

## The History of Russian Literature

This is a Unit on Russian Literature within our overall framework of a semester on World literature. During this time, we will learn about some of the major authors of Russian Literature. This is a great and artistic body of work, full of wisdom, beauty and human emotion.

*Why learn about Russian literature?* you might ask. The best answer is that it is one of the great literatures of the world -- filled with interesting characters, beautiful writing, philosophy and valuable life lessons. Even if you do not use this information now, you may find yourself turning to some of these writers as you get older. Some the following information has been borrowed or adapted from the public, free online encyclopedia at [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com).

### Key Facts About Russian HISTORY

- ◆ **Moscow** has long been the historical center of Russia.
- ◆ Russian had slavery, called **serfdom**, until 1861.
- ◆ Russia was ruled for many years by dictator-kings called **Tsars** (pronounced Zars).
- ◆ Tsar **Nicholas II**, ruled until 1917.
- ◆ Military defeat and food shortages triggered the **Russian Revolution in 1917**, bringing the Communist Bolsheviks to power. The nationalized property and industries.
- ◆ By the **late 1980s**, with the weaknesses of its economic and political structures becoming acute, significant changes in the economy and the party leaderships spelled **the end of the Soviet Union**. It was replaced by the Russian Federation, which included aspects of democracy and capitalism.

### Key Facts About Russian LITERATURE

#### Golden Age

The 19th century (1800-1899) is traditionally referred to as the "Golden Age" of Russian literature. Romanticism permitted a flowering of poetic talent, as epitomized by **Aleksandr Pushkin**. Pushkin wrote a beloved epic poem called *Eugene Onegin*.

**Leo Tolstoy** wrote a huge novel of Russian wars and society entitled *War and Peace*. He also wrote what many consider to be the best romantic and psychologically insightful novel ever, *Anna Karenina*. It is about, among other ideas, a married woman who has a love affair and the consequences.

**Fyodor Dostoevsky**'s greatest novels include *Crime and Punishment*, considered a great psychological novel, and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Another widely-recognized novelist from this period was **Nikolai Gogol**. He wrote a number of short stories set in Saint Petersburg, including the *Diary of a Madman*, "The Overcoat", and "The Nose," as well as the novel, *Dead Souls*.

## Silver Age

Other genres came to the fore with the approach of the 20th century (1900-1999). **Anton Chekhov** excelled in writing short stories and drama, and **Anna Akhmatova** represented innovative lyrical poets. Chekhov's major plays include: *The Cherry Orchard*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Seagull*.

The beginning of the 20th century ranks as the Silver Age of Russian poetry. Well-known writers of the period include the poet **Vladimir Mayakovsky**, the novelist **Boris Pasternak**, who wrote *Doctor Zhivago*, (which was also made into a great movie) and Mikhail Bulgakov, who wrote a satirical novel called *The Master and Margarita*.

## Soviet Era – 1917 - 1980

Sovietization of Russia affected literature after 1917. Maxim Gorky and Nobel Prize winner Mikhail Sholokhov came to prominence as part of Soviet literature. While Socialist realism gained official support in the Soviet Union, some of the writers secretly continued the classical tradition of Russian literature, writing "under the table," with no hope of publishing such works until after their deaths. Their secretly published works were called **samizdat**. Meanwhile, writers such as **Vladimir Nabokov**, author of the novel *Lolita*, continued to flourish in exile.

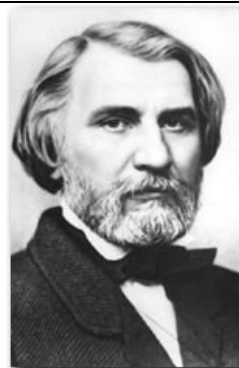
In post-Stalin Russia, *Socialist Realism* remained the only permitted style. This emphasized praise for heroic working people and included writers like Nobel Prize winner **Alexandr Solzhenitsyn** (who built his works on the legacy of the gulag camps). This summary does not include writers of the Post-Soviet era.



*Vladimir Nabokov*



*Scene from  
Anna Karenina*



*Ivan Turgenev*