

The Russian Theme in Henri Troyat's Works

¹Natalia V. Rusinova, ¹Tatiana P. Astankova, ¹Nadezhda G. Bazhenova,
¹Rita A. Egoshina and ²Natalia A. Egoshina
¹Department of Romance and Germanic Philology,
Mari State University, Yoshkar-Ola, Russia
²Elite Learning Language Center, Beijing, China

Abstract: The study focuses on the work of the French researcher Henri Troyat (1911-2007), who had Russian roots and whose work combines the best features of two cultural traditions. The researcher deals with the theme of Russia which is one of the key themes in the writer's work and analyzes the image of Russia created in the biographies of Russian tsars and Russian writers. The study points out the role of Troyat as a popularizer of Russian literature, whose works form an idea of Russia in the minds of French people, acquaint the French reader with Russian history and culture, traditions and customs. The researcher outlines the range of problems that the French writer was concerned about the role of the individual in history, the influence of history on the fate of an individual, the dramatic fate of the humble man in the maelstrom of historical upheavals, the problem of belonging to two homelands.

Key words: Henri Troyat, interconnection of cultures, the image of Russia, Russian, individual

INTRODUCTION

Modern humanitarian knowledge is characterized by a growing interest in studying a dialogue of cultures in the formation of national identity. Historians, culture experts and literary scholars are paying a lot of attention to the reception of Russia in the West.

By the end of the 20th century the work of writers whose literary destiny was formed at the crossroads of different national and cultural traditions had become a remarkable phenomenon in literature. Quite often these researchers write their books in a language that was not originally their mother tongue but their works become a notable event in the literature of the foreign country. Creative work at the crossroads of two cultural traditions has a mixed nature.

Speaking about French literature one cannot but mention the phenomenon of well-known French writers with Russian roots, among them Henri Troyat, Elsa Triolet, Nathalie Sarraute, Romain Gary, Alain Bosquet andrei Makine and many others. The creative fate of these writers was formed at the crossroads of Russian and French cultural traditions, enriching the cultural dialogue between Russia and France.

Henri Troyat (Russ. Lev Tarasov) (1911-2007), a French writer of Russian origin, a member of the French Academy, a winner of various literary awards, the author of historical books and works of fiction, a researcher of

the historical heritage of Russia has done more than anyone in the West to acquaint European readers with the culture and history of Russia. The theme of Russia is one of the key themes in the writer's work, nearly half of his books being devoted to it.

Literature review: The image of Russia in the literary consciousness of France, the formation of this image and the projection of stereotypes about Russia in literature have been studied by such Russian scholars as Alekseev M.P., Grechanaya E.P., Kirnozë Z.I., Lukov V.I. A., Oshchepkov A.R., Pakhsaryan N.T., Stroyev A., Trykov V.P., Fokin S.L.

In the 18th century, the image of ignorant Russia, drawn from the writings of foreign travellers was entrenched in the minds of the French. However, the 18th century French enlighteners believed that under the wise rule of the enlightened monarchs Russia was following the path of progress, assimilating European values and that it would become a part of Europe. In the 19th century, Russia was recognized as part of Europe but for French people its image was mainly that of an exotic and barbaric country (Oshchepkov, 2011). Due to I.S. Turgenev popularizing Russian literature in France Russia began to be perceived as a country with great culture. In the minds of French readers Russia emerged as "a cultural phenomenon as the Russia of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky".

The theme of Russia in the work of French writers of Russian origin (Henri Troyat, Elsa Triolet, Nathalie Sarraute, Romain Gary, Alain Bosquet andrei Makine and others) attracts Russian researchers. They point out their role in the dialogue of cultures (Teleshova, 2012) in the formation of an image of Russia as a country with a highly developed culture and peculiar customs (Shishkina, 2004).

