 22.3 (2020), pp. 364–74.
42. Slade; Derek Dalton, 'Juxtaposing Prison and Other Carceral Sites: Interrogating Taxonomic Differences and Empathetic Possibilities', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism*, ed. by Wilson and others, pp. 85–110.
43. Jeffrey Hardy, 'Gulag Tourism: Khrushchev's "Show" Prisons in the Cold War Context, 1954–59', *The Russian Review*, 71.1 (2012), pp. 49–78 (p. 76) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9434.2012.00642.x>>.

44. Tomasz Wites, 'Forms of and Prospects for the Development of Gulag Tourism in Russia', *Tourism in the New Eastern Europe: Global Challenges — Regional Answers*, Warsaw, 29 November 2008.
45. Robson, p. 256; Zuzanna Bogumił, *Gulag Memories: The Rediscovery and Commemoration of Russia's Repressive Past* (Berghahn Books, 2018), p. 25.
46. Barbara Buntman, 'Tourism and Tragedy: The Memorial at Belzec, Poland', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14.5 (2008), pp. 422–48 (p. 439) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250802284867>>.
47. Sarah Hodgkinson, 'The Concentration Camp as a Site of "Dark Tourism"', *Témoigner*, 116 (2013), pp. 22–32 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.272>>.
48. Robert Dale, 'The Valaam Myth and the Fate of Leningrad's Disabled Veterans', *The Russian Review*, 72.2 (2013), pp. 260–84 (p. 260) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.10691>>.
49. In *Gulag Archipelago*, an unknown northern island is mentioned as the exile location, which was followed by more specific references in Yuri Nagibin's novella *Patience* (1982), an article published in an émigré newspaper and the memoirs of German tourist. See Dale, pp. 261–62.
50. The myth is explored on the website: Solovki Encyclopaedia, *Mif o veteranakh i invalidakh Vov, soslannykh na Solovki* [*The Myth of Veterans and Invalids of the Second World War, Exiled to Solovki*] (2020) <[http://www.solovki.ca/disputes/falsification\\_solovki\\_02.php](http://www.solovki.ca/disputes/falsification_solovki_02.php)>.
51. Patrice A. Keats, 'Vicarious Witnessing in European Concentration Camps: Imagining the Trauma of Another', *Traumatology*, 11.3 (2005), pp. 171–87 (p. 171).
52. Slade; Maria M. Tumarkin, *Traumascapes* (Melbourne University Press, 2005).
53. An interesting study on the emotional responses of visitors to concentration camps can be found in Jeroen Nawijn and others, 'Holocaust Concentration Camp Memorial Sites: An Exploratory Study into Expected Emotional Response', *Current Issues in Tourism*, 21.2 (2018), pp. 175–90 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1058343>>.
54. Shcherbakova.
55. Judith Mair and Michelle Whitford, 'An Exploration of Events Research: Event Topics, Themes and Emerging Trends', *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 4.1 (2013), pp. 6–30 (p. 16) <<https://doi.org/10.1108/17582951311307485>>.
56. Katy Gardner and Ralph Grillo, 'Transnational Households and Ritual: An Overview', *Global Networks*, 2.3 (2002), pp. 179–90 (p. 183).
57. Kevin M. F. Platt, 'Russian Empire of Pop: Post-Socialist Nostalgia and Soviet Retro at the "New Wave" Competition', *The Russian Review*, 72.3 (2013), pp. 447–69 (pp. 449–50).
58. Gary Y. Lee, 'Nostalgia and Cultural Re-creation: The Case of the Hmong Diaspora', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 19.2 (2008), pp. 125–54.
59. Ekaterina Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia* (Södertörns högskola, 2014); Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe, *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire's Legacies* (Routledge, 2019).
60. The title can be translated to English as 'The food court'.
61. Knight, p. 794.
62. Anna Kozlova, "'Fairy Tale for Pioneers": Deconstruction of Official Ideology in Memories About Artek 1960s–1980s', *European Education*, 48.3 (2016), pp. 170–86.
63. Christel Lane, 'Legitimacy and Power in the Soviet Union through Socialist Ritual', *British Journal of Political Science*, 14.2 (1984), pp. 207–17 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s000712340003537>>.
64. The songs were: 'Взвейтесь кострами, синие ночи', 'На зарядку', 'Крейсер Аврора', 'Орлята учатся летать!', 'Песня о Щорсе' and 'Песенка Роберта'.
65. Total dictation, *About the Project* (2021) <<https://totaldict.ru/en/>> [accessed 29 January 2021].
66. <<https://totaldict.ru/dictants/uchitel-slovesnosti/>>. For 2014, the writer was Aleksey Ivanov and for 2020, Andrey Gelasimov will provide the text. The book club's reading choices are very close to those of the Тотальный диктант organisers, suggesting that the book selection processes follow the steps of the Russian cultural authorities and their efforts to create the literary canon.
67. The words/phrases were: ошник, залодка, будчка, сделать зонтик, канить, очелинка.
68. The writers were: Dina Rubina, Max Frei (Svetlana Martynchik), Nick Perumov, Alexey Ivanov, Sergey Lukyanenko, Alexey Salnikov. Dina Rubina was the 'odd' one.

69. As a book club member characterised it in the meeting.
70. Berthold Molden, 'Resistant Pasts versus Mnemonic Hegemony: On the Power Relations of Collective Memory', *Memory Studies*, 9.2 (2016), pp. 125–42 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015596014>>.
71. An adaptation of the Jules Verne's novel *In search of the Castaways*.
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75. 'I really liked the game, and I even regretted that, due to my age, I had so little Pioneer-Komsomol experience'. 'I remember my pioneer childhood warmly'.
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77. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*.
78. Lenore A. Grenoble, *Language Policy in the Soviet Union* (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2003).
79. Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (Routledge, 1978), p. 100.
80. 'ошник, залодка, будчка, сделать зонтик, канить, очелинка'.
81. Victor Turner, *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), p. 15.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
83. For instance, posters and souvenirs might bring memories from homeland to the migrant house. See Pechurina, p. 45.
84. Kalinina.
85. David MacFadyen, *Red Stars: Personality and the Soviet Popular Song, 1955–1991* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); J. M. Daughtry, "'Sonic Samizdat': Situating Unofficial Recording in the Post-Stalinist Soviet Union', *Poetics Today*, 30.1 (2009), pp. 27–65 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2008-002>>.
86. Victor Stepanenko, 'Civil Society in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Civic Ethos in the Framework of Corrupted Sociality?', *East European Politics and Societies*, 20.4 (2006), pp. 571–97 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325406293292>>.
87. Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov, 'The Informal Public in Soviet Society: Double Morality at Work', *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 69.1 (2002), pp. 49–69 (p. 57).
88. In Svetlana Alexievich's novel *Secondhand Time* there are various accounts of this phenomenon: 'The final year ... We often had family dinners. Naturally, the conversation would revolve around books. We'd read samizdat together. *Doctor Zhivago*, Mandelstam's poems ... I remember an argument we had about what a poet was. What is a poet's fate in Russia?' (p. 231). 'We lived in our kitchens ... The whole country lived in their kitchens. You'd go to somebody's house, drink wine, listen to songs, talk about poetry' (p. 239). Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (Random House, 2016).

## CHAPTER 5



# Russian Literaturocentrism in the Diaspora

Examining the survival of literaturocentrism in the diaspora requires a close look at the role of literature in Russophone community life. Members of the Waterstones Russian Book Club provided interviews about the significance of literature and readership for themselves, their families, and friends, as well as about their participation in this reading group. In most cases, the interviews took the form of open-ended discussions that occurred before or after book club meetings, book talks, or diasporic social events. These discussions often strayed from complex and abstract concepts such as literaturocentrism, focusing instead on the idolisation of authors, the sacralisation of highbrow literature, and the idealisation of avid readership. Admitting (or not) to the continuous influence of a distinctively Russian and Soviet cultural phenomenon, the WRBC members shed light on their orientation towards their homeland and their identification with the Russophone diaspora.<sup>1</sup> The study of diasporic literaturocentrism is enriched by the analysis of interviews of visiting Russophone writers given that they have traditionally played a fundamental role in the formation of the discourse of literaturocentrism. Representing both sides of the cultural dialogue, diasporic readers and contemporary writers paint a picture of an active and diverse migrant community that turns to contemporary Russophone literature and relevant community literary practices for cultural updates, language practice, escapism, socialising, and, in some cases, as an expression of nostalgia.

### The WRBC and the Search for a Community

Community engagement with Russophone literature in Britain occurred through grassroots initiatives and diasporic cultural organisations. Local book clubs across the country, along with literary festivals and events organised by or in cooperation with cultural centres, provided opportunities for community members to stay connected with contemporary Russophone literary production. In the narratives of the interviewed book club members, the Waterstones Russian Book Club is presented as having diasporic, social, and personal functions. These three categories are intertwined, representing the interviewees' personal need to connect with their cultural homeland, Russian speakers in London, and other avid readers. The multifaceted character of the WRBC stems from the fact that it is not limited to

book discussions like other book clubs but also hosts literary games, celebrations, meet-the-author events, and events organised in collaboration with other diasporic cultural initiatives. For Victoria, the WRBC as a Russophone book club offers an opportunity to reinstate a cultural dialogue between the diaspora and Russia:

Through Russian literature, we somehow maintain a connection between ourselves and the real Russia, even though we are not active participants in everything that is happening there. We do not vote, and we are not deeply concerned about politics or current events in the country. Perhaps we do not understand the people who are going to Syria. In general, there is a dialogue between the diaspora and Russia.

Victoria situates the WRBC within the discourse of the Russophone diaspora, suggesting that contemporary Russian literature, as chosen by and discussed within the framework of the book club, allows members to delve into the mentality of Russians still living in their homeland. The long-distance relationship between the diaspora and the cultural homeland is experienced through absence (*'we do not vote'*), difference (*'we do not understand the people who go to Syria'* — referring to Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war), and a desire to keep communication channels open. Contemporary Russian literature updates and synchronises the cultural imaginary of Russian speakers abroad, contributing to a more homogeneous global ideoscape. Irina adds that global media often distort the truth about Russian society and politics, and it is the responsibility of Russian writers to fight back: 'The main task of Russian writers is to present the real picture of life and people in Russia.'

Most respondents maintain that they joined the WRBC to reconnect with contemporary Russian literary production, having lost touch after their migration abroad. Even though they had previously identified as avid readers who never stopped reading, the interviewees state that they struggled to sift through the numerous new releases and find the 'good' ones:

KLAVDIA I realised that I don't know what is happening in Russian literature at all, except for the detective novels that come out, which my parents read.

DINA It never occurred to me to read modern literature. I tried to keep track of new releases, but there are so many of them, and not all are of high quality. It was very difficult to decide.

Klavdia and Dina reveal that they joined the WRBC to keep up with developments in contemporary Russian literature. For them, the book club represents a place where they can develop their identities as readers, be stimulated, and stay informed. Both respondents distinguish high-quality literature from mass literature, reflecting literaturocentrism and the discourse of Russian high literature. Literaturocentrism is a driving force for them, especially for Klavdia, who stated that she does not participate in any other community gatherings with a diasporic character. In her opinion, the setting of the book club allows participants to focus on a particular novel and escape from their daily routines and worries:

The idea of book clubs is very English and American. I do not know if it exists in Russia. If it does, it is new. I think that the process itself, where you can

discuss books, gather, and talk only about books — not about life or fishing — attracts people. Reading one Russian book a month is a very individual activity. This is what attracts participants to any club: for two hours, you do not do what you do every day, but something different.

In Klavdia's account, book clubs are not considered part of the Russophone literary tradition but rather a well-received influence of the Anglo-Saxon reading culture. Although group readings took place in Russia from late medieval times and were connected to the mass illiteracy of the population in the Russian Empire,<sup>2</sup> they did not resemble the 'reading societies' and 'literary societies' that existed in the eighteenth century in Britain and the USA.<sup>3</sup> The Soviet reader was a solitary one, relying mainly on their private collection,<sup>4</sup> yet people gathered in kitchens or other private spaces to passionately discuss literature and other philosophical matters with friends. The transnational experience in Britain influenced Katya and Klavdia, the moderator and deputy moderator of the WRBC, to turn their in-house literary gatherings into a community book club.<sup>5</sup> The members continue reading alone, but now they have the opportunity to discuss it with fellow Russian-speakers.

Vera participates in two other Russophone book clubs apart from the WRBC, which meet once a month at a different private house each time. Her very positive experience with the book clubs stems from the fact that she started reading '*ten times more*'<sup>6</sup> compared to how much she read before:

I realised that I was reading very little in general, and particularly in Russian. There is an incentive here. There are always interesting books and opportunities to meet interesting people and writers. It is something precious. Other people participate because they also like to read and discuss. All Russian people read a lot; that's just how it is for the majority. But we do not discuss it with anyone, whether they liked it or not, or whether they understood something different. It allows us to view works from a different angle.

Participation in the book club stimulates members to read more regularly, prepare for book discussions, and listen carefully to other people's opinions. According to Robert Clarke and Marguerite Nolan, people join reading groups to 'become a better reader; engage with texts and others; develop a sense of achievement (reading books they otherwise might not); seek social contact and intimacy; and pursue intellectual development'.<sup>7</sup> Vera highly values the WRBC for facilitating social interactions around a shared reading practice by bringing together an interesting group of people and organising meetings with Russophone writers. In the pre-pandemic era, there were also Russophone book clubs and literary events taking place online, but the majority of the WRBC members preferred meeting in person: 'You can discuss it on the Internet, in the comments, but it's not the same as live communication, where you can enter into a vivid discussion. I think that live communication is certainly better than online.'

Anna used to participate in an online book club until she found out about the WRBC. In-person social interaction is fundamental for her, while other readers prefer to socialise through virtual book discussions.<sup>8</sup> Readers also share their opinions by writing reviews or simple comments on book blogs and other digital social networks like Goodreads, which also constitute a form of social interaction

around literature. For the members of a transnational community, face-to-face communication also meets their need to speak in their first language.<sup>9</sup> When it involves forming an argument or using literary terminology, book discussions can be intellectually challenging even for competent but non-native language users: 'I come to discuss all the new releases, especially in my own language, because I don't have to strain to remember the words. It is very pleasant to discuss in your own language and with people who understand what you are talking about.' Dina stresses the importance of being able to express her ideas in her mother tongue, especially in a stimulating environment with people sharing the same Soviet and post-Soviet cultural heritage. In other words, she articulates the need to be understood on both linguistic and cultural levels, which is connected to the migrant experience.

A transnational reading community often attracts readers who are interested in book discussions as much as the diasporic setting where it takes place. Irina was invited to join the WRBC by a friend, while Sofia's daughter found the book club while looking for socialising opportunities for her:

My daughter registered me with national Russian organisations. She did not want me to be bored. For fourteen years, I lived very narrowly. My job was in an English environment, and I had some Russian connections. I did not need the Russian diaspora as such.

When Sofia retired, she turned to London-based Russophone diasporic cultural organisations and initiatives to expand her social network. The WRBC represents an opportunity for communication and mingling for elderly migrants who might not be as successfully integrated into the host society as the younger generations. Nevertheless, other WRBC members distinguish this book club from other similar diasporic initiatives for the 'quality of the participants'. Dina is proud of meeting with the 'intelligentsia of the diaspora', Irina enjoys being a member of 'a group of like-minded, educated Russian speakers', and Anton is glad to be among 'deep-thinking and intelligent' people.

Russophone migrants in London have a plethora of spaces and groups to choose from where they can meet, speak in their mother tongue, and socialise based on shared interests. For Mark,

There are so many places where someone can speak Russian. Each place has its own theme, and people choose what they are interested in. I have many options where I can communicate with the Russian-speaking diaspora, but I find this place interesting.

He is reluctant to attend Russophone events or community gatherings unless the participants' common interests reflect a shared understanding of reality: 'Often people speak the same language but use different words.' In his opinion, Russian speakers abroad are often divided as a transnational group due to their different ethnicities and political views. When asked what can bring Russian speakers together, Mark answered:

Literature, like music and cinema, can bring people together when it addresses contemporary issues, such as the challenges faced by Russian-speaking people outside Russia. In this way, art can become a unifying factor. For instance,

if someone writes about the adventures of a contemporary Russian-speaking person abroad, that would be interesting.

Literature can contribute to the construction of the Russian-speaking community identity through works that engage with and portray the Russophone population abroad. By depicting diasporic life, literature creates discursive points of reference for Russian speakers abroad, allowing them to imagine themselves as members of a broader transnational community. The representation in literary works of issues that concern the majority of Russophone diasporans supports the formation of a sense of belonging and ingroup solidarity. However, Mark acknowledges that contemporary Russophone literature does not sufficiently address diasporic themes, which can limit its influence on the transnational Russian-speaking identity.

Tailored to the needs of diasporic readers, the WRBC is a community space that gathers Russian speakers around the symbolic value of Russian literature. Vera, who proudly identifies as a member of the Russophone diaspora in Britain, regards the WRBC as an example and indicator of Russophone literature's community-building character: 'Look at how many people the Russian book club unites — more than 600 people, even though only 30–40 attend meetings. This is a social moment that brings us together.'<sup>10</sup> Sasha expressed similar thoughts: 'Here, people find each other, and it's easier for them to communicate. They share the same blood. It doesn't matter if you're Latvian, Ukrainian, or Russian. They read the same books and use the same idioms that only they can understand.' The WRBC serves as both an offline and online meeting point for Russian speakers interested in literature, regardless of their nationality. By using the pronoun 'we', Vera underlines the existence of a transnational group with shared cultural heritage that differentiates itself from others within the host society. Sasha takes a step further and employs a primordial vocabulary (*'they share the same blood'*) that stresses the common origins of the Russian-speaking populations. The discourse of cultural homogeneity, to which Sasha subscribes, refers to a shared cultural capital (*'read the same books'*) and the capacity to use the same idiomatic language. For the two WRBC members, the book club affords Russophone migrants the opportunity, and at the same time represents their need, to come together and socialise informally. In this way, the WRBC meetings capture a glimpse of and contribute to the community life of the Russophone diaspora in London.

According to Dina, the book club generates a sense of community, which is expected from a diasporic group joined by 'nostalgic participants', a characterisation not accepted by all WRBC members. Restorative nostalgia aims to recreate home and its sense through material and immaterial cultural practices, providing comfort and relief. The role of literature and the WRBC in the reconstruction of home culture is apparent in the following extract:

I think that reading literature together is just a tool for communication. It is like going to eat at the restaurant Winter or in Mari Vanna because they cook Russian food. This is another reason to meet and spend time in some familiar activity that both enjoy. On Monday, we will organise an evening of Soviet perfumes, and this is another way to remember what unites us. Any aspect of

life, including literature, is a great occasion to remember and feel at home, in your own family. This is what we want the most. Literature is just an occasion to get together, to feel at home, like a family.

