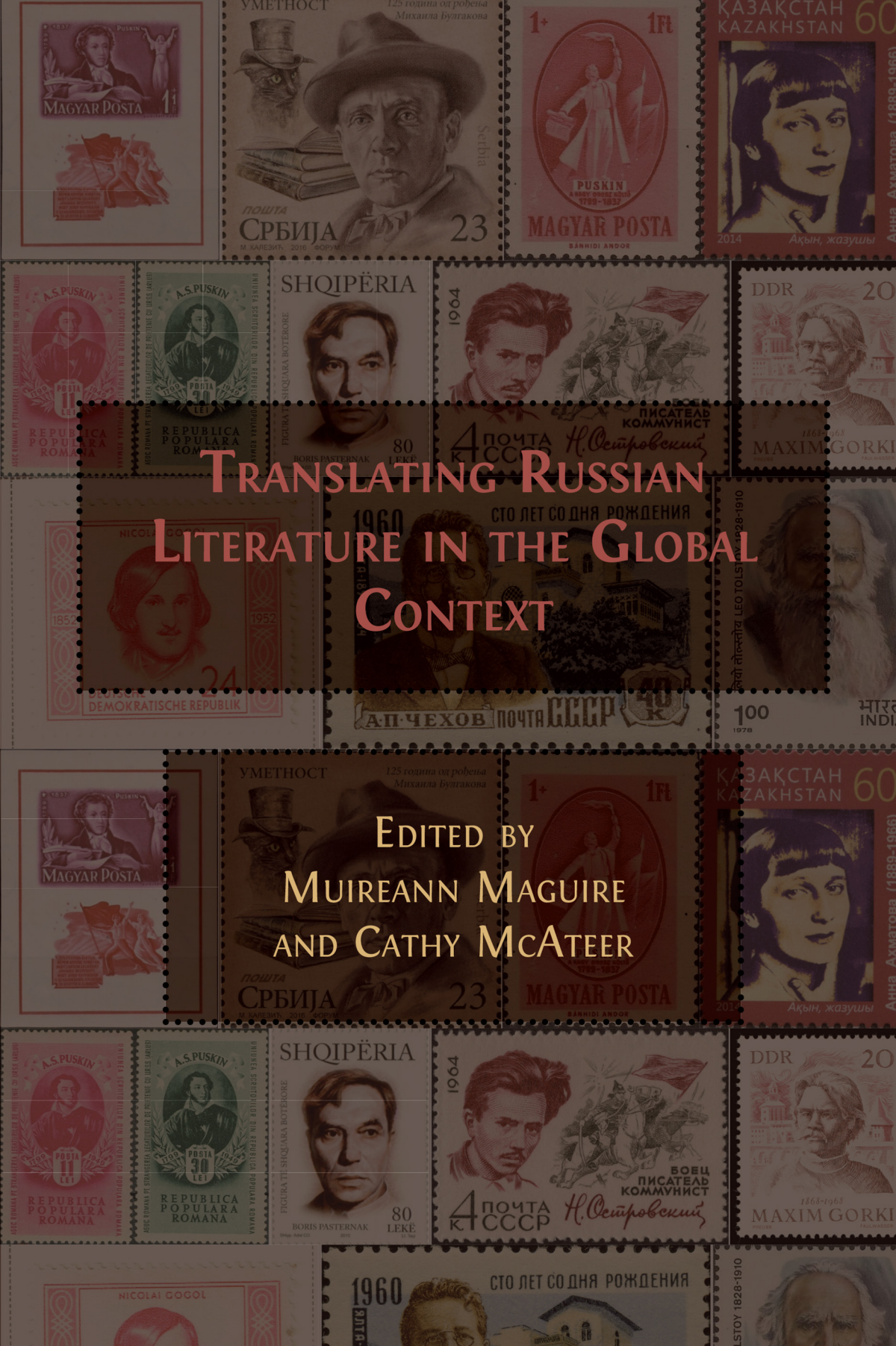

Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context

Edited by
Muireann Maguire
and Cathy McAteer

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Muireann Maguire and Cathy McAteer (eds), *Translating Russian Literature in the Global Context*. *Cambridge*, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0340

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0340#resources

ISBN Paperback: 978–1-80064–983–5
ISBN Hardback: 978–1-80064–984–2
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978–1-80064–985–9
ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978–1-80064–986–6
ISBN DIGITAL ebook (HTML): 978–1-80064–989–7
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0340

Cover Design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme as part of the RUSTRANS academic project, 'The Dark Side of Translation: 20th and 21st Century Translation from Russian as a Political Phenomenon in the UK, Ireland, and the USA' (grant agreement no. 802437).

