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Derek Offord, Vladislav Rjéoutski, and Gesine Argent, *The French Language in Russia: A Social, Political, and Literary History*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 702pp. €46.95 (hb). Bibliography, index, and illustrations. ISBN 9789462982727.

Review by Willard Sunderland, University of Cincinnati and Higher School of Economics (Moscow).

It is not clear that Napoleon actually said “Grattez le Russe et vous trouverez le Tartare,” but if he did, the irony is that a large number of Russians and some Tatars would have understood him. Already a “prestige language” by the 1750s, by the early nineteenth century French had become a basic marker of Russian noble identity (p. 61). The merchants and *muzhiks* could not prattle in French, but the lords and ladies could, and they did, whether in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Baden-Baden, or Kazan. Even Russian patriots were patriotic in French. Shot through and lying close to death at the Battle of Leipzig, General Nikolai Raevskii quoted from Voltaire’s *Ériphyle*: “Je n’ai plus rien du sang qui m’a donné la vie / Il a dans les combats coulé pour la patrie.”[1] According to the poet Konstantin Batiushkov, the officers tending the general were deeply moved by his display of sangfroid and presumably, just like Batiushkov, understood every word.[2]

Yet the very omnipresence of French in educated Russian society gave rise to numerous myths. For example, that every last nobleman spoke French, that they spoke it better than their native Russian, that Russian noble women were especially Frenchified, and that the sheer absoluteness of the nobility’s French conversion was proof that the country had an imitation problem. Incapable of being happy being themselves, the Russians pretended instead to be European, which then led critical Europeans, like Napoleon, to dismiss them as frauds and critical native critics, like the Slavophiles, to lament the country’s apparent lack of *amour-propre*. And then there is that other unflattering generalization—the contention that modern Russian culture, Russian literature in particular, is itself largely French or at least French-inspired, a notion that lives on a little every time one of our undergraduates asks whether it is true that Tolstoy wrote most of *War and Peace* in French. (In fact, French passages amount to only about 2% of the novel, and Tolstoy was quite strategic about when he used the language.)

Thankfully Derek Offord, Vladislav Rjéoutski, and Gesine Argent are here to save us from these and other overdrawn claims by reframing the Franco-Russian question in much more precise terms. As their impressive book makes clear, French was indeed influential but the Russian nobility’s adoption of the language was not unique or exceptional, and it does not speak to a flawed dualism in Russian culture that supposedly condemned Russian nobles to living like foreigners in their own country. Rejecting “grand narrative”-style arguments about Russian

identity (p. 587), the authors get down to the nitty-gritty of how French worked in Russian life—who spoke it, when they spoke it, why, and to what effect. The result is a nuanced rebuttal of the “negative discourse” about French practices in Russia during the imperial era that reframes Franco-Russian bilingualism as a reflection of the social transformation of the nobility—in particular, the aristocracy as a subset of the nobility—and the country’s broader modernization and its increasing integration within European cultural space (p. 77).

Following a useful overview of “the historical contexts of Russian francophonie” in chapter one (p. 79), the book unfolds with individual chapters focusing on the various contexts of French practice in Russia, exposing who taught and learned French, how French was used at court, within high society, and in diplomatic work, who chose to write in French and why, and how French was deployed in various political-cultural debates, in propaganda both extolling and denouncing Russia, and in “the classical Russian novel” (p. 519). Virtually every major Russian cultural and political figure of the imperial era appears here, which is hardly surprising since this was the age when anyone of influence had at least some exposure to French, but still, just in itself, this is a remarkable fact. One really cannot know Russian history, especially between roughly 1750 and 1850, without knowing French, or at least without appreciating it. If not everywhere, the language was at a minimum where the powerful people tended to be, including at every *grand monde soirée*. As the ex-serf turned censor, professor, and diarist Aleksandr Nikitenko (1804–1877) put it somewhat snarkily, French was the union card, the necessary ticket: “Knowledge of French serves as an entrée in the most ‘refined’ salons. It frequently determines your status...and frees you, if not forever, than at least for a while, from the necessity of displaying other very serious claims to the public’s attention and good will” (p. 245).

Indeed, read not as a history of French in Russia but as a history of Russia *tout court*, the book is a remarkable guide to how old Russia used to work. In the first instance, it worked by being a country where a tiny number of people spoke French and most everyone did not. This infinitesimal stratum used the language to connect themselves to Europe, to establish the bounds of politeness, to be secretive, polemical, and bawdy. By the same token, they did not use the language in church or when they had to get something across to their perceived social inferiors. Nor did they use it when plotting revolution (as opposed to palace coups) or when they wanted to write “literature of a more serious and professional kind” (p. 573), since such literature was imagined, more often than not, as a way to assert Russia’s authenticity, and this seemed better done in Russian.

Perhaps most perceptively the authors show us that old Russia was never really “old Russia” in that timeless sense usually evoked by the term. The country was always changing, evolving, and it changed a great deal over the long arc of French’s linguistic heyday, and consequently, the appeal of French changed as well. Thus even as Catherine the Great and her courtiers conducted a good deal of their business in French, they were also proud empire-builders who sought to advertise their achievements by establishing their own linguistic credentials, including by introducing reforms to codify Russian as a language of education and administration. (Catherine’s famous Instruction [*Nakaz*], for example, was printed in both languages.) By the early nineteenth century, the “nationalistic outlook” became even more prevalent (p. 577), which further bolstered the standing of the national tongue, and around that time a new sort of public also began appearing whose members were less noble-dominated and less high-society conformist, which, in linguistic terms, meant that they were less interested in advertising themselves as French-speakers. The result was a “gradual fall in the stock of French” over the

long term (p. 576). By the end of the imperial era, aristocrats still spoke French, but the language was nowhere near the tool of power that it had been a century earlier.

It is thus ironic if somewhat predictable that just as French was exiting the stage, it was turned by nationally minded Russians into a symbol of the country's grossest miscalculations. The intellectuals and critics who wanted to feel better about themselves criticized the aristocrats for seeming to prefer French over their own language, which quickly abetted breezy generalizations that grossly oversimplified how French actually functioned in Russian society. The great contribution of this learned book is, first, to draw our attention to these simplifications and then to reveal the messier, more complicated picture that they have kept us from seeing. This result is a rich achievement that Francophiles and non-Francophiles alike will gain from exploring.

#### NOTES

[1] Voltaire, *Ériphyle* in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland, 52 vols. (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1877-1885), v. 2, p. 471.

[2] Iurii M. Lotman, "Russkaia literatura na frantsuzskom iazyke," in *Izbrannye stati, Vol. 2: Stati po istorii russkoi literatury xviii-pervoi poloviny xix veka* (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992), p. 354.

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