The repetition of ‘home’ and ‘family’ in the above extract from Dina’s interview highlights the connection between participation in diasporic initiatives and the feeling of nostalgia for the country of origin. The book club member places literature and group reading practices among the different options available for Russian speakers who want to resurrect and relive memories of home. The sensory (re)experience of home culture through exposure to materiality and sensuous stimuli, such as food and perfumes, is central to diasporic identity. Like Vera, Dina also approaches Russian speakers as a group (‘This is what *we* want the most’), which comes together on different occasions to remember their pre-migration life through the performance of cultural practices. In this way, literaturocentrism is situated within the Russophone collective cultural memory and is being discursively reproduced in the diaspora.

The formation of community literary spaces where diasporans gather is a dynamic process. The interviewees witnessed the proliferation of Russophone book clubs, the emergence of children’s reading groups alongside Russian schools, and the organisation of well-attended events with writers from Russia. For Oksana, the WRBC is an example of the growing interest in Russophone literature: ‘The club was formed a year ago and there were very few people. But slowly, after a full year, we have quite a lot. And everything is ahead of us. It is a unifying moment. I think books unite.’ Books bring together Russian-speaking migrants not only within the framework of the WRBC but also around other literary initiatives. The creation of community groups and cultural hubs in a global, superdiverse city like London occurs progressively and translates into multiple memberships and overlapping areas of activities, akin to Byford’s ‘community-at-large’.<sup>11</sup> However, ‘*books unite*’ only if groups manage to handle politically divisive topics for post-Soviet migrants with caution, such as Stalinist repressions and communist nostalgia. For Anton diasporic socialising is compartmentalised, and since most Russian speakers are members of more than one club, they have many opportunities to engage and interact with each other:

We do not meet outside the club, at least I don’t. There are people I meet outside the club, but that is a club as well. There are different areas of interaction within the diaspora. There is a creative club where people meet, read their own poems, others’ poems, and sing their own songs. It happens once a month. They gather in a pub and perform. I performed poetry there once.

The WRBC is situated within a thriving community life that represents the yearning of Russian speakers in London to engage with various forms and spheres of Russian culture. The book club appeals to two distinctive but often overlapping groups: bibliophiles who want to keep up with contemporary Russian literature, to escape from the everyday hustle and develop their reading identities; and nostalgic diasporans who wish to socialise with other Russophone migrants, converse in their mother tongue, and stay informed about life in Russia. For most interviewees,

the sense of community within the club derives from the reaffirmation of cultural bonds between the members grounded in their shared post-Soviet heritage, as well as from literature's ability to bring people together. Nevertheless, the WRBC membership is fluid, with most members participating in several community initiatives simultaneously, and does not necessarily translate into socialising outside the book club. The dynamic and flexible participation in the WRBC aligns with what Zygmunt Bauman described as 'liquid modern community'.<sup>12</sup> For Bauman, modern communities resemble social networks with flexible, instrumental, and conditional participation as people connect and disconnect from them depending on their situational needs. The book club members attend WRBC meetings regularly, join celebrations, and play games, expressing their sense of belonging to its community. Yet, they are ready to withdraw from the club's functions if it ceases to serve its purpose, like members of 'liquid communities'. What matters most for the WRBC members is the continuing engagement with Russophone literature on a diasporic community level.

### Literaturocentrism and the Russophone Transnational Experience

Discussing literaturocentrism with the WRBC members involved exploring the high significance of logos, literature, and writers for Russophone culture, both diasporic and non-diasporic. Without necessarily identifying with the Russophone diaspora, all readers embraced the discourse of the literaturocentric Russophone identity. Some of them accepted this notion without further clarification, while others chose to elaborate by situating the phenomenon within the Soviet or present social context. Mark quickly agreed on the role of Russophone literature: 'Contemporary Russian literature and classical literature have a very important role for the Russophone identity.' He recognised the equal importance of contemporary and classic Russian literature for Russians and Russian speakers who are nationals of the Soviet successor states like himself. For Victoria, Russian literature draws its symbolic power from the Russian language and the Russian logocentric tradition with its profound respect for the literary Word:

Literature is of central importance. It is the language of our communication. It is the link between people. Perhaps we are missing the new entries to the Russian language because we live apart. Russian identity is more logocentric than literaturocentric.

Regardless of their place of residence and their ability to use the language in their everyday life, the Russian language appears to be the binding factor for Russian speakers. The respondent's claim that Russophone migrants might be losing touch with some of the developments in the Russian language recalls Ryazanova-Clarke's observation that 'voices from the streets outside the Russian Federation speak in Russian that is variously "accented" and often ungrammatical'.<sup>13</sup>

The literaturocentric character of Russophone identity apparently persists despite migration and assimilation. For Sofia, a Russian speaker from Latvia in her seventies, the ability to move freely and migrate abroad does not diminish the

significance of Russian literature for Russian speakers: 'We live wherever we want. Everyone needs this literature. It does not depend on where we live. We Russians need Russian literature.' The repetition of the word 'need' adds to the discourse of Russian literaturocentricity an element of necessity, underlining its importance on both personal and collective levels. Migration does not impact this need, which survives and endures. Sofia further describes how she found it necessary to move her book collection from Latvia to England when she moved there in 2005:

I have a house full of books. I brought these books with me from my childhood. They may seem insignificant, but my home here is identical to my home in my homeland. The way I lived there is the way I live here; nothing has changed. I threw some things away, but I might need a book, and it is here. A new country, a new home, and the books are here. It should be like that.

The (re)creation of home in England was possible for Sofia through her books and bookshelves, which she placed in her new apartment to remind her of her home in Latvia, as she found it difficult to part with them. The actual value of the books or even their quality as literary works seems insignificant to her compared to the sense of companionship they offer.<sup>14</sup> To Sofia, they matter more as a collection than as individual items. This relationship with books, imbued with meaning, transcends time and space for Russian speakers. Lovell refers to the fetishisation of book collections in Soviet times, which acted as status symbols and indicators of the owner's cultural capital.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Pechurina observes the attachment of Russian migrants to their book collections and the books' role in the creation of diasporic homes,<sup>16</sup> a phenomenon also noted by Keren Dali in her research on the use of public libraries by Russophone migrants in Toronto.<sup>17</sup> In Sofia's diasporic home, 'nothing has changed', and that was mandatory and universal ('It should be like that'). The normative description of her personal, emotional attachment to her book collection represents an expression of Sofia's literaturocentric transnational Russophone identity.

Anton regards literaturocentrism as an intertemporal phenomenon in the Russophone world that has shaped the social relationships and sociocultural identities of people:

There has always been this attitude in Russian-speaking society, the respect for the book. Literaturocentric identity, yes. Someone will not say, 'I haven't read, I'm not familiar, I'm not well-read', because it's a shame. Being well-read is good. Not being well-read is bad.

The well-established feeling of shame that not well-read people bear in Russian society constitutes, for Anton, an indication of literaturocentrism's survival today. In this way, the discourse of literaturocentrism influences not only the personal space and life of Russian speakers but also their social interactions and communication with other bearers of the same culture. Being well-read is not merely an ideal but a cultural norm and standard for Russophone societies and communities. The use of the binary opposition 'good' and 'bad' for being or not well-read emphasises how deeply felt the discourse of literaturocentrism is for Anton.

Anna, a Russian speaker from Ukraine in her late thirties,<sup>18</sup> was sceptical

about the current role of literature in the Russophone sphere. In her opinion, literaturocentrism has receded in the post-Soviet era due to the lack of financial support for writers:

One book is a monthly salary in Moscow. You write this book in a year. Who needs it? For them [Idiatullin and Yakovleva],<sup>19</sup> it is not the main job. If people do not earn more money, nothing will happen. This is important, but you understand that artists should not be hungry, especially if they have a family and children. Everyone wants to live, work, and have money. Why would people write? It's easier for them to write a blog or on Instagram and get paid for advertising.

In Anna's account, literature remains significant for Russian speakers today, but its place relies on a thriving literary production, which is potentially disrupted by writers seeking more financially rewarding occupations. The reformation of the Russian literary landscape under cultural capitalism<sup>20</sup> has led writers to seek new ways to connect and engage with their audiences, a fact that the interviewee finds disconcerting. The central role of writers in the discourse of literaturocentrism is even more apparent in Anna's following statement: 'Of course, literature is important. What problems does Russia always face? Fools and roads. There will always be fools who will write.' Anna is employing a *krylataya fraza*, an aphorism or catchphrase, whose disputed origins go back to the nineteenth century and are often attributed to the writer Nikolai Gogol.<sup>21</sup> The aphorism refers to the two 'eternal problems' of Russia: fools and poor road infrastructure. In this case, the interviewee chooses to present Russian authors as 'fools' who continue to write, trying to live up to the high standards of a literary tradition that asks them to serve an enlightening social mission. The reference to the 'fools' places the authors outside the logic of the market, which in turn ennobles and idealises them, indicating the survival of the pre-revolutionary and Soviet cultural myth of the poet.<sup>22</sup>

The book club members attributed the importance of literature for Russian speakers to their Soviet upbringing and the particular features of Soviet society. The Soviet state had made it its official mission to have highly educated citizens who were avid readers and appreciated all forms of high culture such as opera, ballet, classical music, and fine arts. Embracing the Soviet discourse that idealised its citizens, Irina described the Soviet reader as a mass phenomenon: 'The Soviet reader was massive, but, unfortunately, many of the indicators disappeared. In my childhood, in my youth, people read more. We were brought up in this way, we were trained, instilled in reading, in literature.' The literaturocentrism of Russophone identity appeared in the pre-revolutionary era but was established and had a widespread effect during the Soviet times due to the influence of the Soviet literacy project<sup>23</sup> and a certain sociopolitical system that ceased to exist after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Irina is nostalgic about the times when people read more, a feeling also shared by Sofia: 'Reading has always been there. There was a cult of books in the family, but not in every family. I remember what it feels like to go buy a book, which has remained for a lifetime. We read a lot.' Sofia refers to the myth of the Soviet reader as the 'cult of books', which used to apply to the majority

of Soviet people.<sup>24</sup> Even though the love of books, experienced mnemonically and physically through consumption,<sup>25</sup> is not shared by everyone, it is still powerful to her and is an indicator of her transnational cultural identity. Anton proposes a different explanation for the Soviet stereotype of the ‘most well-read nation in the world’. In his opinion, Soviet people used to read a lot due to the very limited alternatives for leisure and recreation:

*Russian people read a lot and appreciate literature.*<sup>26</sup> I think this is a big misconception because in Soviet times, literature was one of the few forms of entertainment. There was only one TV channel, and it was boring, with only political news. Everyone had books. Whether you wanted to or not, you took a book and read it.

Anton sociologises literaturocentrism and its influence on Soviet cultural identity, referring to it as a ‘delusion’ that does not properly depict Soviet life. Books were widely available, readership was supported and encouraged by the state, and Soviet people indeed read a lot. However, the reality was that the variety of available titles and genres was centrally controlled, as was the case with other forms of entertainment such as TV shows. State censorship and monopoly in the cultural field translated into limited options for cultural consumption. Anton further offered an anecdote about how his friend ended up reading Dostoyevsky’s collected works:

My friend has read all of Dostoevsky. He went on some expedition, they lived in a hunter’s hut, and by some miracle, there was a collection of all Dostoevsky. He lived there for a week, there was absolutely nothing to do, and so he read everything. Due to the lack of entertainment, everyone read.

The status of literature and readership has changed radically in post-Soviet times. For Berg (*Literaturokratiia*), the break-up of the Soviet Union signifies the end of the literaturocracy and the nodal role of literature in society and culture with the arrival of the market economy. Without state support, writers quickly understood that according to the free market rules, to earn a living from their work, they not only had to write a text that readers wanted to read, but even had to persuade publishers to accept the work for publication.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the reading audience shrank with 46% of the population claiming in 2008 that they never read books.<sup>28</sup> Mark attributes the present crisis of literaturocentricity to the rise of the internet and social media:

Today, people read less, especially those who were born after the 1990s. The Internet takes up a lot of their time, and as a result, people read less. This is a fact. Older individuals, born before 1990, established their reading habits in childhood and now read for entertainment. In the past, we used to read for personal development. There are many sources of information available now. In the past, books, literature, and newspapers were the primary sources of information.

In Mark’s narrative, two different generations emerge: the Soviet generation (born and raised in the Soviet Union) and the post-Soviet generation (born after Perestroika). The Soviet generation has read the Russian classics (‘their base’), and while they continue to read, they now select books for entertainment and

aesthetic pleasure rather than to ‘improve themselves’. For the younger generation, print culture no longer serves the same informational functions as before<sup>29</sup> and loses its prestigious status in the cultural imaginary, which subsequently affects their engagement with literature. Digital practices have transformed the forms of readership but have not affected the significance of literature for Russian speakers: ‘The formats have changed. They read online, listen to audiobooks. I started listening more myself because I don’t always have enough time. People read, but they read eBooks.’ Masha, a Russophone community leader and poet, admits that even she struggles to find the time in her busy schedule to sit down and read as much as before. Therefore, she has turned to audiobooks and eBooks like many of her friends and other book club members.<sup>30</sup> Reading from her phone or listening to a book while she is in transport might not necessarily be less time-consuming, but thanks to the flexibility of these formats, Masha manages to keep up with new releases in fiction. Even though Masha represents the aforementioned Soviet generation, she has adapted her reading practices to the digital era. In contrast to Kondakov, who argues that the emergence of audiobooks is an indicator of the end of literaturocentrism, with reading incorporated into ‘audio-visual mainstream media culture’,<sup>31</sup> Masha shows that readership of literature is not dependent on physical books and can continue to thrive in any format.

A different ‘danger’ for the literaturocentrism of the Russophone cultural identity is indicated by Vera. In her opinion, when the state ceased controlling literary production, various genres of low-quality popular fiction appeared:

Everything has changed. The so-called pulp fiction has arrived, which is not literature, but pulp fiction. Works that do not represent any literary values. To forget, kill time, distract yourself from everyday stress. I often try to avoid these books.

Detective fiction, historical novels, and romance have been the main ‘popular’ genres of the post-Soviet period, representing a turn to mass literature.<sup>32</sup> Despite their orientation towards the mass reader, significant contemporary writers have written in some of these genres, such as Boris Akunin, who specialises in detective novels. Vera aligns with the discourse of Russian high literature and criticises the readership of pulp fiction and low-level popular literature, following the Soviet reading tradition of approaching literature through the lens of literary quality.<sup>33</sup> In her account, literature worth reading is critically acclaimed or canonised and cultivates its readers, in contrast to ‘pulp fiction’, which constitutes a relaxing but superficial diversion. Vera fears a decline in the quality of Russian literature, as she still idealises literature and its mission for society and culture.

The reading tradition persists through the children’s upbringing, thereby reinforcing literaturocentric cultural identities. Irina moved from Belarus when her daughter was 8 years old. Before their resettlement, Irina’s daughter had joined a children’s reading group at the local library, where she attended various literary events. Now in London, Irina continues to instil a love for reading and Russian literature by integrating it into her daughter’s school curriculum. As a family, they also attend Russophone children’s literary festivals and events

organised by the diaspora and *Rossotrudnichestvo*: ‘The love of reading is passed down from generation to generation. It’s a tradition. Family plays a very important role. And school, of course.’ Families play a significant role in identity construction and performance through discourse and other cultural practices. In her study of Russophone migrant families in Finland, Pihla Vuorinen argues that ‘identity building through family discourse acquires greater significance after the immigration process. Immigration raises the need to define who “we” are compared to “others”, the majority of the society, by seeking both similarities and differences’.<sup>34</sup> By insisting on reading Russian literature and following the Russian school curriculum, Irina constructs a literaturocentric Russophone identity for her daughter, which enhances intra-family unity through its distinction from the host society. In her view, being bilingual is a significant advantage for her daughter, and literature can support the preservation of the connection to Russian language and culture. Therefore, Irina invests her time in explaining the necessary vocabulary and content of the literary works that her daughter reads:

We read, discuss, and explain because children today do not understand the old Russian language. We read Pushkin, Lermontov, and there are words that she does not know. I try to educate her, so she understands the meaning and context of each book. My childhood was in the Soviet Union, and I was raised there. For my daughter, these events and historical dates are not clear at all, and I have to explain and suggest, sometimes from a different point of view than I was told. History has been rewritten.

Apart from defining old Russian words, Irina has the responsibility to explain historical events and their relevant eras to her daughter, whose interpretation has changed in the post-Soviet times. Irina’s approach resembles that of Klavdia and Masha when their children were younger, while other WRBC members appear less successful in their mission to promote literature to their children. Vera is an avid reader and member of three book clubs, but her children read very little and only in English:

Unfortunately, my children do not read much, and I am working on this, but it is unlikely that they will read in Russian. They read in English. My children have never lived in Russia; they speak Russian with an accent. They are not exactly Russian children, although they have Russian citizenship. I often go to the theatre with my children and to Russian-language performances. There are also many literary works.

Vera distinguishes between Russian identity and Russian citizenship and maintains that her children are not ‘exactly Russian’ since they were not born in Russia and speak the language with an accent. In other words, Russianness apparently ‘recedes’ outside Russophone societies, and the discursive components related to this identity, such as literaturocentricity, also diminish. For Sasha, the reason behind this phenomenon is that Russophone parents in Britain try to assimilate into the host society and do not focus on teaching their children the Russian language:

I think the problem here in England is that in these Russian-speaking families, parents try to assimilate into English society. They do not really emphasise that

children should be introduced to the Russian language and literature. Not all of them, but many. I think this is a big mistake. I am in favour of integration but against assimilation. We should not lose our 'face'.

Sasha recognises the significance of preserving the Russophone identity ('our face') for the second generation of migrants in Britain, which is possible through language and literature. Identity-building continues to take place in the migrant home, connecting children to the culture of their country of origin, while integration into a new country does not necessarily interrupt this process. In this way, Sasha supports the hybridisation of Russophone cultural identity in the transnational space of Britain and views literaturocentrism as one of the discursive practices to be sustained in this new context. An example of a successful continuation of the reading tradition and interest in Russophone literature comes from Sofia, who proudly describes her daughter's connection to Russian books:

My daughter, she is such an Englishwoman, but when she went to Latvia, she brought back a whole bag of books. She brought Tolstoy, Pushkin, back to London. I think she took that after me, my child. It depends on the upbringing of each family, and it is passed on. She was never taught Russian, but she reads.

By calling her daughter an 'Englishwoman', Sofia underlines that she is fully integrated into English society while preserving her literaturocentric identity. The interviewee explained that her daughter grew up in the 1990s in a non-Russophone Latvian city and did not have the opportunity to receive any education in Russian. Sofia regards it as a personal success that her daughter reads Russian literature and expresses her pride by emphasising their parent-child relationship.

By and large, the WRBC members agreed on the literaturocentric character of Russophone identity and contributed in different ways to its understanding. The significance of literature derives from the Russian logocentric myth, as well as the Soviet literacy and cultural project, which highly valued reading. The Soviet literaturocentric culture has resulted in a value system that influences different aspects of the readers' lives: books as physical items and the creation of diasporic homes (Sofia), social relationships and the importance of being well-read (Anton), family life and education (Irina, Klavdia, and Masha). This value system seems less relevant to the post-Soviet generation, namely, Russian speakers who were born and raised after the dissolution of the USSR. Some book club members believe that literature has given way to the internet and mass culture, while others assert that reading has been transformed to keep up with contemporary life. In most cases, the respondents assume the responsibility for the continuation of the literary tradition within their families, even though they often struggle with it due to the challenges of migrant life.