Russian Literature in Europe:
An Overview

Muireann Maguire

The larger European languages, particularly French and German, have always acted as pivots for the transmission of Russian literature beyond the borders of the Russian nation. The complex relationship of cultural imitation, trade, and mutual conquest between the Russian Empire and the nations of Western and Central Europe created a dynamic whereby French and German (together with English, the dominant language of another close partner through trade, diplomacy and dynastic intermarriage) were typically the first foreign languages in which major works of Russian literature appeared.

The present volume includes case histories spanning the European continent from Norway to Catalonia. As in other sections, our contributors on Europe offer a variety of approaches: some offer a history of the reception and translation of Russian literature within a specific nation or region (Estonia; Finland; Hungary; Denmark and Norway); others examine the life of a single translator, writer, or other cultural advocate whose interaction with Russian authors altered his or her country's reception of Russian literature (France, Germany, Italy, Spain), while others follow the reception history of a particular Russian writer within a single cultural field (Catalonia, Ireland, Germany, Greece); still others combine overall reception history with a mix of these approaches (Greece, Hungary, Scotland, Italy again, Romania, Ukraine). We welcome this plurality of models, and in this brief introductory essay we will suggest why it is important to trace the reception history of Russian literature in Europe not only from a strictly chronological and geographical perspective, but also through the complex history of literary influence. While neither space nor expertise permit us to include an overview of every nation or region of Europe, we attempt here and elsewhere to point our readers to additional texts which offer more specific case histories, including studies of those major European nations whose reception history is not fully covered elsewhere in this volume.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0340.01

The first reason to chart the European penetration of Russian literature is borne out by the later sections of this volume: precisely because of the unhappy history of European imperialism, the languages of Europe acted as pathways of transmission of Russian literature through each other's territories and, even more importantly from a world literature perspective, to their colonies across the globe. Hence, the Spanish reception of Russian prose (which, as our contributor Margaret Tejerizo informs us, was jump-started by the remarkable Emilia Pardo Bazán with a series of lectures delivered at the Madrid Ateneo during the late 1880s) went on to colour its Latin American reception, as discussed in the 'Americas' section of this volume. While we lack a direct contribution on the Portuguese-language reception of Russian writing, later chapters in this volume explore the influence of Russian writers on the culture of Brazil and Angola respectively, both former Portuguese colonies. The French diplomat and critic E.M. de Vogüé, who taught himself Russian while serving as secretary to the French Embassy in St Petersburg, later (through a series of articles and a book) persuaded not only his French contemporaries of the importance of the great Slav Realist authors, as Elizabeth Geballe shows in her essay, but at the same time facilitated the reception of nineteenth-century Russian prose in Spain, Portugal, and far beyond, thanks to translations of his criticism.[1] By retracing how European critics and writers interpreted Russian literature, we gain insight into how that same literature was re-translated and re-configured abroad, into other world languages.

A second reason is the fact that so many major European writers owe their inspiration to Russian literature. Some admittedly so, others more covertly. In the case of writers like Thomas Mann or Romain Rolland who openly advertise their debt to Russian writing, it is useful to know which translations they used; in the case of those writers who may have adapted Russian themes without acknowledging them, it is pragmatic (when building a case for influence) to know which translations they would have been able to access, or how Russian literature was evaluated in their culture at the time of writing. It is also helpful, from the cultural historian's standpoint, to understand which critical essays changed attitudes within a nation in favour of Russian influences (or indeed the reverse); a particularly complex task in the twentieth century, when reading of nineteenth-century Russian prose was impossible to extricate from the supposed Communist threat to national integrity (particularly in Spain or Greece, which were for many decades controlled by anti-Communist dictatorships).

It is remarkable how often Russian literature was perceived (by both critics and writers) as a completely fresh alternative to the materialist trends dominating European Realism; how frequently its aesthetic was welcomed as spiritual and philanthropic. (This idealistic reception would, in the long

1 See F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Russian Novel in France 1884–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), esp. pp. 27–48.

term, undermine the commercial success of Russian literature, especially in Anglophone nations). This reputation for higher spirituality, ostensibly inherent to Russian literature, encouraged similar responses from its readers, as in the following analogy. Dostoevsky famously wrote from Siberian exile in 1854 to one of his benefactors, Natalia Fonvizina, that "if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth [...] then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth".[2] A character in a 1914 short story by the Spanish author Miguel de Unamuno protested:

> My vision of Russia [...] arises from my reading of Russian literature [...]. My Russia is the Russia of Dostoevskij, and if that is not the real, true Russia of today, then all that I am about to say will lack any real practical value but not any other value. I vote for the triumph of the philosophy [...] that is to be found in Dostoevsky.[3]

In other words, where Dostoevsky stood for Christ against the truth, Unamuno's character stood for Dostoevsky's imagination against the truth of Russia.