Henri Troyat's biography is closely connected with Russia and has been studied quite well by Russian literary scholars. The major events in the writer's life are dealt with in the works of modern researchers (Teleshova, 2012; Shishkina, 2004). One can learn a lot of facts from Henri Troyat's autobiographical novel "My road is so long".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Henri Troyat was born in Moscow into the family of the wealthy Armenian merchant Tarasov. The Tarasov family originated from Circassian Armenians living in the Caucasus mountains. Troyat's ancestor named Toros settled in Armavir. The name Toros was changed by tsar officials into Tarasov. The Tarasov dynasty was famous in the North Caucasus. Troyat's great grandfather was a cloth merchant, his father Aslan Alexandrovich Tarasov (1874-1967) invested in railways and banking. Troyat's maternal grandmother, a German by birth was educated at the Smolny Institute. His grandfather on the maternal side worked as a doctor in Ekaterinodar.

After the revolution the Tarasov family went to Constantinopol. From Turkey they moved to France and settled in Paris, where the future writer graduated from the Louis Pasteur lyceum and received a law degree. After the army, having become a French citizen, H. Troyat served in the police prefecture of the Seine department to earn a living, while writing books at night.

The first novel "False Days" (Faux jour) was published in 1935 and became one of Troyat's most popular works. The publisher advised the researcher to think of a pseudonym because if the novel was published under a foreign name, the readers might think it was a translation. This is how the pseudonym Henri Troyat appeared.

The novel "Spider" (L'Araignee) was awarded the Prix Goncourt. In 1959 at the age of 48 Troyat was elected a member of the French Academy, becoming one of the youngest academicians.

One of Troyat's significant works is a book of memoirs "My road is so long" (1993). In this book the author tells the French journalist Maurice Shavardes about his life and his literary work. It is a fascinating literary narrative, an interesting document of the epoch depicting the events of the 20th century with all its

cataclysms. The researcher is concerned about such issues as the role of the family, young people and women in the modern world; the problems of morality, creative work, the fate of the humble man, the destruction of ideals at the turning points in history, the issues of the interaction between different cultures. This biographical work is also interesting as a reflection of the image of Russia, the author's memories of the country where he spent his childhood.

In the novel "My road is so long" the researcher makes use of Tolstoy's technique of "double vision". The image of Russia is shown as seen through the eyes of a naive child and a worldly-wise adult. The child sees Russia as a fairy tale, "Tales of my lost motherland were added to the fairy tale about the Little Humpbacked Horse and I was Tom Thumb wearing seven-league boots" (Troyat, 1998). However the reader can feel the ironic attitude of the adult to the child's naive understanding of the world.

The writer describes his childhood spent in Russia as a happy period in his life. The unpleasant events such as the forced departure from the native land are depicted as an exciting adventure, "we were dressed poorly and did not cause any suspicion of the new militia patrolling the streets but I realized how dangerous the masquerade was and walked with my hands in my pockets as there were banknotes hidden in the seams of my trousers" (Troyat, 1998). The events of the 1917 revolution are perceived by the boy as a thrilling adventure game. With delight and enthusiasm he recalls the details of those days: street fighting, windows broken by shrapnel, his pockets stuffed with cartridges, family jewelry hidden in the lining of his coat. The boys' games reflected the events of those times, the players being divided into reds and whites. Troyat himself once played the part of General Denikin leading the snow-ball battle.

Troyat's memoirs do not evoke any feeling of loneliness or separation from his motherland and his people. The child perceives emigration as a change in his life, "emigration for me was just a change in life. And any change in life when you are eight is seen as a promise of happiness" (Troyat, 1998).

The little Russian boy from Troyat's book keeps the memory of his parents, his brother and sister, his teachers and friends, the places from his early childhood (rooms, walls, pictures, furniture, stairs).

The French researcher emphasizes his parents' character traits that he loved so much. His mother was sensitive and cheerful, she was a good story-teller and before bedtime she told her son old Russian folk tales about the Little Humpbacked Horse, the Gold Fish and Baba Yaga. Troyat's father, by contrast was very

thoughtful, serious, level-headed and straightforward and was inclined to see everything in dark colours. Troyat shares his fond memories of his father's industriousness and his loyalty to the family.