### Touring Writers and Diasporic Literaturocentrism

Russophone writers have contributed significantly to the creation and dissemination of literaturocentrism, (re)producing a narrative that highlights and sometimes mythologises their contribution to the formation of Russian culture and a shared cultural identity. Examining the role of these writers would provide valuable insight into this cultural phenomenon from the perspective of those producing literature. While attending Russophone literary events, I quickly observed how regularly writers visited London and other British cities, invited by cultural organisations, diasporic groups, Russian departments of universities, book fairs, and bookshops. Therefore, I started getting in touch with the visiting writers before or during these events to arrange meetings where we could discuss the relevance of literaturocentrism to the contemporary Russophone diaspora.

In this context, I was afforded the opportunity to meet and interview thirteen famous or up-and-coming Russian authors coming to Britain to promote their work (in alphabetical order): Mikhail Durnenkov, internationally acclaimed playwright and screenwriter, winner of the 2019 Golden Mask Award; Shamil Idiatullin, journalist and novelist, winner of the Big Book Award 2017 and 2020; Alexei Ivanov, author and screenwriter, known for his TV miniseries *The Ridge of Russia* (2009) about the history of Urals; Irina Lukyanova, writer and journalist, involved in Kniguru, the All-Russian Competition for The Best Literary Work for Children and Youth; Vera Pavlova, bestselling and world-famous poet, whose work has been translated into twenty-four languages; Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaya, journalist, writer and photographer, daughter of the Soviet poet Robert Rozhdestvensky; Alexei Salnikov, novelist and winner of the NOS Prize and National Bestseller Award; the late Vladimir Sharov, novelist and laureate of many award including the Russian Booker Prize and the Big Book Award; Anastasia Strokina, rising children's writer; Eugene Vodolazkin, scholar, multi-award-winning and one of the most translated contemporary Russian writers; Guzel Yakhina, novelist and winner of Big Book literary Award (2015 and 2019) and the Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award, whose debut novel has been translated into more than thirty languages; Yulia Yakovleva, children's writer and columnist; and Galina Yuzefovich, literary critic participating in popular TV-shows, who produces her own podcast and YouTube videos with writers.

Most writers agree on the persistent significance of literature and readership for Russian speakers today, regardless of their place of residence. Galina Yuzefovich, a critic who closely follows developments in the contemporary literary scene, contends that Russia has always been a literaturocentric country: 'Literature has always been and continues to be an art above all others, the main art form, and the entire Russian identity is definitely built around Russian literature. The Russian cultural identity is based on Russian literature.' Yuzefovich's assertiveness regarding the place of literature in the Russian cultural identity represents a well-established ideal that glorifies literature and exalts it over other forms of art and high culture. The choice of structural vocabulary ('built around', 'based on') contrasts with the repetition of 'always', highlighting the discord and dissonance between

the discursive, constructivist approach to identity formation and essentialism.<sup>35</sup> Essentialism views identity as stable, timeless, and sometimes even given by a higher authority, while discourse theory recognises its relative, situated, shifting, and dynamic character. The same contradiction between the internalised official discourse on identity and the awareness of the role that a certain sociopolitical environment has played appears in Guzel Yakhina's response:

It is customary to say that. That's what everyone says. It's true. I am talking about myself; I don't like to talk in general. I can say about myself that, of course, this is how books shaped me. Of course, books were the main thing, one of the most important things in our childhood and youth, and I'm actually very happy that I was born back then.

As a writer who grew up during Soviet times, Yakhina acknowledges the influence of the Soviet education and cultural system on her, which allowed her to develop her reading identity, making literature central to her. However, Alexei Salnikov and Vera Pavlova are less positive about Soviet literaturocentrism. Salnikov, on the one hand, clarifies that 'In the past, we read more, but before, there was no other way out', given that entertainment options were extremely limited. Pavlova, on the other hand, notes that reading was highly directed and faced restrictions:

In a situation of censorship and restriction of reading, literature was still some kind of ventilation. We were all very proud that you could go to a house of intellectuals, see a bookcase, and find all the books there, all with the same covers, as if your bookcase was delivered to your home. Just recently, I realised, what were we proud of? We were proud of what we were allowed to read. We now think that we are all united by this bookcase; this is our identity. But we could not choose our identity.

Pavlova summarises most elements of Soviet literaturocentrism, which generated a sense of pride among Soviet people, known as 'the most well-read nation in the world': reading as a means of self-improvement, unwinding, and recharging; book collections as status symbols, widely fetishised and commodified; an ideologised literary canon; and the representation of readers as a single, unified voice.<sup>36</sup> The poet opposes the uncritical acceptance of literature as common ground for all Russian speakers, disregarding the role that communist ideology and Soviet politics played in its formation. Nevertheless, Pavlova admits that the legacy of the idealised Soviet reader survives today as an integral part of the post-Soviet cultural heritage and the Russophone cultural identity. This legacy has resulted in a superficially religious attitude towards literature, as Shamil Idiatullin maintains:

The book has become a bit of an icon. People pass by, cross themselves, and move on. Unfortunately, the more they swear allegiance to literature, the less they actually study and read. This is especially true for the middle and older generations, who neither understand nor want to engage with new literature, and have already read the old literature.

Idiatullin observes an inconsistency between the words and deeds of Russian speakers regarding the place of literature in their lives. In his opinion, people in Russia proclaim that literature is highly significant to them, but in reality, they

do not invest their time in reading books or keeping up with the newest releases. Instead, they prefer other forms of entertainment, such as social media and TV shows. However, the diaspora presents a different picture. Strokina refers to the interest of Russian speakers in literature as a ‘thirst to read, learn, feel, touch’. Reading usually offers this multifaceted and multisensory experience, yet in the case of migrants, it performs an additional function:

Reading books in Russian for the diaspora is a great opportunity to visit Russia without buying a ticket or physically going there. It allows for a dialogue with an interesting Russian person — a writer through their text — especially since a phone conversation with a former friend in Russia might not always be as valuable.

Contemporary Russian literature allows diasporic readers to visit Russia, reconnect, and, most importantly, converse with interesting people still living in the homeland. In contrast to the previous discussion about books as sources of information regarding life in Russia, Strokina suggests that diasporans read to keep the cultural dialogue with the writers alive, a relationship that encapsulates their link to their homeland. Such a dialogue is stimulating, thought-provoking, and beneficial for Russian speakers in terms of language practice. Ekaterina Rozhdestvenskaya agrees with Strokina but focuses on the diaspora’s relationship with literature rather than the writers:

I observed that Russian-speaking readers here are more ‘hungry’ for communication, look forward to new releases in literature, and largely depend on what books will be available. Interest in contemporary Russian literature reflects an interest in oneself and one’s former country, as well as a fear of losing their language and origins.

Rozhdestvenskaya portrays a transnational community strongly attached to its home culture and literature, demonstrating signs of dependence. This dependence can be seen as an expression of a sense of belonging and an indication of their orientation towards their homeland. In other words, Russian speakers in Britain turn to literature to safeguard their ‘Russianness’ or ‘post-Sovietness’. Similarly, Yulia Yakovleva, who lives in Norway, describes the driving force behind diasporans’ engagement with Russian literature as ‘a superstitious fear of losing their national identity and language’. The choice of the adjective ‘superstitious’ aims to illustrate how deeply some Russian speakers feel the need to preserve their identity and connection to Russian culture, while also suggesting that their fear may be irrational. The expected hybridisation of the Russophone identity as a result of the transnational experience does not signify the loss of the pre-migration cultural identity but rather its enrichment. Nevertheless, Yakovleva argues that this fear is only present in a part of the Russophone diaspora:

Russians who live abroad are a little bit peculiar. This refers to their attitude towards their own children. Some are afraid that the children will forget their roots, their language. Many parents, on the contrary, want their children to quickly forget their roots and their language and become part of the new society to which they now belong.

Literature and readership can serve as tools employed by diaspora parents against the assimilation of their children into the host society by conveying Russian culture and language, thereby supporting the formation of a transnational Russophone identity for children who have never lived and/or visited Russia. Yakovleva does not elaborate on the intention of those parents trying to assimilate their children into British culture. Yet, assimilation often represents a strategy of de-emphasising one's cultural differences for survival<sup>37</sup> or success<sup>38</sup> in the country of settlement. In this case, the implementation of such a strategy requires withdrawing from Russian literature and its influence on their cultural identities.

Even though most interviewed writers embrace the literaturocentric character of Russophone identity, they are divided over the role of Russian literature in forging a diasporic community in Britain. The first group of writers recognises the binding force of literature and community literary practices, such as reading groups and festivals, under certain circumstances and conditions. For Strokina, only high literature is capable of uniting a community:

I would very much like it to be like that, but for this to happen, literature must be of a very high level because the average text will not unite anyone. The average text is a waste of paper. Good literature, worthy, great literature always gives something to a person. What will it be? I do not know yet, but we are still forming the literature of the new times. This literature will reach the readers of the diaspora and will definitely serve as a link. But this is all a very slow and difficult process.

The discourse of high Russian literature dates back to the nineteenth century and constitutes one of the foundations of literaturocentrism. According to this discourse, literature must educate, cultivate, and preach on ethical issues, and only literature that is 'good, worthy, great' is considered valuable. Nonetheless, the post-Soviet crisis of literaturocentrism has affected the quality of produced literature and its place in the cultural consciousness of the population. In this framework, Strokina suggests that contemporary literature has not risen to the level of the Russian classics, and only when it does, will it act as a consolidating factor for the Russophone community. For Vodolazkin, writers bear the responsibility for creating high literature that will be able to unite Russian speakers abroad:

Russian literature unites us; it has always united us. I think this is true. I try to write not aggressively, not maliciously, so I do not alienate any of my readers or offend them. When you talk to a person who is different from you in terms of thoughts and actions, it is a long conversation that allows you to find some common ground with each other. So, literature allows Russophone people, who are very different, often polar opposites, to sometimes find common ground.

The writers' duty to unite reflects their special mission in the Russophone landscape and the ongoing influence of literaturocentrism. Vodolazkin's writing is guided by the principle of avoiding division and conflicts, a challenging task when dealing with historical themes. He compares reading a novel to participating in a long conversation with inherently different people. As numerous people read the same novel synchronously or asynchronously, a multi-layered dialectical relationship is

formed: between the writer and the readers, and among the readers themselves. The power of the written word is also recognised by Sharov, who believes that the Russian literary tradition continues uninterrupted:

Language, I think, can be a guiding and unifying idea for everyone. It seems to me that written speech, in general, can be more or less unifying if everyone reads it. Talented or absolutely brilliant books unite. And there are really such.

The Russian language in its literary form can unite if it manages to reach the widest possible audience. For Yuzefovich, the potential audience is global due to the 'post-imperial character of the Russian language' and the significant presence of Russophone populations worldwide. The global presence of Russophone diasporic communities engaging with contemporary literature is acknowledged by the visiting writers, who are in regular contact with them, visit them in person, or join their online events when possible. Yakhina recounts her encounters with small community groups outside Russia:

I receive quite a lot of requests from these circles abroad, from America, from different countries. I see that these are circles that have existed for a long time, circles that unite Russian speakers, at least for one Sunday morning a month. No doubt, this is a banality, but culture in general and literature in particular can unify those who immerse themselves in it.

Yakhina notes that the diasporic community groups reaching out to her have been operating for a long time, but they often meet just once per month. Busy lifestyles do not allow migrants to come together regularly, especially in the case of literary gatherings, where participants are often expected to have read a novel beforehand. Yakhina holds a more moderate view than others on literature's ability to unite Russian speakers, clarifying that this 'banality' (commonplace) concerns only those who already engage extensively with literature. In other words, literature brings together those who appreciate its value.

The second group of writers disagrees with the position that literature can serve as the foundation of Russophone communities. Salnikov maintains that 'Nowadays, everyone can find a certain commonality of interests with others', and literature does not hold a special privilege in this regard. Similarly, Ivanov contends that people form communities based on their hobbies or country of origin, yet these groups are ephemeral. In his opinion, while the love of reading and literature might be an integral part of Russophone cultural heritage, it has not demonstrated the ability to support the formation of sustainable communities:

Any phenomenon can serve as a basis for unity. I do not believe that Russians can be united simply because they all once lived in Russia. Everyone has noticed that Russian tourists abroad often avoid each other. When they hear Russian spoken, Russian tourists may even try to cross the street to avoid encountering a fellow countryman. In other words, while any national or cultural element can contribute to unity, it is not necessarily a universal criterion.

Ivanov observes that Russian speakers abroad are often divided, and a shared cultural heritage sometimes drives them apart instead of bringing them together.

The influence of the literaturocentric tradition has clear limitations at a community-unifying level. More generally, the reduced influence of literature within post-Soviet Russia is linked to the collapse of the sociopolitical system that supported its prevalence. However, Russophone literature retains its significance for diasporans as it keeps them informed about life in the homeland, helps them practise their language skills, and enables them to engage with cultural authorities. Still, only great literature read by a wide audience can support and accelerate community-building processes among the Russophone diaspora in Britain, which, in the case of Russian literature, is currently under formation.

### Conclusion

Diasporic literaturocentrism preserves the core elements of the cultural myth, including a deep appreciation for highbrow literature, ritualised readership, and the veneration of writers. All WRBC members agreed on the literaturocentric character of their transnational Russophone identities, influenced by the Russian logocentric tradition and the Soviet cultural project. This influence resonates through their personal and social lives, manifesting in a variety of cultural practices. Although readership has taken new forms and its social significance has been reduced, book club members strive to preserve this literary tradition and pass it on to the next generation despite the challenges of migrant life. As avid readers and/or nostalgic diasporans, they participate in WRBC meetings with commitment, engaging in book discussions, celebrations, and literary games that foster a sense of community. The 'liquid community' of the book club forms a flexible and fluid social network centred on a love of literature and a shared post-Soviet heritage. For visiting writers, literaturocentrism remains prevalent in the diaspora, as engagement with Russophone literature allows readers to (re)connect with their cultural homeland and participate in a dialogue with cultural authorities. Regardless of internal divides, literature has the potential to unite the Russophone diaspora if it is widely read and of exceptional quality.

### Notes to Chapter 5

1. The respondents belonged to the three main age groups of the club — 28–38, 39–55, and 56–70 — representing three different generations of post-Soviet migrants. Following Byford's distinction with minor adjustments, the older group constitutes 'the last Soviet generation' and includes those who were born in the 1950s to the late 1960s and had fully experienced late-socialism; the middle group or 'the generation of transition' to post-socialism covers those born until Brezhnev's death in 1982; and subsequently, the younger group or first post-Soviet generation brings together readers with little or no lived experience of the Soviet system and society. See Byford, 'The Last Soviet Generation in Britain', pp. 55, 62. The composition of the book club allowed me to collect accounts that reflected different dispositions towards Soviet cultural heritage and literaturocentrism as one of its principal discourses. The interviews with representatives of the three different generations also shed light on the functions of community literary events for each group, and especially their capacity to act as constitutive elements of the Russophone diasporic identities.
2. Brooks.

3. Long; Rehberg Sedo, 'An Introduction to Reading Communities'.
4. Birgit Menzel, 'Writing, Reading and Selling Literature in Russia, 1986–2004', in *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Stephen Lovell and Birgit Menzel (Sagner, 2005), pp. 39–56.
5. In the 1920s, 'evenings of worker criticism' and other similar activities were organised to encourage worker readers to express their opinions on books (Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*, pp. 30–31).
6. 'The experience is the most positive. I began to read ten times more. I like something, I do not like something else. But largely, I am delighted with modern Russian literature.'
7. Robert Clarke and Marguerite Nolan, 'Book Clubs and Reconciliation: A Pilot Study on Book Clubs Reading the "Fictions of Reconciliation"', *Australian Humanities Review*, 56 (2014), pp. 121–40 (p. 123).
8. Fister, p. 305.
9. Nancy M. Foasberg, 'Online Reading Communities: From Book Clubs to Book Blogs', *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 1.1 (2012), pp. 31–53; Pristed.
10. This interview was conducted in 2018.
11. Byford, 'Performing "Community"'
12. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity Press, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Polity Press, 2001).
13. Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 'Russian with an Accent: Globalisation and Post-Soviet Imaginary', in *The Russian Language outside the Nation: Speakers and Identities*, ed. by Lara Ryazanova-Clarke (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 249–81 (p. 259).
14. Keren Dali, 'Reading their Way through Immigration: The Leisure Reading Practices of Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Canada', *Library & Information Science Research*, 34.3 (2012), pp. 197–211 <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2012.02.004>>.
15. See Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*.
16. Pechurina, pp. 135–36.
17. Keren Dali, 'Reading by Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Toronto: Use of public Libraries, Bookstores, and Home Book Collections', *International Information and Library Review*, 36.4 (2004), pp. 341–66 (p. 351). See also Keren Dali, 'Books in their Suitcases: Leisure Reading in the Lives of Russian-Speaking Immigrants in Canada', *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 45.4 (2013), pp. 261–93 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000612448208>>.
18. Anna married her English husband in 2015 and moved with him initially to Cyprus and then to London in 2016.
19. The interview conducted after a literary event with the writers Shamil Idiattullin and Yulia Yakovleva at the Waterstones Piccadilly in March 2018.
20. Gorski.
21. Konstantin Dushenko, *Citata v prostranstve kul'tury: Isis istorii citat i krylatykh slov sbornik statej* [Quotation in the Space of Culture: From the History of Quotes and Familiar Phrases] (INION RAN, 2019), pp. 161–63.
22. Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks*; Wachtel.
23. Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena, "'Reader, Where Are You?": An Introduction', in *Reading in Russia: Practices of Reading and Literary Communication 1760–1930*, ed. by Damiano Rebecchini and Raffaella Vassena (Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere, 2014), pp. 11–38.
24. Dina used a similar strategy to describe the phenomenon of literaturocentrism: 'Not all Russians are the same. For the stratum of the population that likes to read, literature and books are a real cult'.
25. Thumala Olave, 'Book Love'.
26. I italicise in this case to show that the interviewee stressed the whole phrase.
27. Shelton.
28. Dubin and Zorkaya.
29. Stelmakh; Dubin and Zorkaya.
30. Most WRBC members listen to audiobooks, especially when they are busy, even for the book of the month.