This quotation highlights the importance of studying the history of the transmission of Russian literature to the nations of Europe: for many European writers, and for their readers, Russian literature represented a state of psychological and spiritual truth-telling which was not contingent on historical or political conditions. As fiercely as it might be criticised on aesthetic grounds, it remained—for many European critics—an enduring moral exemplar. Meanwhile, up to the present day, an uncountable number of European writers (and film-makers) are inspired directly or indirectly in their own creative work by reading 'the Russians'. Sometimes this influence can be traced through obvious parallels or the author's own admission, as in the essay on Thomas Mann and Dostoevsky in this section; often the influence is unacknowledged or unconscious. There is even a third category, consisting of writers inspired to write non-fiction about the Russians they admire, and/or to translate their work into their own language—like the French novelist Prosper Mérimée, who wrote articles for the *Revue des Deux Mondes* in the 1850s about Pushkin, Turgenev, and Gogol (and translated work by all three, not without some errors), or the case of André Gide's 1926 study of Dostoevsky.[4] And of course, there is a fourth

---

2 Cited by Joseph Frank in *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 220.

3 Cited by William B. Edgerton in 'Spanish and Portuguese Responses to Dostoevskij', *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 55:3 (1981), 419–38 (p. 423).

4 See Hemmings, *The Russian Novel*, p. 5, p. 7. On Mérimée's translations, see also John L. Chamberlain, 'Notes on Russian Influences on the Nineteenth Century French Novel', *The Modern Language Journal* 33:5 (1949), 374–83. Chamberlain reports that despite publishing his translation of Pushkin's 'The Queen of Spades' ('Pikovaia dama', 1833; 'La dame de pique') in 1849, Mérimée wrote to his Russian 'friend and mentor' Varvara Ivanovna de Lagrené (née Dubenskaia): "I wish that

category: philosophers and other creative intellectuals who found their thinking enriched by the experience of reading Russian literature in translation. Gide, for example, began his *Dostoevsky* with an epigraph from Nietzsche: "'Dostoevsky was the only psychologist from whom I had anything to learn: he belongs to the happiest windfalls of my life, happier even than the discovery of Stendhal.'"[5] The Norwegian author Knut Hamsun, whose reception of Dostoevsky is discussed in Susan Reynolds's chapter in the present volume, falls into several of these categories.

Not all discoveries of Russian literature were as happy as Mérimée's or Nietzsche's—nor as spontaneous. In the present volume, Lada Kolomiyets and Oleksandr Kalnychenko describe how Russian literary culture was forced on Ukraine through a combination of strategic rewards, political persecution, and mass state-subsidised translation. The history of Polish-Russian literary contact is at least equally fraught and complex; for every Polish scholar "fanatically enamored [sic]" with the work of a Russian author,[6] a multitude of ordinary Poles were compelled to study their uncongenial neighbour's prose canon in school. Although Poland did not lack skilled translators, including the prolific Seweryn Pollak (1907–87), Andrzej Stawar (1900–61), and the poet Julian Tuwim (1894–1953) whose translation of Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman* (*Mednyi vsadnik*, 1833; *Jeździec miedziany*, 1932) became the canonical Polish version, a 1947 reader survey showed that the majority of the Polish public had only ever heard of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky (that is, out of all Russian authors; yet they were familiar with over 150 other foreign writers). A decade later, more than half the books provided for schools, libraries, and book clubs in Poland were translations from Russian: but, in a seemingly odd decision by the Soviet authorities responsible for this unsubtle Russification of the Soviet literary field, few of these were nineteenth-century classics. Instead, Polish readers were treated to contemporary fiction by Mikhail Sholokhov, A.N. Tolstoy, Viktor Nekrasov and other, lesser luminaries of Soviet Socialist Realism: "millions of

---

I could tell you, madame, that I am making progress in the Russian language, but it seems to me, on the contrary, that the study of it becomes harder day by day. I can never find even one line of poetry which I can understand at once, without looking up one or two words." (p. 374).

5 André Gide, *Dostoevsky*, unknown translator (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1925). https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.169976/2015.169976.Dostoevsky-By-Andre-Gide_djvu.txt.

