



reading

R U S S I A

BOOKS ABOUT RUSSIA

Interested in understanding Russia's often brutal and blood-stained history? Looking for some insights into the fabled "Russian soul"? Well, books are the ideal place to start. Russia has a deep literary tradition while its politics, society, and culture have attracted many superb commentaries. Here's some recommendations.

Fiction

Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Heart of a Dog* (1925)

This satire of life in the early Soviet Union was banned for many years but nevertheless became an underground favorite. A science fiction comedy involving a mangy dog who is transformed into a dissolute human, it mocks the Bolshevik belief that Communism would produce the new socialist superman.

Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita* (1967)

Bulgakov's dark comedy is now considered a classic but its critique of Communism in the 1930s meant it was not published until decades after the author had died. It's a strange, complex piece of Russian humor about a talking cat, a literary master, and the Devil coming to Moscow.

Brodsky, Joseph. *Collected Poems in English* (2000)
This collection is an introduction to the work of one of the giants of 20th century poetry. Brodsky, a Jew, did hard labor in a prison camp in the Arctic before being expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1987.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment* (1866)

Part detective thriller, part psychological study, part philosophical and mystical treatise, this story of an impoverished ex-student who plans the "perfect crime" is often called one of the greatest novels ever written.

Lermontov, Mikhail. *A Hero of Our Time* (1840)

An essential novel of Russian romanticism. Lermontov's partly autobiographical portrait of an intensely sensitive

yet cynical army officer became an antiheroic archetype of Russian literature.

Pelevin, Victor. *Babylon* (2000)

A satire on the chaos and corruption of Russia in the first years after the fall of Communism. It's a fantastical tale involving consumerism, conspiracies, Eastern philosophy, and plenty of recreational drugs.

Pushkin, Alexander. *Eugene Onegin* (1833)

Pushkin is revered as Russia's national poet and this novel told in verse is considered his masterpiece. It centers on the relationship between a cynical, dandyish artist (based on Pushkin) and Tatiana, the model of many later romantic heroines. There is much about the social conventions, including duelling, of 19th century-Russian nobility. Pushkin himself died at age 37 in a duel.

Solzhenitsyn, Alexander. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962)

This haunting narrative of a prisoner determined to survive another day in the Gulag brought Stalin's network of forced labor camps to public attention in both the Soviet Union and around the world. Its influence, artistically and especially politically, proved to be vast.

Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace* (1869)

This tale of five aristocratic families and their lives following Napoleon's invasion is another Russian contender for best book ever written. It's epic in scope, innovation and, as many readers complain, length.



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Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina* (1878)

Others argue that Tolstoy's depiction of the affair between a countess and a dashing cavalry officer is even better than *War and Peace*. This story of doomed love is played out against the backdrop of the modernization of Russia and the end of serfdom.

Turgenev, Ivan. *Fathers and Sons* (1862)

In just 200 pages, Turgenev's story of conservative fathers and their progressive sons manages to deal with families, love, faith, duels, Russia's modernization, and much more. An iconic novel of the nineteenth century that has retained its power.

Non-Fiction

Alexievich, Svetlana. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2016)

Alexievich, the Nobel Laureate in 2015, was an essayist and oral historian who investigated the "emotional history" of thousands of ordinary citizens as they struggled to make sense of life after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is one of her most recent English-translated books.

Bushkovitch, Paul. *A Concise History of Russia* (2011)

Bushkovitch provides a new understanding of Russia's pre-modern past plus a detailed re-evaluation of the country in the last 150 years. There is plenty of political analysis but also a detailed discussion of Russian culture including its music, literature, and science.

Braithwaite, Rodric. *Across the Moscow River: The World Turned Upside Down* (2002)

As the British Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1988 to 1992, Braithwaite had a ringside seat at the collapse of Communism. His memoir of those momentous times is

infused with a scholarly knowledge of Russian history and a love for the land and its people.

Dawisha, Karen. *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (2016)

There are many highly regarded books about Russia's current president, his rise and his hold on power. This is one of the most critical and controversial, with its closely researched claim that Putin sits at the head of a corrupt, authoritarian state.

Figes, Orlando. *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (2002)

Figes masterfully explores the power of Russian art, music, painting, and poetry. He argues that Russian creativity has been nourished by the ongoing tension between the rational and the mystical, by the upper class interacting with peasant life, and by the merging of high European culture with traditional folk beliefs.

Frankel, Jonathan. *Crisis, Revolution, and Russian Jews* (2009)

A series of essays which examine how Jews in the Russian Empire – especially the young intelligentsia and activists who would go on to play a major role in the politics of Palestine and the USA – reacted to and were shaped by key moments of crises, including the 1881 pogroms and the 1905 and 1917 revolts against the tsars.

Freeland, Chrystia. *Sale of the Century: Russia's Wild Ride from Communism to Capitalism* (2000)

Soon after the fall of communism, Russia's new leaders instigated a radical "shock therapy" designed to transform the country's economy. Freeland traces how this led to the rise of the oligarchs: a small clique of businessmen / robber barons who amassed fortunes and political power by acquiring, in a less than transparent manner, state assets.



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Gitelman, Zvi. *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (2003)

An outstanding history of Jewish life in the Soviet Union which looks at the pogroms and persecution of 1881, the responses of Jews to communism, the Holocaust, and Stalin's repression of Jewish culture. It also provides a full account of the Jewish community after the fall of the Soviet Union as it deals with extensive emigration and assimilation.

Hosking, Geoffrey. *Russia and the Russians: A History* (2001)

This book tells the story of Russia from the beginnings of the Slavs in the 6th century CE to modern times and does so with style and drive. Hosking's is one of the best English-speaking historians of Russia.

Hosking, Geoffrey. *Russian History – A Very Short Introduction* (2012)

Hosking has written a number of overviews of Russia and the Soviet Union: all are valuable. In this one, he pays close

attention to the way that Russian political authoritarianism has, through many generations, been built around the fear of invasion deriving in part from the country's size and lack of natural borders.

Remnick, David. *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (1993)

Remnick won the Pulitzer Prize for this book that combines a history of the Soviet Union, interviews with everyday citizens, and his own eyewitness account of life in Moscow as a correspondent for the Washington Post.

Shane Scott, *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union* (1994)

Why did communism and the Soviet Union collapse so rapidly? Scott emphasizes the shockwaves caused by Gorbachev's policy of glasnost (openness), which allowed more accurate information to be released into a hitherto authoritarian, misinformed nation.