31. Kondakov, p. 14.
32. Stephen Lovell, 'Reading the Russian Popular', in *Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Lovell and Menzel, pp. 29–38; Menzel, 'Writing, Reading and Selling Literature in Russia, 1986–2004'; Shelton.
33. Dali, 'Reading their Way through Immigration', p. 209.
34. Pihla Vuorinen, 'Family in Transition: Transnational Family Ties and Identity Negotiation', *Pro Ethnologia*, 15 (2004), pp. 67–94 (p. 69).
35. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora'.
36. Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution*; Wachtel.
37. Lucille L. Ngan and Kwok B. Chan, *The Chinese Face in Australia: Multi-generational Ethnicity among Australian-Born Chinese* (Springer, 2012).
38. Yiorgos Anagnostou, 'Model Americans, Quintessential Greeks: Ethnic Success and Assimilation in Diaspora', *Diaspora*, 12.3 (2003), pp. 279–327.

## CHAPTER 6



# Russophone Writers Meet the Diaspora

Writers in Russia have been idolised since late medieval times, leading to the creation of the pre-revolutionary poet's myth. In the Soviet era, this myth was appropriated and imbued with a clear political character. Accustomed to quasi-religious personality cults for its political leaders,<sup>1</sup> Soviet society offered similar treatment to the 'big names' of literature, such as Pushkin and Mayakovsky. The Soviet tradition of personality cults was expressed in various ways, such as public commemorations, the placement of their portraits in public buildings, and even the naming of metro stations in honour of a writer. This tradition did not disappear in the post-Soviet era. Many elements of the cult have survived, such as the flourishing of museums in former residences of poets and writers (e.g. Anna Akhmatova Literary and Memorial Museum) and the renaming of major international Russian airports in a similar manner (e.g. Sheremetyevo Alexander S. Pushkin International Airport).<sup>2</sup> However, the celebration of writers' contributions to Russian culture is not limited to the classics, as it includes contemporary authors who have received recognition on a national and/or international level and have been incorporated into the contemporary literary canon.

The pursuit of 'new talent' and 'great literature' among the first post-Soviet generation of writers correlates not only with Russian literaturocentrism but also with publishers' interest in commercial success. The literary market must be constantly supplied with 'new voices', new books, or new editions from well-established writers. The plethora of literary awards in post-Soviet Russia represents these new trends, reflecting the hybridisation of the literaturocentric tradition with elements of the market economy. In turn, most writers now operate according to the rules of the literary market, attending book presentations, giving talks, and participating in promotional tours inside and outside Russia — practices unknown and unnecessary in the Soviet era when the literary sector was state-run. Social media accounts are necessary for commercially successful writers, serving as platforms for interacting with their audience, who follow new releases, interviews, and book reviews. Authors have not been stripped of their symbolic role in society, although this is a primary concern for only a significantly smaller number of them.

Central to understanding diasporic literaturocentrism is examining the role of writers in the lives of transnational Russophone readers. Multifaceted diasporic

processes are shaped by complex global cultural flows, making the preservation of cultural discourses from home uncertain. Like the previous chapter, the current one adopts a dialectic approach, examining both how WRBC members negotiated the presence of writers at their meetings and other literary events in line with the myth of the writer, as well as the perspectives of the authors whose works are consumed by diasporic readers. Leveraging their authoritative position in Russophone culture, the visiting writers offered profound insights into the readers' connections with literature, readership, and their cultural homelands.

### Writers and Readers in the WRBC Meetings

The WRBC members interacted with Russophone writers physically during their visits to London or imaginatively in discussions, games, and celebrations. Interest in authors, their works, and lives is quite common in book clubs, where readers immerse themselves in a different book each month. While a book club might occasionally invite a writer or a translator to join their meeting, the usual focus remains on the text. However, WRBC regularly hosted visits from writers and literary critics, and infused its games with activities that conveyed a sense of presence by their favourite authors. This form of literaturocentrism reveals a nuanced negotiation of the writers' authoritative role in Russophone culture, which is further developed with insights gleaned from the writers' interviews in the following section.

Returning to the WRBC games, the 'Outside the Brackets' game dedicated to Gelasimov's novel *Kholod* (April 2018) included a picture-based quiz featuring portraits of well-known contemporary Russian-speaking writers who represented various genres previously read by the book club. Participants were tasked with recognising these writers, testing their attentiveness as book club members (since a picture of the month's writer typically appeared on the Facebook page) and their general knowledge of prominent figures in contemporary Russophone literature. The names of these writers frequently arose in book club discussions, both online and offline, and by identifying the portraits, WRBC members demonstrated their ability to connect with them visually. Though branded as a memory game, this quiz ensured that both new and established members were familiar with essential cultural references, thus maintaining their grasp of the post-Soviet cultural landscape. The picture-based quiz was revisited a year later as part of the 'Pioneer Childhood' game (April 2019). This game was more challenging as players were required not only to identify the portraits but also to spot the odd one out. In both instances, the quizzes featuring writers' portraits stood apart from other activities by lacking a thematic connection. The title of the picture quiz in April 2019, 'The Royal night', underscored the writers' significance to the book club and (post) Soviet culture, which served as inspiration for the game. The characterisation as 'Royal' positions the writers at the apex of a hierarchy, an inherently authoritative and unquestionable position, thus framing their idolisation discursively. Having begun the previous year with an emphasis on recognition, the 'Royal night' encouraged

engagement with the most esteemed contemporary novelists on an intellectual level, drawing participants' attention to the genres each writer represented.

Another indication of the WRBC games' connection to the personality cult of Russophone writers is the edited group picture used to promote the book club meeting and the 'Outside the Brackets' quiz. This compilation of novelists included writers who had visited London for various literary events (e.g. the children's writer Yulia Yakovleva) or who represent the elite of contemporary literature, such as Viktor Pelevin, Dmitry Bykov, and Lyudmila Ulitskaya. Considering that the WRBC members had not read books from all these writers by the time of that meeting, this selection suggests the club's favourites or those it intended to celebrate in future meetings. By replacing the faces of the WRBC members with those of the writers, the book club moderator created hybrids, or chimaeras. The merging figures of the readers and the writers, based on mythical creatures, encapsulate the perseverance of the writer's myth in the contemporary Russophone ideoscape. The reading experience imaginatively brings together the writer and the readers in the fictional world of the book. The hybrids in the WRBC promotional picture symbolise the discursive union of the creators and the 'consumers', with the latter being 'beheaded' in favour of the former's creative force and intellect. The picture shows, in a light-hearted and metaphoric way, the book club's respect for the writers and its intention to revere them, as would be expected for those considered superior.

The last round of the literary game about the novel *Kholod* welcomed Gelasimov himself to the book club's proceedings by including his own question about the hotel room number, especially designed for the WRBC gamers. Book clubs often promote the latest books by their favourite authors or inform their members of book-signing events.<sup>3</sup> Communication with writers on social media is not rare, especially through forums and platforms used by book clubs. Still, the long-distance inclusion of an author in the form of co-creation of a group literary game is as unusual as the game itself. The 'Outside the Brackets' game was the first official interaction of the WRBC with the writer of the month, one of the most famous contemporary Russophone novelists whose work has reached an international audience. The book club moderator expected that the participants would be positively surprised, if not thrilled, by her small success in contacting and involving Gelasimov. Thanks to the question, Gelasimov imaginatively joined the meeting, giving insight into the creative process of writing a novel. Nevertheless, Gelasimov's presence through the co-creation of the literary game did not yield the expected results, particularly in terms of group dynamics. The last quiz proved unsuccessful, as no one found the correct answer or even guessed the logic behind the question. Imagining Gelasimov's presence among them, the participants allowed themselves to express their irritation towards him. Unlike most book club meetings, where the writer is imagined and their intentions are guessed, during this game the players had Gelasimov's personal input and confronted him for his failure to meet their expectations with an appropriate question. The author was idealised to the point that his inability to understand his audience led to his rejection by the book club members. Nevertheless, even if he was temporarily confronted and rejected,

Gelasimov remained present and influential in shaping the gaming experience.

The demanding (and unsuccessful) question in the novel *Kholod* can also be interpreted as Gelasimov's idealisation of the reader. The ideal reader, or implied reader, is the one created by the text, its language, and style, the reader to whom the writer is addressing their work.<sup>4</sup> The implied reader is juxtaposed with the real reader of a literary work, the actual person who chooses and interacts with it. In other words, writers often have a mental image of their readers, of their audience, and their works reveal that. Vladimir Nabokov, in his lecture 'Good Readers and Good Writers', refers to the hard labour of the 'good reader' as akin to climbing up a mountain while the book unfolds:

Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever.<sup>5</sup>

Resonating with romantic ideals, the writer is idealised, and this projects onto the reader, who is expected to challenge themselves significantly, inspired by the book and the excellence of the writer. The moderator's invitation to Gelasimov to suggest the topic for the last round of the 'Outside the Brackets' game empowered him to extend his influence from the reading experience to the gaming one as well. The choice of this particular question suggests that he imagined his readers — the members of the book club — as vigorous, inquisitive, and familiar with his personal interests and passions, transcending a mere 'fan club' attitude toward the reading audience. The idealisation of the readers reaffirms the idealisation of the writers themselves, who are expected to live up to the highest standards and to serve a special social or national mission.

The necessary qualities for the ideal reader — a 'sharp eye' and an affinity with the writer and his oeuvre — can be identified in the informal conversation that followed a Facebook post by the WRBC moderator. After uploading the video from the 'Outside the Brackets' game on the WRBC page, the moderator shared it on her Facebook page as well, tagging Andrei Gelasimov:

What is important about a book is the discussion. In a cosy café tucked away in the mezzanine floor of the five-story Waterstones Piccadilly bookstore, every first Monday of the month, readers have the opportunity to exchange opinions about what they've read, argue, laugh, and even engage in intellectual literary games. This is what the 'Outside the Brackets' game looks like, inspired by the novel *Kholod* by A. Gelasimov. Many thanks to the author for the question in the final round! To be continued.

The moderator's post aimed to showcase the literary games recently added to the book club's curriculum and to provide an updated description of the WRBC meetings to her audience (which includes a large number of the club's members), drawing on Gelasimov's authority as an established Russophone writer. In this way, not only do the games become an integral part of the WRBC identity, but also its affiliation with writers. A Facebook friend of Gelasimov reacted to the video, congratulating the writer on composing a question for the book club game. Gelasimov replied to this comment (but not to the main Facebook post) with the

movie poster from *The Shining* and the following message: ‘I love this movie 🎬 In my youth, I was so creeped out on the first viewing at a friend’s VCR))))’). Gelasimov chose to interact with his friend under the post instead of the book club moderator or his reading audience, revealing some biographical information that gives away the answer to the last round of the game. Even though the cross-talk under the Facebook post continued, this particular response highlights the contradiction between how Gelasimov imagined his readers (being able to empathise with and understand him in depth) and how they actually read his book. The WRBC members did not ‘cooperate with the text’ of the game and the novel<sup>6</sup> in the sense that they approached them as ‘real readers’ who do not necessarily manage to decode and decipher all the embedded messages and codes.

The mythologisation of the writers was also evident in direct interactions with visiting authors. The March 2019 book club meeting coincided with the visit of a Russian author to the London Book Fair. Alexei Salnikov, an up-and-coming writer at the time, was invited to the fair by the Read Russia project upon the request of the book club members. Salnikov accepted the invitation and became the first Russian writer to join a WRBC gathering. The meeting was well attended, and the round of questions lasted for over an hour, as almost everyone had a question about him, his books, and his writing experience. I had interviewed Salnikov earlier in the day and, having noticed his mild character, I was curious to see him speaking or even performing during the meeting. Contrary to everyone’s expectations, Salnikov’s presence at the book club meeting did not evoke the authoritative figures of classical Russian literature. He was a very modest, low-profile, and soft-spoken person. None of his answers was impressive or attempted to create a myth around himself and his talent. For example, when the moderator asked him how he would define the genre of his books, he simply answered, ‘I don’t know.’ When she proposed fantasy as the main genre, he responded with, ‘Probably, yes.’ Closer to the end of the meet-the-author event, Salnikov was asked again to clarify his creative process:

For starters, after all, a plan is needed. I can’t just write endlessly. If I do not know when the work will end, the results, or the perspectives, I will not touch the book at all. I need storylines, not just inspiration. I need an overarching perspective. I need to know approximately how it will end, when it will end, and what will happen there.

Salnikov’s statement illustrates his personality as a down-to-earth, realistic, and experienced writer who does not invest in self-mythologisation. He creates the novel’s storyline first, thoughtfully examines the different possible endings, and then starts writing. Even though his description of writing a novel aligns with the way most writers prefer to work, it fails to create an air of greatness around his work or present himself as full of literary pathos and inspiration. He was approachable, but most importantly, he did not support, with either actions or words, the idealisation that the book club members apparently expected from him.

When Salnikov left the meeting to attend another event, the majority of the WRBC members departed as well. Only the core members of the book club

remained for the second part of the meeting — the actual book discussion. The dynamics changed radically with the moderator leaving with Salnikov and her deputy assuming the moderation duties. With only seven book club members remaining, the discussion quickly started. A member soon interrupted the deputy moderator and asked, with frustration, why Salnikov had been looking at the desk for the entire duration of the discussion, which he actually had. She continued by deconstructing his literary work, saying: ‘I don’t like Salnikov’s style. It’s not academic, it’s not the standard, it’s Facebook-like, it’s conversational.’ In her view, an author should follow the standards of classic Russian literature, possess a sophisticated vocabulary, and avoid colloquialisms. According to these purist and prescriptive language opinions, literary language should be distinguished from everyday conversational language, and Russian-speaking writers must safeguard that distinction. Discussing the social construction of genius, Tia DeNora argues that the categories of perception according to which we understand and structure value ‘are themselves created and recreated by socially located individuals and groups’.<sup>7</sup> The negative reception of Salnikov’s behaviour represented a cultural system that values a sense of superiority, didacticism, and a ‘skilful’ use of language. Therefore, the comments of the book club members were very dismissive and showed their deep disappointment at not having their expectations met, actively reproducing the Soviet approach to literary authorities (‘He doesn’t write skilfully enough’, ‘the meeting wasn’t the most interesting’). They came to meet a representative of the contemporary Russian intelligentsia who would talk about the special mission of the author and Russophone literature. All of them seemed displeased, although only a few were vocal about it. The book club quickly moved on from Salnikov and his personality to the book of the month and the questions the moderator had prepared for this session.

A final example of the symbolic role of Russophone writers in the WRBC meetings comes from Brodsky’s celebratory event in March 2020. This event was the only instance of a book club meeting being organised and hosted by a WRBC member rather than the moderator. The main benefit of this deviation from the norm was the promotion of agency and community ownership in the book club, allowing the members to articulate their own views on shared cultural identity with more freedom. Masha, the event organiser, explained in her talk why she considered Brodsky relatable in the present diasporic context. In her words, Brodsky emerged as a transnational figure, an artist with a hybrid identity (Soviet, Jew, and American), who wrote both in Russian and in English while living in exile in the USA. He tackled the difficulties of diasporic life with success, and he was even appointed United States Poet Laureate in 1991. Melvin Delgado maintains that ‘a celebratory event conveys a narrative that has community significance’,<sup>8</sup> which in this case was conveyed through the biography of the poet and the recitation of his poems. In this context, Brodsky’s commemoration event was transformed from a mere celebration of an acclaimed poet to his veneration as a symbol of the Russian-speaking diasporic experience in the anglophone world. The idolisation of Brodsky differed from previously described cases because the book club members regarded

him as more than a canonised Russophone poet. His personal story marked by migration reflected elements of their own lives outside their homelands. At the end of the event, I asked a small group of book club members about their experience, and they described it as ‘Emotional’, ‘Very different’, and ‘Close to the heart’. These remarks indicate that they welcomed this unconventional event with its significant diasporic character.

The presence of writers is a recurring theme in the discussions, celebrations, and games of the Waterstones Russian Book Club. In some cases, this presence is facilitated by performances of songs and poetry readings, picture-based quizzes reminiscent of Soviet practices related to the cult of writers’ personalities, literary questions connected to them, and the involvement of the month’s author in creating games and meet-the-author events. Russian-speaking writers are idealised by WRBC members according to the myth of the writer, but they are also expected to perform and interact with their audience as literary figures and authorities. These writers are bearers of the Russophone literary tradition and are expected to live up to its standards. Otherwise, they might be challenged to the point of demythologisation or even rejection.

### Russophone Writers and Diasporic Audiences

The visiting Russophone authors described very warmly their encounters with Russian speakers in Britain. Some writers have been visiting the country to meet with the local diaspora for almost twenty years and they have built a relationship with certain communities that invite them regularly. As a WRBC member shared, ‘We [Russian speakers] in London are very happy that the authors are coming. It is a great happiness that you can meet in person and communicate with a person whose book you have read, ask questions, get autographs.’ When touring the country the authors give lectures, and participate in panels and literary events organised by local Russophone communities and cultural organisations. It was before or after these events in London and Edinburgh that I managed to interview them. For example, Idiatullin, Ivanov, Rozhdestvenskaya, Salnikov, Yakhina, Yakovleva, and Yuzefovich were invited by Read Russia to participate in the London Book Fair 2018 and 2019, while Lukyanova represented the Kniguru competition and Strokina promoted a literacy and readership campaign targeting Russophone migrant children and adolescents.

Children’s writer Anastasia Strokina stated, ‘I visit to expand children’s knowledge about the history and culture of Russia, to inform them that there are children’s writers who write for them, and to stimulate their interest in reading.’ Guzel Yakhina explained her presence in London and meetings with readers during the LBF in two different ways:

On a practical level, everything is very clear. There is a new book and a book that was translated and published at the London Book Fair. There is another level, a higher plan. To construct a tiny bridge between cultures, a bridge between different mentalities.

After their departure from Britain, the authors often continue their tours to other countries, allowing them to gain first-hand experience of various Russian-speaking diasporic communities. This experience makes their opinions about the role of Russian literature today and its ability to bring together Russophone migrants especially valuable. As Mikhail Durnenkov maintained in his interview, 'Writers have always been more than writers, and poets have always been more than poets. They have always been teachers of life and authorities for the people.'

Alexey Ivanov has visited Britain numerous times to promote his work and meet his readers. In his opinion, a welcoming reception of visiting writers is to be expected from members of a diasporic community:

Foreign audiences are always warmer and more cordial than Russian ones because I am not just a writer for them, but also a person from the homeland. I carry some kind of energy from the homeland, and I receive some of the warmth that is intended for Russia as a whole.

Ivanov's choice of the adjective 'foreign' for the Russophone diasporic audience distinctly differentiates it from the in-Russia audience. The writer's presence at a literary event targeting a diasporic audience acquires a symbolic character, as the attendees come to listen to not just an author but a representative from their homeland. For Ivanov, an imagined exchange takes place with the writer bringing 'energy from home' and receiving 'the warmth' produced by their longing for their homelands. Vladimir Sharov attributed the welcoming atmosphere of these meetings to the feeling of familiarity generated by the common past and shared memories:

Most people who come to my presentations in England, in particular, are generally people who have lived the same life with me at least at some part, went to the same houses, saw the same performances and so on, sat at the same table with me. Well, figuratively.