6 This is how Roman Jakobson described the attitude of the great Polish Pushkinist Wacław Lednicki (1891–1967) in 'Polish Scholarship and Pushkin', *The American Slavic and East European Review*, 5:1/2 (May 1946), 88–92 (p. 89). By Lednicki's own admission, other Poles (including the poet Adam Mickiewicz) viewed Pushkin more soberly, judging that his unwilling subservience to the Russian Tsar tainted the quality of his poetry. See Wacław Lednicki, 'Pushkin, Tyutchev, Mickiewicz and the Decembrists: Legend and Facts', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 29:73 (June 1951), 375–401.

copies of the mediocre, dull novels that characterized Soviet fiction after the Zhdanov decrees of 1946".[7] As Seweryn Pollak reflected in a wry 1947 article on translation, a translator was rarely free to choose their texts on aesthetic grounds: political contexts took precedence.[8]

A third justification for our case studies is the light they shed on the lives and professional networks of dozens of translators who made the cultural exchanges described above possible, but who would otherwise be lost to history. These range from culturally peripheral figures like Juli Gay, the obscure Catalan translator of Dostoevsky, rediscovered by his twenty-first century successor (and our contributor) Miquel Cabal Guarro; or the Jesuit classicist Fr. Gearóid Ó Nualláin, whose early twentieth-century Irish-language adaptations of Pushkin and Tolstoy are touched upon by Mark Ó Fionnáin in his chapter in our volume. Several essays mention the importance of the German translations (of Pushkin, Turgenev, Lermontov and others) produced by Friedrich Martin von Bodenstedt (1819–92), a Hanover-born polyglot who taught himself Russian and Persian. As a professor of Slavonic Studies (and later of English literature) at the University of Munich, he translated Russian and Ukrainian poetry; despite his failings, his versions of these authors would be re-translated into Hungarian, Turkish, and other languages, as our contributors show, with lasting influence on the literatures of those nations. Genuine polyglots like Von Bodenstedt deserve re-evaluation today: what can we learn about their success as intercultural communicators in an age where resurgent populism and nationalism challenge the values of multilingualism and tolerance?

Similarly, major European translators of twentieth-century Soviet and dissident literature are in danger of being lost to history, apart from a few notes in the front matter of a paperback. There are casualties of the translator's infamous 'invisibility' in every national culture.[9] In France, significant twentieth-century translators include the Prague-born academic and translator of Pasternak,

7 Maurice Friedberg, 'Russian Literature in Postwar Poland: 1945–1958', *The Polish Review*, 4:1/2 (Winter-Spring, 1959), 33–45 (p. 35), https://www.jstor.org/stable/25776220. I am indebted to Friedberg's article for the statistics on Polish readers cited in this paragraph.

8 Cited by Friedberg, 'Russian Literature in Postwar Poland', p. 34. For the early modern history of Polish-Russian literary relations, see Paulina Lewin, 'Polish-Ukrainian-Russian Literary Relations of the Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries: New Approaches', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 24:3 (Autumn 1980), 256–69, https://www.jstor.org/stable/307180. For more on the impact of Soviet literature behind the Iron Curtain, see the relevant articles on Poland, Hungary, the former Yugoslavia and other Eastern European nations in *Translation Under Communism*, ed. by Christopher Rundle, Anne Lange, and Daniele Monticelli (Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

9 See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

Tolstoy, and Solzhenitsyn, Michel Aucouturier (1933–2017);[10] René Huntzbucler, the translator of Gorky (*Mother*, 1906; *La mère*, 1952), Vsevolod Ivanov, and Konstantin Simonov; Claude Ligny, first French translator of Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* (*Le Maître et Marguerite* (Editions Robert Laffont, 1968)); Françoise Marrou-Flamant (1931–2015), whose widely acclaimed version of Bulgakov's novel was published by the prestigious 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade' and Folio series in 2004 and 2017 respectively;[11] and Bruno de Schloezer (1881–1969), one of France's most eminent (and prolific) translators of Tolstoy.[12] As this incomplete list shows, Francophone translators include émigrés, academics, amateurs, authors, journalists, and some who filled more than one category (often at the same time). Their personal and professional networks are exceptionally rich in national and international historical resonances and cultural influences. France—like every other European nation—is overdue for an historical investigation of its heritage of literary translation (and not only from Russian).