Troyat paints his life with his family in bright colours. Having decided to leave the native land and to live abroad, his parents saved mostly fond memories of their past life and shared them with their son. The boy saw Russia as a happy land as "a dream land where youth is radiant, old age doesn't know any diseases, wealth comes easy and the snow is clean and white" (Troyat, 1998). Thus, thanks to his parents, the image of his first motherland formed in Troyat's mind was pure, bright and kind.

Most of Henri Troyat's works are devoted to classical Russian writers ("Dostoevsky", "Pushkin", "Lermontov's extraordinary fate", "Tolstoy", "Nikolai Gogol", "Anton Chekhov", "Turgenev", "Gorky", "Marina Tsvetaeva", "Boris Pasternak"). Troyat confessed, "I love Russian literature deeply and passionately. The works by Russian writers have nourished my mind, enriched my feelings, shaped my consciousness. I still care about everything that happens in Russia. It seems to me that I am a tree with Russian roots and French fruit" (Troyat, 1998).

Troyat's biographies of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and others have been highly appreciated by Russian and foreign literary critics. His book about Tolstoy published in 1965 became one of the most popular works on the writer's life and work.

Troyat admired Russian classics and read them in the original. During family readings he fell under their influence, felt a kind of kindred understanding, pictured the image of distant Russia, "In my imagination the fates of Tolstoy's characters were closely interwoven with my parents' stories about their youth and Russia in "War and Peace" was no longer only Russia at the time of Napoleon and Tsar Alexander I. It was eternal Russia, Russia lost to us forever, that probably stretched out somewhere, far away beyond the borders" (Troyat, 1998).

While working on Pushkin's biography Troyat carefully studied the documents and the atmosphere of the period, the events of social and literary life in Russia. This helped the writer to give the reader an insight into Pushkin's drama. In Troyat's book the poet is described as a passionate, daring and reckless person who "does not calculate his actions but weighs his words" (Troyat, 2002). Troyat's book includes excerpts from Pushkin's poems translated in blank verse. The writer admits that despite his careful attitude to the poems and his desire to be close to the original, the translation sounds oversimplified and lacks the richness of the original. Troyat says that the French will only be able to read true

Pushkin "when a talented poet translates his works ignoring the order of Russian words but recreating the music of Pushkin's verse" (Troyat, 1998). Pushkin's biography written by Troyat is notable for the fact that the writer includes the papers that he had got from Baron Dantes de Haecker, the grandson of the person who killed the poet in a duel. These papers enable the readers to look differently upon Pushkin's wife and not to judge her too harshly as is customary among Pushkin's biographers.

Henri Troyat admired Dostoevsky's talent. While working on Dostoevsky's biography he read all his works and everything written about him. He tried to stick to the documents that he had at his disposal. The writer wanted to pay tribute to Dostoevsky, to tell the reader about his life, to analyze his work, to immerse the reader in a world where the real is closely interwoven with the fantastic, to show the characters' painful emotional struggle, the difficulties that they go through in search of an ideal standing before God rather than a better place in the world. In the writer's opinion Dostoevsky's madmen are not as mad as they seem to be, they are what we dare not be (Troyat, 2002).

Of all Russian classical authors Anton Chekhov was closest to Troyat in spirit (Troyat, 2002). He equally admired Chekhov as an artist and a person. Chekhov's conception of art and life was close to Troyat. The Russian writer does not advocate any political, philosophic or religious position; he fights against social injustice not by preaching or writing pamphlets but by creating a faithful picture of Russian reality. In his book about Chekhov Troyat aimed at showing the connection between the personality of the Russian writer and his works, whose main features are truth, clarity, objectivity and irony.