The common post-Soviet heritage of the Russian speakers gathering at community literary events is depicted by Sharov through scenes from public and private life in the Soviet Union and Russia. What diasporans share with Sharov, they share with each other, but their relationship with the writer resembles an even more personal, intimate one. For the writer Irina Lukyanova, nostalgia drives Russian speakers to diasporic events, a longing for home culture that can be sporadic or more persistent:

It is the simple interest in the fact that someone came from there; you can talk to someone here about what is left there because we all have something left somewhere there. I think part of it happens to people here because there is a part of the head where Russian culture, Russian soul, and Russian identity are situated. They miss something, or something does not suffice. They just want to enter that part again.

For Lukyanova, diasporic literary events constitute entry points to Russian culture, and by attending them, Russian speakers act on and perform their Russophone cultural identities. Still, community events and in-person meetings with writers are not the only ways for migrants to keep up with the developments in their home

culture. Social media and digital platforms offer opportunities to communicate and stay in touch with the sociocultural life in Russia and other post-Soviet countries. In other words, diasporic community spaces and cultural practices in the country of settlement are situated within the global Russophone ideoscape, as global cultural flows are not hindered or blocked by borders.<sup>9</sup> Alexei Salnikov shared his experience from communicating with readers inside and outside Russia:

Now there are no borders between Russian speakers living abroad, because before, if a person went abroad, they absolutely lost touch with their homeland. This is not happening now. Now a message is written on Facebook, and responses are immediately received from all over the world. Therefore, there is absolutely no clear border between those who live here and anywhere else.

In Salnikov's account, nowadays diasporic audiences cannot be easily distinguished from the national audience, as all readers read the same books and can communicate in real-time with their favourite writers. The synchronous, broadly speaking, consumption of literary texts and media content by the diaspora enhances the sense of multipresence in both home and host societies, thereby surpassing the feeling of belonging to a 'minority audience', as Adrian Athique defined the diasporic audience.<sup>10</sup> By joining the majority audience of their homeland, Russophone migrants can actively participate in their home culture and the ongoing dialogue with authors and poets. The locus of settlement of each diasporic community does not influence its place in this dialogue, as all different communities interconnect and intertwine.<sup>11</sup> In this framework, Eugene Vodolazkin asserted that the transnational community in Britain is part of the continuous Russophone audience:

For me, the Russian-speaking audience here is a continuation of the audience I perform to in Russia. Most certainly, there is a specific audience here, because people have often lived outside Russia for a long time, but now is a time when physical presence in another place does not imply ignorance of current issues. Now the world is so united information-wise that you can live on the moon and know everything that happens in St Petersburg, just like a Petersburger.

For Vodolazkin, national and transnational media outlets allow the diaspora to stay informed about the homeland's 'problems', making contemporary Russian literature relevant and approachable. At the same time, the globality of the Russophone reading audience is inextricably linked to the presence of the diaspora in most regions of the world. Lukyanova recalls how her friends and colleagues migrated from Russia in the 1990s, looking for opportunities abroad like many other Russians. For the writer, the emergence of the global Russian reader is connected to the reach of the post-Soviet migrant wave:

In principle, there is a global Russian reader. We have many Russians who live everywhere and continue to read in Russian. The Kniguru contest tracks visits to the site from countries around the world. They have readers from 126 countries, spanning all continents except Antarctica. I don't know if there is no Internet in Antarctica or if children are reading in Russian there. But they have readers from various African countries as well, from places like Central Africa. Wherever they are, people are looking everywhere for something to read.

Drawing from user data of the Kniguru competition website, Lukyanova maintained that there is a global audience for Russophone literature today. In her account, the global Russophone reader is characterised by their multitudinousness ('We have many'), omnipresence across 126 countries, and persistence in reading in Russian rather than the host society's language ('they are looking everywhere for something to read'). The discourse of the global Russophone reader differs from that of Global Russians in that the former focuses on the global presence of Russophone populations, while the latter emphasises their deterritorialised character and global mobility. Although both discourses appear in the interviews, the authors showed particular emphasis on Global Russians, as evidenced by the following excerpt from Vodolazkin's account:

Whenever I would come here about ten or fifteen years ago, I used to ask, 'Where do you live?' They would answer, 'In London or Manchester.' Now, a very popular answer is, 'I live between London and St. Petersburg, between London and Moscow.' I mean, their focus has shifted a bit towards Russia. It used to be cool to say I live in London, but now a bridge to the East is being constructed.

Vodolazkin refers to the deterritorialisation of the transnational Russophone identity as a status of in-betweenness, the act of maintaining multiple homes in Britain and Russia. In his opinion, the in-betweenness of Russian speakers represents a recent trend and their desire to maintain links with Russia. This type of elite cosmopolitanism has been examined by Elisabeth Schimpfössl in her monograph about Russian oligarchs.<sup>12</sup> The scholar argues that the Russian elite had been required, at the time, by changes in national legislation to maintain their permanent residence in Russia in order to preserve a good working relationship with the government and/or protect their assets abroad.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, upper-class Russians find more opportunities for investments in the Russian market, as well as for networking within their homeland's high-status social circles compared to Western societies. Nevertheless, oligarchs and very wealthy Russians constitute the minority of the diaspora in Britain, while most working-class migrants cannot afford to sustain this status of in-betweenness. For instance, almost all interviewed WRBC members belong to the middle class, except for one who identified as working-class. Shamil Idiatullin deconstructed the myth of the super-rich Russophone diaspora settled in London:

I expected that the audience in the UK would consist of individuals with multiple residences, living for extended periods in various countries, with ties to several homelands, including apartments in Moscow, London, and Florida. However, my expectations were somewhat off, as the audience actually comprises people who left Russia relatively recently, and many may not have left forever. Some continue to maintain dual residences, while others have settled permanently in England, particularly in London, but they all remain Russian-speaking individuals and readers of Russian literature.

The writer's expectations reflect an idealisation of the UK Russophone transnational community, similar to the way London has been imagined and presented as the

capital of the cosmopolitan ‘New Russian Plutocrats’.<sup>14</sup> Conversations with the audience during his British tour allowed Idiatullin to dispel this myth and realise that the community is very diverse in terms of its position in the British social hierarchy but maintains a keen interest in Russian literature. Meanwhile, Vera Pavlova has spent a significant part of her life among the Russophone diaspora and, based on her personal experience, she claimed that her fellow diasporans are fully integrated into their host societies, not nostalgic, yet they try to maintain a critical, long-distance relationship with Russia. For them, ‘Russian literature is a treasure from both a spiritual and aesthetic point of view’, as Pavlova contended. Therefore, Russian speakers (re)read the classics but also closely follow developments in contemporary Russian literature:

In the UK and generally abroad — I now live in Canada, and before that, I lived in New York — I have spent a lot of time with the Russian-speaking diaspora. I have encountered very intelligent, culturally knowledgeable people who, to my surprise, were aware of all the latest news in literature. In other words, I got the impression that people in the UK read more and follow new releases more closely than in Russia. There is a sense that they read more new books here than in Russia. Perhaps I was fortunate to come across such individuals.

Pavlova made a significant distinction between the literary audience inside and outside Russia. Contrary to her expectations, diasporans stay informed about new releases and read more compared to their counterparts in Russia. She explained this phenomenon as a curiosity about ‘what is happening in Russia’, a diasporic consciousness oscillating between attachment and detachment. This represents a form of double consciousness that incorporates experiences from both ‘here’ and ‘there’, often attributed to members of diasporas.<sup>15</sup> In this case, diasporic double consciousness does not manifest as internal cultural conflict or emotional investment in the homeland, but rather as a keen interest. At the same time, Pavlova stressed that the audience in Russia rarely asks about her diasporic life:

In Russia, for example, I am never asked about what is happening in Canada or America. They simply do not care. I am not asked any questions there, and the most they might inquire is, ‘Well, tell us what problems you have there. You all praise America and Canada. But you must be lying; tell us about the problems you face.’ They seem to want there to be problems. Perhaps that is the difference.

The indifference shown by the Russian population towards the diaspora is interpreted by Pavlova as underlying envy and resentment towards those living a better life abroad, although these feelings are rarely expressed. Despite starting her literary career and establishing herself while still living in Russia, the poet is seen by the national audience as a representative of the diaspora and is expected to account for the discourse about the higher quality of life in the West. This complex homeland–diaspora relationship contrasts with what Martin Kilduff and Kevin Corley observed: ‘The successes and failures of members of the diaspora are likely to be read as providing evidence for how well a representative from one specific culture can do in a different context.’<sup>16</sup> Russians seem uninterested in capitalising

on the successes of the diaspora and less eager to explore the culture produced within their own country. Vodolazkin explained the difference between the two audiences using a centropерipheral model:

You see, they are on the periphery of Russian cultural and social life. So, when Russian writers come here, from being listeners and viewers, they are brought to the centre. It is always nicer to look at problems from a central point. Here they can address the people who shape Russian culture and hear everything first-hand.

The proposed model of the Russophone literary landscape places the diaspora on the periphery and writers living in Russia at the centre.<sup>17</sup> For Vodolazkin, Russian speakers attend events with visiting writers to transition momentarily from passive audience members to discussants interacting with cultural figures. In other words, the ongoing interest and desire of diasporans to participate in community events stems from and is intensified by their secondary role in Russian culture. By opting for a Russia-centric viewpoint, the writer disregarded the existence of diasporic literary production,<sup>18</sup> as well as the multidirectional global cultural flows that contribute to the Russophone ideoscape. However, it is worth mentioning that the WRBC mostly reads literature produced in Russia, with the exception of three writers (Akunin, Rubina, and Dyachenko) who began their careers before migrating to their respective countries.

The questions that members of the Russian-speaking transnational community pose to visiting writers during events provide insight into their relationship with their cultural homeland and how they perceive their place in the global ideoscape. Vodolazkin acknowledged that in addition to the typical 'What should we read?' inquiries, he also receives political questions, despite having distanced himself from political life. Similarly, Durnenkov was regularly questioned about freedom of speech for writers in Russia and whether he can address the same topics both domestically and internationally.<sup>19</sup> The readers are well-informed, seeking valuable insights and personal experiences from writers due to their authoritative position in Russian culture. Yakhina, in turn, observed a distinct characteristic of Russophone audiences that sets them apart from their European counterparts: 'Discussions about literary works often evolve into conversations about life; people engage not just with the material or the text, but with broader issues that concern them.' For Yakhina, literature sparks profound philosophical and existential dialogues between writers and readers at literary events, whether in Russia or the diaspora. Often, novels serve as a catalyst for discussions on various topics, including the political landscape back home. Lukyanova concurred that the atmosphere at diasporic meetings closely resembles those in Russia, with the notable difference that many questions stem from the experience of migration. For instance, parents express concern about passing on their cultural heritage and a love for reading to their children:

When we gather, we primarily engage with the first generation. Sometimes, children who departed Russia just two years ago join our meetings. For these youngsters, already at a discerning reading age, Russian books remain their primary reading material. It becomes more challenging with the second

generation here, as it hinges on their feelings, their retention of the language, and their sense of belonging to this culture.

As a representative of a literacy campaign, Lukyanova often meets with Russophone parents who aim to foster a love of literature in their children. Each generation of young readers presents unique challenges based on their language skills and their sense of belonging to Russian culture. First-generation children may have attended schools in Russia, while those of the second generation are likely to speak Russian primarily with their parents. As children's writer Anastasia Strokina recounted, during meet-the-author events, she often needs to explain words, references, and even some of the jokes in her books. Diaspora children sometimes struggle to understand her books, which is evident from the questions they ask:

When I meet Russian children, there is a high percentage of somewhat philosophical, adult, intelligent questions. This has not happened yet with children in Britain. I think that is because it is very difficult for them to read such a text in a language foreign to them.

Strokina asserted that Russophone children in Britain do not ask profound questions in the characteristic way that children in Russia do and tend to limit themselves to simpler, content-related questions. The accounts of Lukyanova and Strokina illustrate the complexities of participation in the global Russophone ideoscape for subsequent generations of migrants. Through shared language and cultural heritage, first-generation migrants manage to access the global Russophone ideoscape on equal terms with their compatriots living in Russia. However, for the second generation, additional effort is required to comprehend Russian texts and connect to their home culture. Diasporic literary events with writers provide opportunities for Russian-speaking families in Britain to practise their language skills, deepen their understanding of contemporary Russian culture, and integrate into the respective transnational community.

The touring writers described the UK Russophone community as warm and welcoming, diverse and multi-layered, well-read, and curious about cultural and political life in Russia. With an insightful perspective on the migrant experience, they view readers attending their events as part of an effort to preserve cultural identity and pass on their heritage to the next generation. Moving beyond their typical roles in Russophone culture, the authors now serve new functions for the diaspora, acting as mediators of cultural dialogue with the homeland and reinforcing transnational connections within the relevant global ideoscape.

## Conclusion

The myth of the writer and their special mission in society has evolved over the centuries, reflecting the role literature plays in each era. Central elements of this myth include the idealisation of authors, which in Soviet times escalated to idolisation in accordance with the norms of personality cults. The literary activities of the Waterstones Russian Book Club offer a fresh perspective on this myth and literaturocentrism more broadly, now viewed through the lens of diasporic

readers. Through imagined, long-distance, and physical interactions, the presence of writers at WRBC gatherings is integral to the cultural and literary experiences of its members. Their continuous involvement in discussions, celebrations, and games surpasses typical book club activities, culminating in in-person meet-the-author events when writers visit the country for book promotions or other literary engagements. These authors, regarded as bearers of the Russophone literary tradition, are idealised and expected to engage with their audience as literary authorities, ready to convey wisdom and profound insights. Some literary practices of the WRBC aim to transform writers into symbols for Russophone migrants or promote their idolisation, even if through a playful take on personality cults. The visiting writers characterised their engagements with the UK Russophone community as not merely about literary consumption but also about maintaining a connection to the homeland and fostering a shared cultural identity among the diaspora. The authors do not engage in self-mythologisation but instead explore the dynamic interplay with diasporic readers, demonstrating how transnational processes and global cultural flows shape the preservation of cultural practices. As mediators of cultural dialogue, the presence of writers at literary gatherings such as those in the WRBC not only enriches the literary experience but also strengthens the cultural and transnational bonds within the UK Russophone community. In a literaturocentric framework like that of the WRBC, the diasporic version of the writers' myth demonstrates how a cultural discourse survives, hybridised by the migrant experience, preserving its identifiable elements while adapting others to the needs of its bearers.

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## CHAPTER 7



# Enhanced Globality and the Covid-19 Pandemic

On 23 March 2020, the British government announced a country-wide lockdown as a measure to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic and hinder the spread of the virus. The lockdown resulted in a massive disruption of the socio-economic life of the country since travel and movement were restricted, and offices, universities, and non-essential shops were closed. Similar measures against the coronavirus were implemented in many countries around the world. On a global level, meetings, classes, celebrations, and various social gatherings moved to online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype, which allowed people to connect easily, regardless of their location. These platforms already had a global network of users, but the pandemic led to their unprecedented expansion. Digital media supported the continuation of social and cultural life, ‘normalising’ the prolonged disruption caused by the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> In the pandemic landscape, online book clubs grew in popularity, offering a valuable avenue for maintaining social interaction, mental health, and creative engagement with the arts, combating the stillness in imagination.<sup>2</sup> Coupled with rapidly evolving technologies, digital reading groups provided a flexible space where participants could engage in shared reading and discuss prominent issues, fostering a sense of agency and control during times of isolation. By promoting imagination and connection through the collective interpretation of literature, online book clubs created communal and dialogic spaces that overcame the limitations of social distancing.<sup>3</sup>

Reading communities existed in both online and offline settings long before the Covid-19 pandemic. A simple search on the internet reveals a variety of options for collective engagement with literature, such as online book clubs, listserv book discussions, book-related blogs, forums, and Facebook groups. Synchronous or asynchronous online book discussions have often been the only option for readers who either do not have access to face-to-face book clubs<sup>4</sup> or are looking for language-specific and genre-focused groups. These groups are usually open and constantly accept new members, yet they are not based on personal relationships or friendships, as their members typically do not know each other beforehand. This also explains the usual absence of ‘social chat’ in online groups at the beginning of a meeting or conversation, with participants moving swiftly to the book discussion.<sup>5</sup> Online participants still manage to express their ‘positions of familiarity and foreignness,

inside and outside, distance and proximity' when they introduce themselves to their fellow readers.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, virtual reading communities often operate in a more democratic, non-hierarchical way than offline groups<sup>7</sup> and tend to be more diverse, given that their members are often dispersed and anonymous, and their social status and cultural difference are less evident in typed discussions.<sup>8</sup> With the internet transforming collective interpretation of literature, reader-to-reader and reader-to-text interactions become flexible and hybrid, reforming membership, hierarchies of taste, and group identity in book clubs.<sup>9</sup>

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic safety measures, the WRBC moved its in-person gatherings from Waterstones Piccadilly to the online platform Zoom. This digital transition significantly impacted the community and shared reading experience, as the format of the meetings changed and new readers joined the discussions from around the world. Focusing on the period from April to October 2020, this chapter follows the adaptation of the book club to the online environment and the intended temporary change of mission. The 'digital turn' — the digitisation of a cultural practice — invited the book club members to reconfigure the WRBC identity and collectively form hybrid reading practices. The peak of the pandemic experiments was marked by two literary events titled 'Forum of Book Clubs', which were connected to the founding of the Association of Russophone Book Clubs (ARKKA), greatly enhancing the transnational and global character of the Waterstones Russian Book Club.

### The Waterstones Russian Book Club Goes Online

At the end of March 2020, the WRBC coordinator and the club members discussed on their Facebook group the temporary transfer of their meetings to an online platform. In the past, the book club had posted a handful of videos from its meetings on Facebook, mainly capturing its games and interactions with other community groups, to which participants would respond with comments and emoticons. Given this occasional and limited online presence, the WRBC was not prepared for the digital transition, and the adaptation of the meetings to the online environment lasted for over a month. By the time the pandemic reached London, I had already completed my fieldwork there. The decision to continue the WRBC meetings online and experiment with new formats created a unique opportunity to explore how 'digital formations facilitate and transform the possibilities for diasporic affiliations'.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, I participated in the pandemic meetings to observe the impact of this new form of connectivity between the WRBC readers on community building and transnational identity construction.<sup>11</sup> The online environment created new research dynamics, with WRBC members progressively experiencing pandemic digital fatigue,<sup>12</sup> power relations changing, and hybrid book discussions where participants expressed their opinions in various ways: orally, through text in the Zoom chat, or via comments on Facebook posts.

The first online WRBC meeting took place on 6 April 2020 at 7 p.m. and was attended by twenty-four members. Alongside the regular members of the book club, there were also attendees who joined the meeting for the first time or returned

after a long absence. I noticed that three members did not turn their cameras on, and five opted for an automatic wallpaper to hide their background. The meeting started with participants introducing themselves as they signed in, followed by the moderator's invitation to pour a glass of wine and sit comfortably. As part of the introductory comments, a member expressed her deep satisfaction with the transition to online meetings, as she lives on the outskirts of London and couldn't attend face-to-face gatherings ('I've never attended in person because I have to be home for the kids on Monday night. I'm certainly more comfortable on Skype'). The well-established rules of the WRBC meetings were adapted to the functions and etiquette of Zoom (i.e. click the 'Raise hand' button to contribute, mute the microphone, and unmute only when about to speak). The participants swiftly moved to discussing the chosen book, following the typical structure of WRBC meetings, with the moderator asking questions inspired by the book and members answering in turn.