One major French exception to the translator's usual obscurity is the 'Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger'; this prestigious literary prize, established in 1948 and funded since 2011 by the hotel firm Sofitel, rewards both the author and translator of the best foreign novel translated into French during the previous year. In 1968, translations of Solzhenitsyn's novels *The First Circle* (*V kruge pervom*, 1968) and *Cancer Ward* (*Rakovyi korpus*, 1955–68) were honoured;[13] more recent Russophone laureates have included Vasilii Grossman (1984), Mikhail Shishkin (2005), Marina Tsvetaeva (2011), Guzel' Iakhina (2021), and Maria Stepanova (2022). The prize favours translations of contemporary fiction and essays: only once, in 1957, was a nineteenth-century Russian author honoured. This was Pavel Melnikov-Pecherskii's *In the Forests* (*V lesakh*, 1874; *Dans les forêts*, translated by Sylvie Luneau in 1957).[14] Analogously with the Anglophone International Booker Prize (which, since its establishment in 2004, splits its

10 For more biographical details, see Catherine Depretto, 'Michel Aucouturier (1933-2017), *Cahiers du monde russe* 59:1 (2018), 143–52, https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10292.

11 On translations of *The Master and Margarita* into French, see this French-language interview with the novel's latest translators: Annick Morard, 'André Markowicz et Françoise Morvan: '"Le Maître et Marguerite" est un acte de résistance en soi', *Le Temps*, 1 December 2020. https://www.letemps.ch/culture/livres/andre-markowicz-francoise-morvan-maitre-marguerite-un-acte-resistance-soi.

12 Schloezer was born in Vitebsk, now in modern Belarus, also the home-town of his near-contemporary Marc Chagall. Celebrated as a musicologist and a philosopher (and a devotee of Lev Shestov), Schloezer translated Tolstoy's *War and Peace* for Gallimard (*La Guerre et la Paix*, 1960). For more information, see B.J. Bisson, 'Boris Shlezer: paradoks perevodchika' ['Boris de Schloezer: A translator's paradox'], *Voprosy literatury*, 1:1 (2020), 220–30.

13 The French translations referred to here were *Le Premier Cercle*, by Louis Martine, and *Le Pavillon des cancéreux*, by Michel Aucouturier.

14 See 'Palmarès du prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger', http://www.lalettredulibraire.com/Palmarès-du-prix-du-Meilleur-Livre-Etranger

prize money equally between the author and translator), the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger bestows symbolic capital as well as publicity on both author and translator; recent awards to authors whose work is considered original, polemic, or at least interrogative (such as Shishkin, Stepanova and Iakhina) indicate a desire to encourage the dissemination of Russian literature abroad, although this may change post-2022 to align with the critical reaction against Russian culture in some Western countries.

A final reason for recovering national histories of translation, and of translators, can be applied even more generally. Any comparative and diachronic study of the reception history of Russia, such as we have attempted for Europe, helps scholars of cultural transmission to determine the most favourable conditions for this phenomenon to occur (if, indeed, these circumstances can be reliably categorised). As Hemmings notes in his history of France's reception of Russian literature between 1884 and 1914, there was no particular reason why this reception could not have taken off nationally well before the 1880s: translations were available, cultural contacts were extensive, the reading population was large. He points out that "a perfectly satisfactory translation of *War and Peace*" barely sold any copies in Paris in 1879 yet, "six years later the book was a best-seller".[15] It is difficult not to accept Hemmings' argument that Russian literature must have acquired during the 1880s a "special appeal" for French readers, produced by a collection of identifiable circumstances, which it did not possess earlier: what we might call a perfect storm of favourable conditions.[16] He lists the conditions applicable in the French case: France's need (since 1870) for a political ally against Prussia; the insidious appeal of popular romances set in Russia; the growth of critical interest in Russian literature, accompanied by the foundation of the first academic chairs in Russian Studies at French universities; and, not least, the critical discovery of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky by de Vogüé, which led the way for other writers to be translated and enjoyed.[17] Analogously, in this section on the European reception of Russian literature, and indeed in this book as a whole, we compare and discuss the conditions for that reception to work: to inspire emulation, to provoke debate, and to infiltrate a culture's imaginative categories. Can any such set of favourable circumstances be described? In the essays which follow this section, we will discover which conditions were necessary for Russian literature, in translation, to take root among its European neighbours.

15 Hemmings, *The Russian Novel*, pp. 2–3 (p. 3). He is referring to *La Guerre et la Paix, roman historique* (St. Petersburg, 1879), attributed to Princess Irène Paskévitch. Turgenev, then living in Paris, enthusiastically sent copies to French literary friends and critics, including Flaubert, Zola, and Daudet (see Hemmings, p. 20).

16 Ibid., p. 3.

17 Ibid., pp. 3–10.