Studying Turgenev's life, Troyat discovered that he was a man with a double personality, who couldn't choose between Russia and France. Turgenev spent most of his life abroad, where he created his best works, very Russian in spirit. Being far away from Russia, Turgenev missed his native land but he couldn't stay in Russia for a long time and longed to leave it. In his book Troyat showed Turgenev's complicated relations with the intellectuals of Moscow and St. Petersburg; he wrote about his role as an envoy of Russian culture in France, "in the eyes of his compatriots, of great value was not his life but his creative work. His works partly written abroad were Russian in spirit and mind. Isn't it a wonder he was an inspired singer of his motherland and at the same time a person who was open to all the temptations of Europe?" (Troyat, 2007). Troyat writes about Turgenev's friendship with Flaubert, Dodet, George Sand, Zola, Maupassant, Edmond Goncourt; all these great French researchers

deeply respected and admired the Russian writer's talent. The book about Turgenev also describes his affair with the famous singer Pauline Viardot who with her talent, "outshone all those women he could have had far away from her in Russia" (Troyat, 2007). For 40 years he never parted with her, followed her from country to country, lived near her, feeling at home in that foster family in his own words as if "on the edge of another bird's nest". "It seemed to him that being unhappy near her was a better fate than being happy with another woman. He may have secretly desired to be exquisitely tortured by contempt, rejection, coldness" (Troyat, 2007). Troyat managed to show the duality of Turgenev's political views. On the one hand he was a friend of the revolutionaries Hertsen and Bakunin and was persecuted by tsarist police; on the other hand he was against violence and came out for a gradual transition from autocracy to constitutional monarchy. But above all Troyat's book shows Turgenev as a wonderful personality, a tolerant, gentle and noble man.

It was interesting for Troyat to discover in Maxim Gorky's life a link between the two epochs that the writer belonged to: his first books appeared in tsarist Russia while official fame came to him under the socialist system. Troyat shows how a talented person who was a rebel and a nihilist in his youth through compromises and radical changes in his life became a mouth piece of the government and served its interests. He called upon writers not to emphasize the negative aspects of everyday life in Russia but to devote themselves to propagating socialist gains. This is how Troyat characterizes Gorky during this period in his life, "the exposé of all the errors of the previous regime, he wanted to erase all the mistakes of the new regime from history. The ardent anarchist of the past put on rose-coloured glasses. Out of love for his homeland he preferred sweet lies to bitter truth. He himself was not fully aware of this transformation. On the contrary, he was sure that he hadn't renounced the ideas of his youth, since he still placed the happiness of the working class above his personal bias" (Troyat, 2005).

Troyat was interested in Russian history, he acquainted French people with the history of the Russian state, with Russian tsars and statesmen ("Boris Godunov", "Pavel I", "Everyday Life in Russia during the Reign of the Last Tsar", "Alexander II", "Alexander III", "Nikolas II", "Grigory Rasputin", "Terrible Tsarines", "Catherine the Great", "Alexander I. The North Sphinx", "Ivan the Terrible").

In his biographies of Russian tsars Troyat does not create any historical concepts, nor does he develop any political theories. He reflects upon the surprising turns in

history and human lives, focusing on the personality of his characters. He depicts Russian autocrats as the characters of a great historical novel.

The writer sees Ivan the Terrible as a Shakespearean character who is obsessively suspicious and at the same time inclined to mysticism. Among all the outrages he never lost sight of his political mission, working hard at reorganizing his country and expanding its territory. Troyat is fascinated by the personality of Peter the Great, "a barbarian striving for culture", who shook up his countrymen, destroyed the traditions, built ships, implanted European ideas, mastered every trade and built a new city on the swamps. The writer tries to understand the character of Alexander I who was one of the most mysterious historical figures. The biography of Alexander II is a study of the drama of a reformer tsar who wavered between the temptations of liberal politics and the fear of anarchy. The tragic fate of the last of the Romanovs causes Troyat's compassion, sadness and bitterness.

Another novel about Russian history "Terrible Tsarines" (Terrible Tsarines in 1998) from the historical series of biographies of Russian rulers is interesting because it describes a period in the 18th century, between the reign of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, when the Russian state was formed. In this novel the writer focuses his attention on the role of women in Russian history, shows the tsarines' personal qualities, their relations with their subjects, their attitude to state duties. He gives a detailed description of the character traits of Empresses Catherine I, Anna Ioannovna, Anna Leopoldovna, Elisaveta Petrovna who decided the fate of the country. Very often they are described as cruel and despotic rulers who stopped at nothing for the sake of the throne or a politically favourable move.