The online discussion took place in a more orderly fashion than face-to-face gatherings, as participants did not interrupt each other and waited for their turn. No one tried to huddle up, and any side conversations moved to the chat. During the discussion of *Magi bez vremena* (2019), the book's writer, Sergei Lukyanenko, joined to the surprise of the WRBC members, who were unaware of the moderator's communication with him. For forty minutes, the readers chatted cheerfully with the writer about his latest book, the writing process, and briefly about his personal experience of the pandemic. After Lukyanenko's departure, the participants continued with the analysis of his book. Although the WRBC had organised meet-the-author events in the past, this was the first hybrid session combining book talk and a conversation with a writer. In meet-the-author events, the book of the month is rarely discussed, as the focus lies on the invited writer and their oeuvre as a whole. At the end of the meeting, a book club member showed a flower bouquet to the camera, saying, 'This is for you, Katya, for your amazing work for the book club.' The moderator thanked her and mentioned that she had bought some Russian chocolate treats for the meeting but, unable to offer them to the WRBC members, allowed her children to consume them instead. These virtual symbolic gestures, reminiscent of those typically performed during pre-pandemic offline gatherings, enhanced the sense of familiarity and acted as reciprocal expressions of attention and care. The participants decided to meet again two weeks later to discuss a new book, contrary to their usual practice of gathering once per month.

In the following meetings, the digital practices of the WRBC gradually began to consolidate, forming an identity distinct from the pre-pandemic one. The mission of the book club seemed to have changed. In a conversation I had with the book club moderator, she revealed her intention behind the pandemic meetings: 'Well, many people go into depression, which is why I'm activating them through distraction.' The distraction that the literary gatherings offered provided emotional and psychological support through entertainment, much like other community groups did during the pandemic. Fiction is often read for entertainment and enjoyment, constituting support for life and an act of self-care.<sup>13</sup> By entering and exploring

a fictional world together, book club members create imaginative bonds as they temporarily share the same reality and participate in the same meaning-making processes. This feeling of co-presence and togetherness facilitates community-building and the formation of affective relationships among the readers. In the context of a pandemic lockdown with the subsequent restriction of movement, the transition to a digital reading format helped the WRBC members maintain a sense of normalcy in a climate of global uncertainty<sup>14</sup> by engaging in the same communal cultural activity as before. Therefore, the book club members tried to limit pandemic-related conversations to a minimum, but occasional mentions and reflections still permeated the discussion:

KATYA What memories from this book will you have in a year?

ANNA We need to get through this year first to understand what will be worth remembering.

KATYA We will definitely survive!

Since the new mission of the book club was to ‘distract’ and cheer up its members, the moderator made an effort to invite as many writers as possible to the online sessions. The pandemic had resulted in the cancellation of book fairs, promotion tours, and meetings with readers, so writers were willing to participate in or host online events. For example, the Russian publishing house AST organised the literary project ‘Korona Dekameron’, inspired by Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1353). The project lasted from 7 April to 16 May and involved twenty famous Russophone writers taking turns reading excerpts from their books and answering questions from readers. In addition to four book discussions, the WRBC held seven meet-the-author events between April and October 2020: 6 April — internationally acclaimed and bestselling science fiction writer Sergei Lukyanenko; 17 April — novelist and winner of the Big Book Award Marina Stepnova; 27 April — Boris Akunin, one of the most famous contemporary Russophone writers; 4 May — emerging novelist Maria Arzhilovskaya; 11 May — writers Shamil Idiatullin (Big Book Award winner) and Dmitriy Zakharov (longlisted for the same award); 29 June — bestselling literary couple Marina and Sergey Dyachenko; and 5 October — Marina Stepnova. Most writers’ events attracted record-high numbers of attendees, explained by their reputation and critical acclaim,<sup>15</sup> while the book discussions did not differ from the regular offline meetings in terms of attendance. For the authors, these events provided ‘a sense of connection with their audience’ and ‘a publicity tool that helps to generate interest in their books’.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneously, readers were afforded ‘a rare opportunity to hear the author live and see what kind of person he is, because this is also important, and not just read his biography’, as one of the WRBC members stated.

The digital transition was welcomed by the book club members, who were grateful for the continuation of the WRBC meetings and, like most migrants, were familiar with the use of digital communication technologies. Anastasia commented under one of the meet-the-author events on Facebook, ‘I am glad that quarantine gives us such meetings 😊 Thanks!’ In an interview, she admitted that ‘during the pandemic, the club’s support was excellent’. Meanwhile, Oksana referred to her experience of

the pandemic sessions as ‘quite extensive, thanks to Covid-19 (this is sarcasm)!’ The discursive strategy of expressing gratitude and appreciation by acknowledging the cause of the disruption (the virus) and its countermeasure (quarantine) shows their willingness to highlight the positive effects of the pandemic, even if done playfully and with sarcasm. The book club members regarded the pandemic sessions of the WRBC as a much-needed substitute for a stimulating social and cultural life:

OKSANA Undoubtedly, it was a form of support in the sense of organising some interesting events. You couldn’t and still can’t go to theatres, concerts, and so on. This has become quite a good substitute instead of just sitting at home alone or with loved ones.

VERA Of course, participating in the book club meetings and discussing various books helped me get through almost four months of quarantine (lockdown), although I cannot say that I suffered emotionally from the ‘imprisonment’. I personally felt good and comfortable at home with all the members of my large family.

The lockdown was experienced differently by WRBC members, which subsequently affected the role of literary events in their lives. Nonetheless, the organisation of six well-attended gatherings from the beginning of the spring lockdown until its easing at the end of May 2020 indicates the collective need for such events among its members. On 15 June 2020, Waterstones bookstores reopened to the public, and since no group meetings were allowed, the WRBC discussed its next steps. The interim ‘lockdown’ mission of the book club seemed progressively outdated as people could once again meet outdoors, go to cinemas, or visit exhibitions. The moderator asked members to vote on the format and frequency of future meetings. According to a Facebook poll, the majority of readers preferred to gather once a month to allow sufficient time for reading the chosen books. Hence, they were divided on the format, with 55% opting for meetings with writers and 45% voting for ‘traditional’ book discussions without the presence of an author. Therefore, the club decided to increase the number of book-focused gatherings but to meet monthly from that point onwards.

### Hybrid Reading Practices and the Digital Turn

The digital turn and its impact on sociocultural practices have drawn the attention of researchers long before the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Rozália Bakó defines digital transition as ‘the vast array of social, economic, and cultural transformations enabled by smart mobile technologies, [which are becoming] increasingly affordable for individuals and organizations’,<sup>18</sup> while for David Kergel and Birte Heidkamp, it represents a ‘process in which the structure of media in society is redefined’.<sup>19</sup> Digital media have created a continuous global space where online and offline practices meet and inform each other, contributing to ongoing hybridisation. However, hybridisation is not exclusive to the digital era; rather, it is new media that accelerate and intensify these processes through cross-cultural exchanges.<sup>20</sup> Diasporic communities have employed digital media for sharing information,

socialising, and mobilisation since the emergence of Web 2.0.<sup>21</sup> On that basis, the relatively new paradigm of digital diasporas captures the emerging hybrid practices of migrants across borders and networks, both online and offline. Specifically, diasporic social life in the host society involves navigating and participating in both offline and online spaces, alongside exclusively mediated, long-distance relationships with kin and friends back home. During the pandemic, these socialising patterns were challenged as diasporans temporarily moved their face-to-face community groups and activities online. In the case of the WRBC, its members had previously shown a clear preference for offline, in-person meetings, choosing this book club over numerous online literary forums and reading groups. Consequently, activity on the Facebook page had been limited, as had the interest of ‘active’ members (those who attend the book club sessions) in engaging with those following the discussions from a distance.

The digitalisation of the pandemic WRBC meetings quickly contributed to their hybridisation. According to Lang, hybrid reading practices reflect the democratising character of the Internet and its limitations in terms of accessibility to information and texts.<sup>22</sup> They serve as platforms where readers can challenge literary hierarchies and establish their own canon, redefining the mediation of textual experiences among readers and the performance of their reading identities. In forming its online meetings, the WRBC combined elements from two types of online book clubs. On the one hand, there are the anonymous, text-based, and often asynchronous book discussions that typically occur in forums or mailing lists.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, there are groups conducting a blend of oral and written synchronous book talks, featuring both familiar and new faces simultaneously.<sup>24</sup> Readers typically choose either form of online engagement with literature for its flexibility, anonymity, and less hierarchical structure,<sup>25</sup> especially in the absence of face-to-face book clubs<sup>26</sup> or when seeking language-specific and genre-focused groups.<sup>27</sup> In the case of the WRBC, the primary focus was on oral discussions during meetings, complemented by synchronous text-based conversations in the platform’s chat and occasionally continued asynchronously on the Facebook page. This intricate mode of interaction and book-related exchanges among readers arguably establishes a new hybrid paradigm of communication for reading communities, bridging the digital and offline realms.<sup>28</sup>

During the online WRBC meetings, the existing hierarchies of taste were questioned and reaffirmed. In early May 2020, the readers met with Marina Arzhilovskaya, a young Russian journalist and up-and-coming writer from Moscow, and discussed her novel *Bliki* (2020). The readers appeared unenthusiastic about the book, and the writer received very few questions from the participants. Having stayed for less than an hour, Arzhilovskaya left, and a closed-doors book discussion started. The majority of the WRBC members viewed the novel as lowbrow and poorly written (‘There are terrible dialogues. Seriously. People say something to each other, but what they want to say, why, I do not know. A book needs a story, descriptions, and characters’, ‘This is obviously a young, inexperienced writer’, ‘I didn’t finish reading the book and very rarely leave books, but I felt that

it is bad fanfiction’) and therefore, rejected it. The moderator supported the idea that ‘each book is written for its own audience’ and that the disruption caused by the pandemic offered a unique opportunity for experimentation with genres and formats of discussion. ‘We rarely read popular fiction, but it has a large audience, as not everyone wants to read the short list of the “Big Book Award”’, Katya noted. The debate around genres revealed that even those who dismissed the book of the month for belonging to pulp fiction occasionally read such books for relaxation and entertainment. At the end of the meeting, Katya asked the participants to vote by a show of hands if they agreed to experiment further with genres and writers. The vast majority of the attendees voted in favour of holding to their well-established practices of book selection, which are oriented towards highbrow literature.

Familiarity and the sense of community between the WRBC members were also challenged and reconstituted in the hybrid pandemic meetings. Two weeks before the first lockdown in Britain was announced, the WRBC celebrated three years of literary gatherings, displaying and projecting its group identity multimodally through online and offline discourse, posts, group pictures, and videos. The pandemic format of meetings offered the readers an opportunity to reacquaint themselves with each other by visiting their homes and getting a glimpse into their private lives. Victoria assessed the digital transition of the book club positively, noting the change of setting and the reconfiguration of relationships between the participants:

During the quarantine period, our club started meeting much more frequently, allowing us to reunite with old friends who had moved to other countries. Thanks to Katya’s inexhaustible energy, our club adopted a new, unexpected format. Meetings were held every two weeks, participants appeared much more relaxed against the backdrop of their home environments, and meetings with writers added new dimensions to book discussions, making the boundaries between readers and writers almost invisible.

The pandemic meetings brought old and new WRBC members closer and made the writers more accessible, as they were regularly included in the book discussions. The depiction of the book club members at home, holding a drink and surrounded by books,<sup>29</sup> resonates with the traditional image of the solitary reader. The sense of familiarity generated by these mediated but live encounters with the writers was also reported by the WRBC moderator in a Facebook post:

Many of you have written that in the Zoom format, communication with the writer is much more personal and feels more like a flat party than a lecture or an official meeting. This is absolutely true; an exchange of human warmth and positive energy definitely took place at the meetings.

Familiarity is conceptualised as the opposite of formality and is connected to the feelings of warmth, friendliness, and comfort present in house gatherings and relaxed, intimate discussions. An example of such an informal and intimate conversation was the April meeting with the writer Marina Stepnova. During the event, Stepnova was often interrupted by her young daughter and had to turn off the camera a few times when her daughter needed her. Although the author

apologised for her absences, the all-female audience was very understanding, even suggesting that they end the event earlier, recognising that they faced the same issues themselves. Within this framework, the discussion moved freely to more personal topics such as motherhood and the influence of death and family issues on her writing. At the end of the meeting, the author introduced her daughter to the WRBC members, who collectively wished her good night.

Some book club members did not feel that the informal and relaxed discussions facilitated by the new hybrid format of meetings translated into a sense of closeness. Even though the online gatherings allowed readers to reacquaint themselves with the writers, the feeling of togetherness primarily refers to the relationships between the book club members. As a well-established offline book club, the readers had built strong friendships and eagerly anticipated not only discussing the book of the month but also reconnecting with familiar faces. For Oksana, community-building relies on direct, personal communication between members, promoting bonding initially with some of them and then with the group as a whole:

A sense of closeness with other members of the club occurred only partially because we were deprived of the possibility of direct communication with them. Yet, seeing familiar faces on the screen was undoubtedly pleasing. It was mainly the joy of being at a ‘party’, where everyone gathered despite everything, and everyone was doing well.

Digital platforms may bring dispersed people together, overcoming limitations posed by lockdowns or other movement restrictions, yet Oksana was not satisfied with the mediated co-presence they offered her. Madianou argues that ‘co-presence was traditionally assumed to imply physical proximity while mediation was considered a form of impoverishment compared to the gold standard of face-to-face communication’, a perspective evidently shared by Oksana.<sup>30</sup> The online WRBC meetings were less flexible and direct, with members participating in structured discussions (taking turns to speak), engaging in moderated debates (though muting did not occur in my presence), seeing fellow readers only if their cameras were on, and having limited side conversations via text-based Zoom chat, without the possibility of continuing discussions in a pub. In essence, hybrid meetings helped the reading community sustain itself during the pandemic, supplementing pre-pandemic face-to-face interactions among WRBC members.

In general, the pandemic engagement with Russophone literature did not simply transition offline literary activities to a digital platform; rather, it challenged the identity of the WRBC, potentially forging a new, hybrid model for book club meetings. Specifically, the hybridisation of reading practices during the pandemic led to a ‘blended’ format of discussions, combining elements of online and offline book clubs (synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication, oral and text-based discussions, mediated symbolic gestures, visual presence, and anonymity); created a space for experimenting with genres and writers, discussing canon formation;<sup>31</sup> and capitalised on digital media affordances<sup>32</sup> to enhance familiarity with invited writers while sustaining a sense of community among dispersed WRBC members. As the discussion will further illustrate, certain special WRBC events went a step

further, successfully bringing together a global community of readers.

### Enhanced Globality and the Russophone Reading Community

On 29 June 2020, the WRBC organised the ‘Forum of Book Clubs’ in collaboration with Moscow-based literary critic Galina Yuzefovich. Branded as a ‘Celebration of Russian literature and its readers’, the event aimed to unite Russophone book clubs from around the world for a discussion with the co-authoring literary couple Marina and Sergey Dyachenko. Originally from Ukraine and currently residing in Los Angeles, the Dyachenkos began their collaborative literary career in 1994 and have since produced twenty-six critically acclaimed novels in the science fiction and fantasy genres. The meeting commenced with brief introductions by the WRBC moderator and then Yuzefovich, welcoming ninety-nine<sup>33</sup> participants representing twelve book clubs and reading communities from Canada, USA, UK, Spain, Netherlands, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Jordan, and Australia. The discussion, which lasted nearly an hour and a half, was organised in turns akin to a ‘relay race’, with each book club moderator posing one question or yielding to a member of their club. The topics mirrored typical meet-the-author events as readers inquired about inspiration, work schedules, models of collaboration within a couple, and future book plans.

Given the success of the first ‘Forum of Book Clubs’, the WRBC held a second one in place of its October meeting, this time inviting writer Marina Stepnova once again. Since the April 2020 meeting, Stepnova had released a new novel, and being a favourite of the book club, it was deemed a fitting occasion to gather Russophone readers from Russia and the diaspora. The meeting followed the same structure as the previous ‘Forum’ and was attended by 133 participants from 14 book clubs located in Toronto, London, Newcastle upon Tyne, Warsaw, Amsterdam, Vilnius, Visaginas, Moscow, Nizhniy Novgorod, and Irkutsk. Unlike the event with the Dyachenkos, the October Forum was streamed live on Facebook, allowing non-members of participating book clubs to watch the discussion.

Following the conclusion of the ‘Forum of Book Clubs’ with Stepnova, the WRBC moderator posted the video recording of the event on her personal Facebook page, tagging the coordinators of all the book clubs. In the accompanying text, Katya referred to the unprecedented ‘surge of energy from the opportunity to feel the unity of Russian-speaking readers around the world’ during that ‘unreal meeting’. This post signifies a shift in the discourse of unity, moving from capturing the sense of community within the book club (typically at celebratory events) to suggesting the existence or formation of a global Russophone reading community through the ‘Forum of Book Clubs’. The moderator further thanked ‘modern technologies for the opportunity to be simultaneously in Irkutsk, San Francisco, Warsaw, Moscow, Canada, Netherlands, and many other parts of the world’, despite the digital burnout everyone was experiencing. In this way, Katya defined synchronous multipresence around the world, engagement with a particular activity, and camaraderie among participants as constituting elements of

a global community. Regarding the latter, the Facebook video of the book club meeting with Stepnova received nearly 100 comments from Russophone readers expressing gratitude to the event organisers, stating that ‘life in our club is in full swing despite the surrounding situation’, and requesting the ‘continuation of the tradition’. A common sentiment in most comments was ‘warmth’, with one reader elaborating that it was ‘warm family-style, but at the same time in a truly international company’. In the case of two participants — the moderator of a book club in England and another from a Moscow-based reading group — Stepnova’s novel ignited a nostalgic conversation under Katya’s post, continuing the book discussion from the previous day:

M1 Rita, I did not have time to respond to you in the meeting’s chat — it was nice to see someone from the same region as your family.

M2 Likewise! It was really nice to read about familiar places in the novel too.

M1 Oh, yes! It was a special, extra treat! I never would have thought that I would unexpectedly read about Bityug and the seasonally washed-out roads. One of the most vivid memories of my early childhood — I remember we went to visit relatives in the fall, the car got stuck, and my boot sank into that muddy road 😊 It was incredible!

M2 That’s for sure, childhood memories are incomparable!

The sense of kinship and geniality among dispersed Russian speakers, expressed synchronously during events or asynchronously later, suggests the ongoing formation of a virtual community. This community partially overlaps with various physical communities (i.e. the book clubs), yet brings them together for distinctly new digital interactions.<sup>34</sup> Supported by digital media and the geographical expansion of the language,<sup>35</sup> the emerging Russophone reading community is deterritorialised, less hierarchical, and voluntary, characterised by ‘low barriers to entry, low barriers to exit, and interpersonal relations shaped by mutual adjustment’.<sup>36</sup> An indication of the reading community’s geographical distribution can be found in Table 7.1, showing the top countries and cities where WRBC members reside.

