



Trends in the Development of Russian Prose of the 20th Century

Musurmonova Aziza Rustamovna

Lecturer at the Department of Russian and World Literature, Termez State University (TerSU), Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article examines the main trends in the development of Russian prose of the twentieth century, a period marked by profound social, political, and cultural transformations. The study analyzes the evolution of prose from early twentieth-century realism and modernism to socialist realism, war and post-war literature, the humanistic prose of the “Thaw,” village prose, and late Soviet and postmodern writing. Special attention is paid to the influence of historical events such as the 1917 Revolution, World War II, and the collapse of the Soviet Union on literary themes and artistic methods. The article highlights the diversity of narrative strategies and ideological approaches employed by Russian writers in response to censorship, ideological control, and changing cultural realities. The research demonstrates that despite external constraints, Russian prose of the twentieth century maintained its artistic depth and philosophical orientation, contributing significantly to world literature.

Keywords: Russian prose, twentieth century literature, realism, modernism, socialist realism, war prose, village prose, postmodernism, Soviet literature, literary trends.

Introduction: The twentieth century occupies a special place in the history of Russian literature. It was a period marked by dramatic political, social, and cultural transformations, including revolutions, wars, ideological conflicts, repression, and the collapse of the Soviet system. These historical upheavals profoundly influenced Russian prose, shaping its themes, artistic methods, and ideological orientations. Writers were compelled to respond to rapidly changing realities, often under conditions of censorship and political pressure, which resulted in a complex and multifaceted literary process.

Russian prose of the twentieth century reflects the struggle between artistic freedom and ideological control, tradition and innovation, realism and experimentation. Throughout the century, prose writers explored questions of human existence, moral responsibility, historical memory, and national identity. This article examines the main trends in the development of Russian prose during the twentieth century, focusing on key literary movements, dominant themes, and representative authors.

1. Russian Prose at the Turn of the Century: Realism and Modernism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian prose inherited the rich traditions of nineteenth-century realism represented by such writers as Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov. However, the new century brought a sense of crisis and transition, which gave rise to modernist tendencies. Writers began to search for new artistic forms and philosophical meanings in response to the instability of the era.

Realist prose continued to develop, but it acquired new psychological depth and symbolic elements. Ivan Bunin's works, for example, combined classical realism with lyrical introspection and philosophical reflection. At the same time, modernist prose emerged, influenced by symbolism, impressionism, and existential thought. Authors such as Andrei Bely experimented with narrative structure, language, and symbolism, seeking to convey the inner world of the individual and the chaos of modern life.

Thus, the early twentieth century was characterized by the coexistence of realism and modernism, reflecting both continuity and innovation in Russian prose.

2. The Impact of the 1917 Revolution on Prose

The October Revolution of 1917 became a turning point in Russian history and literature. The revolution not only transformed the political system but also reshaped the literary landscape. Many writers viewed the revolution as a source of hope and renewal, while others perceived it as a national tragedy.

In the 1920s, Russian prose was marked by ideological diversity and artistic experimentation. Writers such as Maxim Gorky, Isaac Babel, and Mikhail Zoshchenko depicted revolutionary events and the Civil War from different perspectives. Babel's *Red Cavalry* presented the brutality and moral ambiguity of war, while Zoshchenko used satire and humor to expose the contradictions of everyday Soviet life.

This period also witnessed the emergence of proletarian literature, which aimed to glorify the working class and revolutionary ideals. However,

alongside official literature, independent and critical voices continued to exist, making the 1920s one of the most dynamic periods in Russian prose.

3. Socialist Realism as the Dominant Method

By the 1930s, literary pluralism was replaced by strict ideological control. Socialist realism was proclaimed the official artistic method of Soviet literature. According to its principles, literature was required to portray reality in its "revolutionary development," promote socialist values, and depict positive heroes devoted to the Communist cause.

Prose of this period often focused on industrialization, collectivization, and the construction of socialism. Writers such as Nikolai Ostrovsky and Alexander Fadeyev created works that emphasized heroism, optimism, and ideological commitment. While socialist realism provided clear guidelines for writers, it also limited artistic freedom and led to the suppression of alternative literary approaches.

At the same time, some authors managed to preserve psychological depth and artistic quality within the constraints of official ideology. Mikhail Sholokhov's novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* is an example of a work that combined socialist realist elements with complex characterization and historical realism.

4. War and Post-War Prose

The Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) became one of the central themes of Russian prose in the mid-twentieth century. War prose focused on the heroism of Soviet soldiers, the suffering of civilians, and the moral *испытания* faced by individuals during wartime.

During the war years, literature served a mobilizing function, encouraging patriotism and resilience. After the war, however, writers began to explore the tragic and human dimensions of the conflict more deeply. Authors such as Viktor Nekrasov and Konstantin Simonov depicted the everyday realities of war, emphasizing personal experience rather than heroic myth.

Post-war prose also addressed the psychological consequences of war, including trauma, loss, and disillusionment. This shift marked a gradual move toward greater realism and emotional authenticity in literary representations of war.

5. The "Thaw" and the Revival of Humanistic Prose

The period known as the "Thaw" (mid-1950s to early 1960s), following the death of Joseph Stalin, brought significant changes to Soviet literature. Censorship was partially relaxed, allowing writers to address previously forbidden topics such as political repression, moral responsibility, and the value of individual freedom.

Prose of the Thaw period emphasized humanism and ethical reflection. Writers like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Vasil Bykov exposed the injustices of the Stalinist era and explored the moral choices faced by individuals under totalitarianism. Solzhenitsyn's works, in particular, played a crucial role in revealing the reality of labor camps and political persecution.

This period marked a return to the tradition of moral and philosophical inquiry that had been central to Russian literature in the nineteenth century.

6. Village Prose and the Search for National Identity

In the 1960s–1970s, a significant trend known as “village prose” emerged. Writers such as Valentin Rasputin, Vasily Shukshin, and Fyodor Abramov focused on rural life, traditional values, and the relationship between humans and nature.

Village prose reflected concerns about the loss of spiritual roots, the destruction of traditional culture, and the consequences of rapid modernization. These works often portrayed village life as a repository of moral wisdom and national identity, contrasting it with the alienation of urban and industrial society.

This trend represented a critique of Soviet modernization policies and emphasized the importance of historical memory and ethical responsibility.

7. Late Soviet and Postmodern Prose

By the late twentieth century, Russian prose underwent further transformation. The period of perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the dismantling of ideological restrictions and the emergence of new literary forms. Postmodernism became an influential trend, characterized by irony, intertextuality, and skepticism toward grand narratives.

Writers such as Viktor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin challenged traditional literary conventions and explored themes of identity, consumer culture, and the absurdity of post-Soviet reality. Their works reflected the fragmentation and uncertainty of the transitional period.

Late twentieth-century prose thus demonstrated a shift from ideological certainty to pluralism and experimentation.

Conclusion

The development of Russian prose in the twentieth century was shaped by profound historical changes and cultural challenges. From the coexistence of realism and modernism at the beginning of the century to the dominance of socialist realism, the revival of humanistic values during the Thaw, and the

emergence of postmodernism, Russian prose reflected the complex dynamics of its time.

Despite ideological pressure and censorship, Russian writers continued to explore fundamental questions of human existence, morality, and historical memory. The richness and diversity of twentieth-century Russian prose testify to its enduring significance and its vital role in world literature.

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