TABLE 7.1. Distribution of WRBC members (January 2021).

<i>Top Countries</i>		<i>Top Cities/Towns</i>	
UK	1169	London, UK	891
Russia	157	Moscow, Russia	105
Ukraine	38	Kyiv, Ukraine	14
USA	34	Manchester, UK	14
Israel	15	St Petersburg, Russia	12
Germany	11	Edinburgh, UK	11
Canada	11	Riga, Latvia	9
Latvia	10	Reading, UK	8
Estonia	10	Yekaterinburg, Russia	8
Belarus	9	Brighton and Hove, UK	7

During the pandemic, the book club membership increased by 65%, with Katya, the moderator, receiving 577 membership requests on Facebook.<sup>37</sup> I discussed the

surprising rise in members with Katya, who explained that most requests came right after the two 'Fora' events and included moderators and members from Russophone book clubs around the world. The newcomers were interested in reading literary works produced both inside and outside Russia, engaging not only with Moscow-based writers like Stepnova but also with diaspora writers residing in the USA like the Dyachenkos. This pattern reaffirmed the reading paradigm of the WRBC while also challenging Russia's central place in the cultural imaginary of the global reading community.

The response of the WRBC members to the two 'Fora of Book Clubs' was mixed regarding their ability to unite Russian-speaking readers regardless of their location. The first group of respondents embraced the narrative that the 'Fora' constituted celebrations of Russian literature and readership ('This is truly a celebration of literature and the soul when meeting with authors from other countries!') and highlighted the unity they felt ('Literature really unites!'). Anastasia described the pandemic lockdown as an opportunity for the book club finally to implement ideas about new projects, including geographic expansion:

One of the advantages of the quarantine was discovering new clubs and potential members for the community, and establishing connections with writers. It was intriguing to learn how popular Russian book clubs are abroad and how similar the challenges they face are. We had a relay of clubs putting questions to writers, which gave this meeting a sense of absolute unity among Russian speakers around the world. Our club has reached a new level.

The invitation to the 'Fora of Book Clubs' is interpreted as the first step in transforming the WRBC from a London-based diasporic community group into a global entity that incorporates dispersed Russophone book clubs. The ability of the reading groups to come together and form a major forum, even for two hours every three months, indicates the existence of the necessary foundation for unifying Russian-speaking readers. On the other hand, some WRBC members were more sceptical about the success of these events, claiming that 'It is really difficult to unite the Russian speakers.' Vera, in particular, tried to deconstruct the narrative of unity, questioning its actual impact:

The Forum of Book Clubs was interesting and intriguing, but just that. Naturally, it was not the whole world that participated, but individual clubs scattered across different continents. The sample is neither representative nor indicative. Nevertheless, the idea is new and perhaps promising, although I can't say that I was personally interested in listening to the questions and opinions of completely unfamiliar people from other clubs.

Vera recognised the potential of online reading events to bring together Russian speakers from various diasporic communities and Russia, as well as the WRBC's contribution to this cause through a digital platform for book discussions. However, she challenged the global character of the 'Fora of Book Clubs' and distinguished these events from the rest of the offline (pre-pandemic) and online (pandemic) WRBC literary activities. Given that the number of participants was much higher than in regular meetings, there was not sufficient time for attendees to introduce

themselves and share their reading experiences, rendering them ‘unfamiliar people’ to the regular WRBC members. The ‘Fora of Book Clubs’ broadened the horizons of the book club, providing opportunities for experimentation, enhancing the global awareness of its members, and encouraging them to envision the merging of Russophone reading communities and groups. Although WRBC members appreciated meeting other readers inside and outside Britain, they remained aware of the limitations of these encounters, which lay beyond the scope of their book club.

The major outcome of the pandemic experiments was the foundation of the Association of Russophone Book Clubs (ARKKA) by the moderators of the ‘Forum of Book Clubs’ in April 2020. Initially a closed, invite-only Facebook group, the successful organisation of the two Fora convinced the moderators to launch a web platform for Russophone book clubs and readers. Assisted and inspired by Moscow-based literary critic Galina Yuzefovich, the ARKKA team developed an extensive arsenal of practical guides and tips covering most aspects of book club operations. New and aspiring book club moderators can find discussion questions, receive support from experienced colleagues, and access a global network of Russophone readers and writers. The aim of ARKKA is to expand the Russian-speaking readership by serving as a link between the reader and the literary industry, helping members navigate a large-scale community of book lovers from all over the world. By 2023, the Association included over 300 Russophone book clubs, the majority of which are diasporic. With Katya as one of the central figures of this new community literary project, the WRBC has experienced potentially the largest expansion and development of any non-TV book club.

## Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic had an undeniably global impact on social life, igniting and accelerating the emergence of new social dynamics. The digital transition of face-to-face social interactions became necessary as many countries imposed movement restrictions and social distancing measures. For diasporic communities, which are already familiar with mediated communication, these regulations led to the migration of offline, in-person activities and initiatives in the host society to an online environment. In response to the pandemic-related lockdown, the Waterstones Russian Book Club shifted online for the first time. Alongside its primary mission of engaging with contemporary Russophone literary works, the club also aimed to provide community-driven entertainment, support, and distraction through literature.

In the first months of the pandemic in Britain (March to May 2020), the book club met every other week, usually in the presence of a writer. In the following period,<sup>38</sup> WRBC returned to its monthly meetings focused on books, except for the two ‘Fora of Book Clubs’. The new hybrid reading paradigm of the WRBC involved experimentation with genres and formats, including synchronous and asynchronous discussions, both oral and text-based. Simultaneously, the WRBC

leveraged digital media affordances to promote co-presence by bringing together regular club members and attracting Russian-speaking readers residing outside London or the UK, as well as to foster a sense of community among participants. The highlight of these pandemic experiments was the introduction of the ‘Forum of Book Clubs’, a new digital format that celebrated Russian literature by uniting book clubs and readers inside and outside Russia. This initiative showcased the potential of the WRBC to serve as a digital meeting point and platform for a global Russophone reading community.

A full assessment of the pandemic period of the WRBC meetings is not possible, as I stopped participating at the end of 2020. However, as I still feel part of this vibrant reading community, I continue to follow its activities on social media. The monthly meetings persisted in the same pattern that was set in the previous months. This distanced view of the book club offered insights until the end of the prolonged disruption, which was quickly followed by a major identity crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. During the pandemic, there was a hypothesis about the potential of the WRBC continuing its online activities in parallel with the offline gatherings. Since WRBC is a bookshop-based reading group consisting of diasporans who prefer face-to-face meetings over online ones, the latter could have continued, but less frequently, possibly in the format of a ‘Forum of Book Clubs’. In the end, the global function of the WRBC evolved into a distinctive initiative, the Association of Russophone Book Clubs (ARKKA), which keeps growing despite the political tensions in the post-Soviet space. A literary phenomenon in its own right, ARKKA serves as proof of literaturocentrism’s survival in the Russophone ideoscape, adapting to the needs of globally dispersed readers and continuously fuelling their passion for literature.

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## CONCLUSION



Ethnographic texts often present a frozen image of a community, a place, or a culture. The writer's reflections capture a specific moment in history that might change rapidly just hours after the research is completed. In response to this unavoidable challenge, ethnographers include vibrant descriptions, multiple perspectives, and critical self-reflections that resemble a well-crafted moving image. Since reality is always changing, the narrative must not appear static. When I was writing up my study of Russophone community engagement with literature in Britain in 2021, the Waterstones Russian Book Club was thriving. With over 2,000 members, the book club hosted successful meetings spanning offline and online realms, attracted readers and writers from all continents, and launched its latest initiative, the Association of Russophone Book Clubs (ARKKA), which was taking its first decisive steps. This small diasporic reading group from London was quickly transforming into an influential player in the global Russophone literary scene. Then, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shocked the Russophone world. On 4 March 2022, the moderator (a Russian speaker from Ukraine) cancelled that month's meeting and changed the name of the Facebook group to (Waterstones) Book Club in London, removing the mention of Russia.

The subsequent ideological crisis was not limited to the WRBC but extended to diasporic communities globally, consisting of Russian speakers who represent various nationalities, ethnic groups, and political loyalties. The need to disassociate oneself from the Russian Federation and its expansionist policies was expressed in varying ways by different groups and was often influenced by the political stance of each hosting country. The book club closed its doors and suspended online activity. The rare post-invasion meetings were actually organised by ARKKA and were advertised within the network. In April 2022, Russophone readers from book clubs—members of ARKKA met to discuss a non-Russian novel, Agatha Christie's *Absent in the Spring* (1944). The event was promoted on the Facebook page of the 'Moderators of Book Clubs' with the following accompanying text:

Our community was formed about two years ago, when the most terrible news in our lives was covid and lockdowns. At a time when we were repeatedly sent into isolation and separated, we, on the contrary, found new friends and supported each other. Today, ARKKA has 155 Russophone book clubs registered on four continents, including most countries of the former Soviet Union. But what is most important is that we unite a progressive-thinking, reading public. We must never lose this unity. The current situation is more challenging than anything we've faced in the past two years. Many of you cannot read, attend club meetings, or even leave your homes. It's heartbreaking.

However, books, communication, and support can bring us together and help us through this difficult time.

In a few lines, the WRBC moderator summarised how the ARKKA members were feeling and what they could do for each other. A refugee crisis unfolded in Ukraine, with millions of Ukrainians being displaced both within the country and across international borders, seeking safety from the conflict. Simultaneously, a new migratory wave from Russia to neighbouring countries, such as Georgia and Armenia, or any other country willing to host them, began. Supported by the success story of the WRBC and ARKKA pandemic activities, Katya's powerful message of unity within the Russophone reading community captured a deep-felt need in times of confusion and uncertainty. Resisting fragmentation and division, Katya suggested reading a well-known work instead of something contemporary, as had been the general practice. To mark the continuation of the newly established online tradition, Galina Yuzefovich attended the meeting and delivered an introductory speech. Relevant posts about the war and the need to support each other continued to appear in the same Facebook group in the following months. A notable moment was another ARKKA-wide meeting organised by the WRBC moderator in November 2022 under the same mission:

Yes, we know that the time is now more difficult than you can imagine; yes, we understand that many people are not up to reading right now. But at the same time, we see that clubs continue to work, and people need to meet and communicate. Let's meet and talk about the painful things: have the tastes of your readers (and yours too) changed, have they started reading more or less (or stopped reading everything except the news), has it become more difficult to moderate meetings, have you started avoiding certain genres or books... And much more.

With ARKKA continuing to prosper as an innovative platform for readers and book club moderators, the doors of the WRBC remain closed, having come full circle back to the private, small meetings where it started. While it is not uncommon for a community initiative initially to flourish and then contract, the case of the WRBC reveals the complexities of diasporic life, especially concerning migrants' relationships with their homeland(s). The book club's orientation towards Russia was a debated topic even before the invasion of Ukraine, with literature providing a refuge from political tensions and conflicting national identifications. Literaturocentrism is a resilient cultural discourse for Russian speakers, serving as a point of reference that can unite them despite all the 'painful things' they have experienced. Retracing the different stages of the WRBC's development will showcase the place of literature in the community life of Russian-speaking migrants and the identity formation work taking place in diasporic book clubs. Crafting a dynamic image of the WRBC, the discussion will focus on three main themes: the role of diasporic book clubs as community spaces, the relationship of a diaspora with the cultural homeland, and the survival of literaturocentrism in transnational Russophone community practices.

### The WRBC as a Diasporic Community Space

The Waterstones Russian Book Club started off as a typical reading group focusing on the discussion of contemporary Russophone literature. The members gathered once a month and engaged in collective interpretation of the chosen novels. However, the club quickly started seeking ways to bring variety to the meetings. The moderator tried to enliven the literary gatherings primarily with games and meetings with writers. During the gaming sessions, the book club transformed into a community of play, with participants testing their knowledge of the club's achievements, proving their post-Soviet cultural competency, entering imaginary worlds, recreating memoryscapes, and negotiating and infusing the practice with their transnational experiences. The inclusion of literary games allowed the book club members to expand their usual discussion-focused shared reading practices by engaging with literary works through multimodal, creative activities. The games also provided opportunities for participants to reintroduce themselves to their fellow members and forge bonds through collaborative action. The meet-the-author events hosted by the book club attracted Russian speakers who wanted to meet their favourite writers, explore unseen sides of the books already discussed by the club, and listen to someone coming from (or joining virtually) their homeland. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the WRBC adapted its mission to the conditions of social distancing and national lockdown by organising virtual sessions and frequently inviting famous Russophone writers. These sessions aimed to provide community-driven entertainment and distraction through literature. The book club members found these meetings to be valuable support and stimulation during a challenging period and remained committed to the group despite the prolonged disruption.

The formation of a community space within the WRBC was also supported by celebrations and gift-giving practices that took place during special gatherings. The celebrations marked important occasions, such as the anniversary of the book club, and adopted various formats that enabled members to highlight shared cultural heritage, commemorate famous poets, and reflect on transnational life. Gifts and awards given to the winners of games recognised achievements, demonstrated attentiveness, and promoted a sense of familiarity and affection among members. An additional function of the gifts was to define sameness and otherness within the club. Bearers of post-Soviet heritage typically received hard copies of Russophone literature as symbols of Soviet reading culture, while non-bearers were awarded non-literary prizes. The celebrations, gift-giving, and gaming practices continued on the club's Facebook page through posts, videos, and discussions, projecting an image of solidarity and cohesion.

The intersections and disparities between WRBC membership and membership in the UK Russian-speaking diaspora revealed the identification patterns of the readers. According to my typology, WRBC members fall into one of the following categories: the regulars, the intermittents, the dilettantes, the lurkers, and the peripherals. The criteria for this distinction were the level of preparation and participation, the regularity of attendance, and the presence or absence of

diaspora status. The varying levels of involvement with the WRBC showed that members attended meetings due to their interest in Russophone literature and/or to socialise with cultivated post-Soviet migrant readers. In this framework, WRBC membership did not necessarily translate into a sense of belonging to the broader Russophone community, as some members distinguished their participation in the group from identification with their fellow migrants. For those who distance themselves from the diaspora as a limiting and limited concept, the book club represents an opportunity to stay in touch with Russophone literature but not necessarily with their 'compatriots'. Along the non-members of the diaspora, there are the Russians 2.0, who identify with the Russian-speaking transnational community, embrace the hybridisation of their transnational identities, and infuse their reading practices with elements from both home and host cultures; and the Global Russians, who regard themselves as cosmopolitans and are not bound by diaspora membership but still celebrate their post-Soviet cultural heritage and enjoy all aspects of WRBC meetings.

The intricate relationship between Russian speakers, the book club, and the diaspora exemplifies a liquid community. As a flexible and fluid social network, the WRBC brings together readers who are passionate about Russophone literature, share a linguistic and cultural heritage, but have different subjective positions towards the diaspora. The common orientation towards shared reading practices forms the foundation of this liquid community, allowing members to disengage easily from the book club if it no longer meets their needs, especially given the numerous options for diasporic engagement with literature in London. Overall, the cultural practices of the WRBC forged a community space where participants can read, discuss, and interact with literature, meet with writers and other diasporans, yet it is highly adaptable and ready to accommodate the needs of its members, as demonstrated on various occasions, particularly during the pandemic.

### Literaturocentrism in the Diaspora

No other place is a more welcoming environment for literaturocentrism to not only survive but also thrive than a transnational book club: Russophone migrants unified by their love of literature and the familiar practice of reading. In this conducive context, literature is experienced collectively in a dialectic manner, supported by expressions of diasporic life and recreated memoryscapes, both of which are binding cultural elements. Focusing on a community of readers, this study of diasporic literaturocentrism involved closely examining literature's role in the lives of Russian speakers in Britain and the negotiation of writers' presence in the book club meetings. Starting with the latter, Russophone writers were consistently idolised in games, celebrations, and meet-the-author events. The persistence of the writers' myth was observed in activities and cultural practices that promoted their recognisability and participation in the creation of games, proposed a visual merging of readers and writers, and highlighted their significance for the book club members. For example, during Brodsky's commemoration event, the poet emerged

as a symbol of the Russian-speaking diasporic experience in the anglophone world. However, when a writer did not live up to the standards of the idealised bearer of the Russian literary tradition, the WRBC members were ready to demythologise or even reject them. For them, Russophone authors should convey a sense of superiority, be didactic, and demonstrate a particularly skilful use of the Russian language in their meetings with readers, actively reproducing a literary hierarchy and cultural imaginary established in the last two centuries. Discussing their encounters with Russophone readers, the authors explained that their main role is as mediators of cultural dialogue between home and host societies. With their special status in cultural imagination, touring writers attract audiences craving stories that remove borders between creators and readers, dispersed diasporans and those who never left.

Zooming in on the role of literature in diaspora life, the WRBC members recognised the literaturocentric character of their identities and showed awareness of the social conditions that led to the formation of the Russian logocentric myth and later to the creation of the Soviet reader. Growing up in a cultural system that valued reading highly, Soviet people became avid readers, investing in their private book collections. The influence of the Soviet literaturocentric culture is apparent in different aspects of the respondents' everyday life, indicating its survival outside the post-communist space. The book club members collect books and regard them as essential features of their homes; prefer to socialise with their fellow migrants if they are well-read; and try to instil a love of Russian literature in their children despite the difficulties of migrant life by reading together, discussing books, and explaining to them the necessary vocabulary and cultural references. Participation in the WRBC represents an expression of the members' literaturocentric identities as they seek like-minded readers to collectively explore and discuss contemporary Russophone literature in their mother tongue. In turn, the visiting writers confirmed the preservation of literature's significance for the diaspora, contrasting it with the situation in post-Soviet Russia, where the reading audience has considerably shrunk and literature is progressively losing its symbolic status. For the authors, shared reading practices centred on Russian literature allow diasporans to stay informed about life in the homeland, practise their language skills, and safeguard their cultural heritage. Literaturocentrism in the diaspora has taken a new form, preserving elements from the Russian and Soviet phenomenon but primarily responding to the needs of migrant readers.

### **Relationship with the Cultural Homeland**

Homeland is the point of reference for each diaspora, defining the community-building and identity-making processes of migrants in the host society. Diasporans recreate the memory of home in private and public spaces, consume media and cultural products from the country of origin, organise grassroots cultural initiatives, and participate in the activities of diasporic organisations. The cultural practices of the WRBC showed a homeland orientation on two different levels: by engaging

with cultural memory and heritage through a variety of discursive practices; and by reconnecting with contemporary Russophone literary production via books, writers' events, meetings with readers, and collaborations with cultural institutions. The book club did not approach the relationship with USSR/Russia based on a past–present dipole (as the aforementioned levels might be interpreted), but instead as a continuum in which global Russophone culture is being produced and reproduced.

The key point for understanding the relationship between the WRBC members and the cultural homeland was the negotiation of the Soviet past and the various manifestations of collective memory. This negotiation took the form of reconciling with a controversial period and nostalgia for childhood memories. By reading Prilepin's novel *Obitel'*, the book club had to confront the traumatic history of the Gulag camps. The novel offered an opportunity to imaginatively enter the Stalinist era and collectively recreate the traumatized landscape of Solovki. Despite the historical and physical distance from the post-Soviet space, participants were shocked by the brutality and atrocities that took place in the camps. The book talk revealed the existence of two generations of diasporic readers in the WRBC: the older, Soviet-raised generation, which was familiar with the fiction and non-fiction works about the Gulag and the social role they played after the dissolution of the USSR, and the younger, post-communist generation that has limited knowledge of this era and its literature. Both generations accepted Prilepin's conciliatory interpretation of Gulag history, highlighting their need for closure and their detachment from any efforts to instrumentalise the controversial Soviet past for political purposes.

In contrast to the discussion of *Obitel'*, the nostalgic reconstruction of Soviet life in the literary game 'The Pioneer Childhood' created a relaxed, light-hearted, and joyous atmosphere as the members enjoyed recreating a shared memory of Soviet childhood. The game tested the ability of participants to navigate the late-Soviet cultural landscape by checking different aspects of cultural memory, such as songs and slang of the time. Regardless of the game's nostalgic framing, some of my respondents rejected any feelings of longing for the Soviet past. For them, Soviet memories represent resistant pasts that have managed to survive despite the decades that have passed since the collapse of the USSR. The participation of the non-nostalgic members in a game that celebrated pioneer childhood as part of the shared cultural heritage was possible only through its disconnection from the ideological subtext in the already apoliticised environment of the book club. The intentional apoliticisation of the WRBC by the moderator follows the example of other Russophone diasporic initiatives and reading groups, which avoid any reasons for discord and highlight sameness in their effort to forge a sense of community. Performances of Soviet nostalgia also prevailed in the WRBC's celebratory events and anniversaries. The first anniversary inspired the members to create a temporary diasporic environment by reconstituting a Soviet sensescape through decorations, gifts, discussions, and food. Two years later, the nostalgic elements of the celebration included Soviet-style singing and poem recitations, showcasing the variety of practices employed by the diasporans to recreate a familiar and cherished place in the country of settlement. All these identity-forging practices reflected and

incorporated the transnational experience of Russian speakers, creating a hybrid diasporic culture in the book club.

The homeland orientation of the WRBC can also be identified in the complex nexus of the club's relationships with the institution of literature as currently formed in Russia and the diaspora. The WRBC primarily reads contemporary literature produced by Russia-based writers, and even when choosing books from diaspora authors, they had all started their careers in Russia. The members were informed about new releases and acclaimed contemporary books from Russian media and social reading websites, but most importantly by following critics and prestigious literary awards. The book club invited the director of the Big Book Prize once a year to discuss developments in Russian literature, and prepared for this meeting by reading one or more books from the shortlist of the prize. The shortlisted novels and book recommendations by the director and other critics regularly appeared on the voting list, establishing themselves as literary authorities and guiding the consumption of literature in the WRBC. Furthermore, the presence of writers was particularly strong in the book club proceedings. The continuous engagement with famous and up-and-coming writers afforded the book club members the opportunity to directly converse with the makers of Russian literature about the creative process and Russian society, thereby reconnecting with their cultural homeland. In some cases, the organisation of writers' events was facilitated by cultural organisations such as *Rosstrudnichestvo* and *Read Russia*, with which the WRBC moderator strategically networked. These organisations brought writers and books to the WRBC as gifts, intending to establish relationships and symbolic bonds with a potential reading audience as part of their effort to mobilise the Russophone diaspora in the UK.

In parallel to the book club's orientation towards Russia as the cultural homeland, the WRBC members opened a dialogue with their fellow readers around the world. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the WRBC developed a new hybrid paradigm that combined elements of online and offline book club practices and transformed the modes of interaction between writers and readers. Russophone authors became regular guests at the literary gatherings, and the number of book club members skyrocketed. Even though the WRBC was already providing its members with access to the global Russophone ideoscape through its multifaceted literary practices, the pandemic gatherings established them as actors in the formation of this imagined landscape. In collaboration with thirteen more book clubs located in Russia and various diasporic locations across the world, the WRBC organised two 'Fora of Book Clubs' that gathered a global reading community to celebrate Russian literature and to meet with writers from Russia and the diaspora. This success story encouraged the moderators of the 'Forum of Book Clubs' to found the Association of Russophone Book Clubs (ARKKA) and design a web platform for reading groups. ARKKA is likely the long-term contribution of the WRBC and its moderator to Russophone book culture, having co-created a space for shared reading and meaning-making practices that transcend physical borders and negate any centre-periphery models.

### **Beyond the Waterstones Russian Book Club**

With its expansions, contractions, and reconfigurations, the transformation of the book club over the years invites meditation on the role of communities in the twenty-first century. Bauman saw liquid networks taking over social formations, and the Covid-19 socialities proved him right. In this increasingly mediated era, social relationships follow traditional patterns but adopt new forms and formats (or the other way around) as people look for opportunities to connect, communicate, support, and feel supported. The frequency of interactions and the level of commitment vary significantly based on the needs and availability of social group members. Borders are becoming less significant, and a sense of global interconnectedness is growing, particularly among frequent travellers or those with international connections. The pandemic lockdowns reminded us of what is available locally while instilling a yearning to explore faraway places, to experience what was once only imported.

Communities will continue to flourish in this evolving context. Whether closed or open, short-lived or enduring, local or global, offline, online, or hybrid, communities are omnipresent and resilient. They foster a sense of belonging, an unmistakable marker of identity formation. Regardless of the format or duration, multiple memberships still define who someone is, what their worldview is centred on, with whom they want to be surrounded, and what opportunities they provide. The created bonds empower community members, providing them with feelings of security, space for creativity and self-expression. Communities broadcast a crucial message of solidarity, weaving narratives of collaboration, synergy, and alliance. The current shift towards small, local communities underscores the acknowledgment of grassroots approaches to sociopolitical change, bolstered by the pressing global predicament. There is undeniable power in unity, and as the necessity for resistance intensifies, community will transcend being merely another overexploited concept; it will stand as a testament of hope.

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# INDEX



- Adams, Laura 45  
Alexievich, Svetlana 38  
Akhmatova, Anna 33, 39, 131  
Anderson, Benedict 4–5, 69  
Anglo-Russian Culture Club 44  
*Apocalypse Welcome* 65, 69–73  
Appadurai, Arjun 3  
Assimilation 7, 116, 121–22  
Association of Russophone Book Clubs (ARKKA) 19,  
147, 157, 161–62, 167
- Bakhtin, Mikhail 7  
Barthes, Roland 25  
Bauman, Zygmunt 116, 168  
Berg, Mikhail 26–27, 119  
Bibliophiles 115  
Big Book Award 2, 34, 51–52, 73, 92, 123, 149, 152, 167  
book:  
audiobooks 120  
book boom 31  
book hunger 31, 125  
book shortage 30–31  
bookshop 1, 16, 34, 46, 86, 100, 103, 123, 158  
collection 1–2, 30–31, 34, 77–78, 90, 112, 117, 119,  
124, 165  
ebook 34, 39, 77, 81–82, 119, 120  
fetishisation 31, 77, 81, 117, 124  
book club:  
book discussion 17, 45, 51, 54, 65, 67–79, 72, 74,  
88–96, 113, 136, 148, 151, 153, 156  
book selection 51–54, 152  
digital transition 146–47, 150–52, 149  
meeting structure 46–47  
online book clubs 69, 72, 112, 146, 151  
Russophone reading groups 154–55, 161  
Boym, Svetlana 8, 28, 32  
brain drain 12  
brutality 89–90, 92, 96, 166  
Brodsky, Joseph 33, 38, 103–04, 136–37, 164  
Byford, Andy 10, 13, 54, 58, 115
- celebrations 64–67, 75–79, 96, 102–13, 136–37, 163  
census 12–13, 29  
censorship 17, 27, 35, 119, 124  
Cohen, Anthony 4, 14, 55  
colonisation 9  
community:  
community-at-large 13, 58, 115  
hybrid 168  
liquid 116, 128, 164, 168  
networks 4, 6, 14–15, 51, 55, 116, 151  
cosmopolitan 29, 58–59, 140–41  
Covid-19 pandemic 146–47, 149  
digital fatigue 147, 154  
lockdown 146, 149–50, 163, 156, 168  
cultural heritage 6, 13, 70–71, 86, 114, 127  
Soviet heritage 11, 45, 49, 54–57, 60, 67, 98, 100–01
- Dahinden, Janine 4  
dark tourism 94  
Delanty, Gerard 6  
deterritorialisation 4, 59, 61, 140, 155  
diaspora:  
active diasporan 54, 58  
belonging 5, 57, 73, 76–78, 86, 101, 114, 116, 125,  
139, 143, 164  
compatriot 11, 39, 58, 60, 143, 164  
diaspora audience 73, 137–39, 141  
diasporic festival 44, 110  
diasporic mobilisation 11, 17, 41  
diasporic organisations 54, 58, 60, 71, 165  
objects 81, 102–03  
parents–children 111, 121, 125–26, 142–43  
return 4, 6, 8–10  
diversity 8, 15, 29, 71  
Dostoevsky, Fyodor 33, 119  
Durnenkov, Mikhail 123, 138, 142  
Dyachenko, Marina and Sergey 52, 142, 154, 156
- Eastern Europe 12, 14, 28  
essentialism 124  
ethnography 16, 45, 102, 161  
ethnoscapes 3  
European Parliament 11
- Facebook 44, 48, 50, 66, 74, 100, 151  
Fedin, Konstantin 37  
First World War 9, 29  
Forum of Book Clubs 154–57  
fragmentation 6, 162
- games 68–75, 132–33  
award 66–67, 70  
'Chto? Gde? Kogda?' ('What? Where? When?') 70  
intellectual games  
literary games 75, 82, 163

- nostalgic games 97–101, 166  
 quizzes 49, 65–66, 69–75, 132  
 role-playing games 73–74  
 Gelasimov, Andrey 66–67, 70, 133  
 generation 15, 95–96, 119–20  
 gifts 75–82, 163, 167  
     ceremony 66, 76–77  
     charity 75  
     honorary diploma 76–78  
     signed books 79, 81, 82  
     source 75, 167  
     Superman 78–79  
 globalisation 3, 59  
     global cultural flows 3, 55, 57, 71, 142  
     periphery 3, 11, 35–36, 49, 50, 72, 142, 167  
 graphomania 28  
 Gulag camps 87–88, 91, 166  
     literature 87, 90, 91, 166  
     memory 92, 94, 96  
  
 Hall, Stuart 6  
 heterogeneity 3, 7, 8, 13  
 hierarchy of taste 52, 90, 147, 151  
 homeland 3–10, 55–59, 72–74, 100, 139, 141, 162, 165–66  
     dual presence 5, 55  
     home 5–8, 55–59, 102, 114–15, 117, 143, 164–65  
     homeland orientation 6, 19, 58, 165, 167–68  
     host society 56–57, 139, 165  
 hybridity 6–7, 71, 133  
     hybrid identities 16, 136  
     hybrid reading practices 18, 68, 147, 151, 157  
     hybridisation 7, 17, 59, 76, 122, 125, 150–51  
  
 ideoscape 3, 57, 71, 111, 133, 139, 158  
 Idiatullin, Shamil 123–24, 140  
 identity:  
     identity construction 96, 121, 147  
     transnational/diasporic identity 6–8, 54–60, 103–04,  
         110–16  
 illiteracy 29–30, 101  
 imagined communities 4–5, 69  
     cultural imaginary 3, 5, 16, 71, 86, 111, 119–20, 156  
 intelligentsia 26–27, 30, 32, 34, 87–88, 113  
 Ivanov, Alexei 97–98, 123, 127, 138  
  
 Kaufman, Peter 39–40  
 Kniguru 140  
 Kondakov, Ivan 27  
 Kritikotsentrism 27  
 Kulturnost 29  
 Kvartrniki 104  
  
 Levada Centre 34, 52  
 libraries 16, 30, 34, 36  
     electronic library 34, 82  
 literacy 97, 101–02, 112, 122, 143  
  
 literaturocentrism 25–41, 110–11, 114–21, 132, 164–65  
     crises 27, 120  
     High Russian literature 126, 152  
     idealisation of readers 134  
     idolisation of authors 27, 29, 134–35, 164–65  
     literaturocracy 33, 26–27, 119  
     logocentric 27, 116, 122  
     Soviet Literacy Project 29–31  
 literature:  
     genres 51–52, 54, 91, 120, 152, 166  
     literary journals 33–34  
     literary spaces 115  
 locality 6–7  
 London 113, 140  
     Londongrad 15  
     London Riots 65  
 London Book Fair 79–80, 137, 149  
 Long, Elizabeth 45–46, 51  
 Lovell, Stephen 30, 117  
 Lukyanenko, Sergei 148  
 Lukyanova, Irina 123, 138–39, 142–43  
  
 Madianou, Mirca 5, 153  
 Mamut, Aleksandr 1–2  
 Maslenitsa 94  
 Mayakovsky, Vladimir 32  
 mediascapes 3, 155  
 membership:  
     book club membership 48–51, 88  
     diaspora membership 54–60  
     dynamics 133, 136, 147  
     fluid membership 116, 128  
     male membership 50  
 Menzel, Birgit 30, 34  
 memory:  
     collective memory 7, 60, 82, 86, 105, 166  
     cultural memory 6, 17, 25, 57, 67, 71, 87, 90, 95,  
         97, 115  
     memoryscape 69, 75, 104, 163  
 migration:  
     Soviet migratory waves 9–11  
     transnational 3–4  
 Miller, Daniel 5  
*Modernity at Large* 3  
 Moscow 14, 29, 39, 51, 118, 140  
 multilocality 7  
     in-betweenness 140  
     multipresence 26, 73–74, 81, 139, 154  
 mythology 25, 27  
     myth of super-rich Russophone diaspora 140  
     myth of the author 26, 32–33, 118, 131, 133, 137  
     myth of the Soviet reader 29–31, 101, 118  
     self-mythologisation 135  
  
 Nagornaya, Oksana 37  
 nationalism 4, 40

- Nobel Prize in Literature 33, 87, 103  
 nostalgia 102–03, 138, 166  
   non-nostalgic diasporans 99–100  
   nostalgic diasporans 101, 114–15, 118  
   nostalgic stimuli 101–03  
   restorative and reflective 8, 96, 114
- Obitel'* 87–95, 166
- other:  
   difference 7–8, 57, 59, 111, 121, 126  
   otherness 6–8, 59, 79, 128  
   sameness 7, 50, 57, 101, 163, 166
- Papastergiadis, Nikos 7  
 Pasternak, Boris 33, 37  
 Pavlova, Vera 123–24, 141  
 Perestroika 10, 12, 27, 95, 97, 100, 119  
 Pioneer camps 97–101, 166  
   songs 97–100
- polymedia 5  
 Portes, Alejandro 3  
 Prilepin, Zakhar 87, 91–93, 95  
 Pushkin, Alexander 28–29, 32, 39, 121  
 Pushkin House 44, 53–54
- Read Russia 39–41, 75, 79–81, 137, 167
- reading:  
   avid readers 1, 121  
   diasporic readers 17–18, 36, 110, 114, 125, 144, 166  
   global Russian reader 139–40, 154  
   readership 17, 25, 29, 30–31, 34, 44, 54, 110, 119–20, 123, 126  
   reading audience 119, 139  
   Russian digital readingscape 36  
   social practice 86, 16  
   solitary reader 152
- Rehberg Sedo, DeNel 46, 69  
 Reznichenko, Yevgeny 39–40  
 Rossotrudnichestvo 11, 39, 57, 75, 82, 121, 167  
 Rozhdestvenskaya, Ekaterina 123, 125
- Russia:  
   cultural diplomacy 36–38  
   diaspora history 9–13  
   internet (RuNet) 34–36  
   Revolution 9, 11–12, 14, 32, 118  
   Russia abroad 9, 11  
   Russian Empire 5, 9, 12, 29
- Russian speakers:  
   global Russians 54, 59, 61, 139–40, 164  
   Russians 2.0 54, 59–60, 164
- Russkiy Mir Foundation 11, 39  
 Russianness 15, 103, 121, 125  
 Ryazanova-Clarke, Lara 15, 116
- Saint Petersburg 14  
 Salmikov, Alexei 123–24, 127, 135–36, 139  
 samizdat 31–33  
 sensescape 103–04, 166  
 Sharov, Vladimir 123, 127, 138  
*Shining, The* 67, 70, 135  
 Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr 33, 38, 41, 87, 91–92, 95  
 Sochi Winter Olympic Games 38  
 solidarity 46, 57, 75, 83, 114, 163, 168  
 Solovki 87–89, 91, 93–95  
 soundscape 98, 100
- Soviet Union:  
   dissolution 14, 33–34, 95, 118–19  
   Soviet childhood 57, 67, 70–71, 86, 97, 99, 166  
   Soviet Cultural Revolution 29–30  
   Soviet guilt 91–92  
   Soviet past 86, 93, 96, 102, 166  
   Soviet terror 88, 92–93, 96  
   USSR 9–11, 28, 33, 36–38, 87, 95, 100
- Stalinist repressions 10, 88–89, 115  
 Stepnova, Marina 152–53  
 Strokina, Anastasia 123, 125, 137, 143
- tamizdat 31–33  
 theatre 15, 27, 37, 53, 56, 88, 91, 103, 121, 150  
 Tolstoy, Lev 38–39, 122  
 total'nyi diktant 97
- transnationalism 2–4, 73  
   diasporic transnationalism 4  
   transnational life 4, 7, 46, 54, 56, 151, 165  
   transnational media 3, 5, 55, 139
- traumascapes 95, 166
- Ukraine 1–2, 14, 50–54, 74, 89, 117, 154–55  
   Russian invasion 10, 16, 19, 60, 158, 161
- Urushadze, Georgyi 51–53
- Valam myth 94  
 veteran 87, 94  
 Vodolazkin, Eugene 123, 126, 139–40, 142
- Wachtel, Andrew 28, 30  
*War and Peace* 28, 38  
 Waterstones Piccadilly 1, 46, 72, 74, 88, 104, 134, 147  
 Waterstones Russian Book Club:  
   apolitical space 100–01, 166  
   blog 72, 112, 118  
   history 1–2
- Writers 123–28, 132, 149–50, 164  
   meet-the-author events 148, 163, 165  
   personality cult 131, 133, 143–44  
   tour 123, 131, 137–38, 141
- Writers' Union 32
- Yakhina, Guzel 2, 45, 80–81, 97, 123–24, 137  
 Yakovleva, Yulia 118, 123, 125, 133  
 Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award 2, 38, 123  
 Yuzefovich, Galina 123, 154, 157, 162
- Zuleikha Opens her Eyes* 2