Catherine I continued the traditions of her husband making every effort to realize his dreams. Describing Catherine's personality the writer points out her benevolence. Her subjects respected and liked her "for her fearlessness, hot temper and the magnetism of her voluptuous body" (Troyat, 1998). Troyat stresses that Catherine was a faithful Christian and thought that a special lot was assigned to her by God. Like any other woman she enjoyed entertainment but never neglected her duties, "she always left a few hours a day to engage in state affairs" (Troyat, 1998).

After Peter II's short reign the throne was occupied by another woman-Anna Ioannovna. Troyat shows the empress's contradictory character, pointing out her strength, firmness and love of power hidden behind the seeming softness of character, "in spite of her ostentatious humility and kindness Anna Ioannovna

never lost sight of her goals; others wanted to make a fool of her but it was she who fooled her enemies and ground them to dust” (Troyat, 1998). Anna Ioannovna is described not only as a reigning tsarina but also as a person. Troyat describes her appearance, her tastes in clothes, her habits: tall, blue-eyed, dressed in rich clothes with embroidery and gilding, despising fashionable perfumes, enjoying good food, drinks and entertainment. Troyat does not embellish the characters of the reigning women, he points out their dark sides too. Thus, the author writes about the cruelty of Empress Anna Ioannovna towards animals, “she loved them madly but found a sadistic pleasure in killing or even torturing them” (Troyat, 1998). She was often cruel to people. Unlike Catherine I who strove to continue her husband’s cause, Anna Ioannovna never showed any zeal for state affairs. The author suggests that “for the empress, who came to power by accident, Russia was not her homeland, she did not feel the need to become close to it” (Troyat, 1998).

Soon Anna Ioannovna was replaced by another empress-Anna Leopoldovna. It is interesting that the regent came to power illegally and was not recognized by the people who reproached her with contempt for the military and common people, “People said that she equally despised the streets and the military barracks and only felt comfortable in salons” (Troyat, 1998).

In 1741 as a result of a conspiracy the Russian throne was occupied by Elisaveta Petrovna. People called her “the spark of Peter the Great”, “the blood of Peter the Great”. Troyat depicts Elisaveta Petrovna as a person who was easy to communicate with; she loved her people and this love was reciprocated; they affectionately called her “matushka” (dear mother) which she was proud of as if it were a high title. In order to serve the state and the nation, to be worthy of the role that she was entrusted with she had to refrain from getting married, to forget that she was a woman and to conform to the image of “the tsar maiden” from Russian folklore. The writer points out the empress’s short temper and inconsistency. Elisaveta’s propensity for inappropriate punishments was combined with spontaneous tidal piety and severe fasting. In Troyat’s opinion she resembled Tsar Ivan the Terrible in her unpredictable behaviour and excesses. After fasting she tried to “catch up”, stuffed herself with food, arranged long feasts. It was very bad for her health and resulted in stomach trouble and pains in the legs because she was overweight. Many courtiers confirmed the inconsistency of her character, “according to the connoisseurs of the Russian soul she is able to make a mountain out of a molehill and to get into a temper over a trifle” (Troyat, 1998). But all this was quickly forgotten as most of the

time the Empress was affable and benevolent in public and her subjects referred to her as “Merciful” (Troyat, 1998).

The reign of the empresses was an unstable period in the history of Russia. Troyat writes about confusion among Russian people caused by the frequent changes of rulers. There was a lot of passionate debate in Russian society about the advantages and disadvantages of the country being ruled by women. Many people believed that women were by nature incapable of ruling the Russian empire. The people were dissatisfied with foreign rulers, “How long will the Russian empire search for its rulers abroad? Why is the throne occupied by females every time? Isn’t there any other choice for Russia than to give the reins of government to an empress with a German standing behind her back and whispering his will to her? If the country is suffering, suffocating under the woman’s skirts, there’s nothing more to say, it’s obvious that this woman is completely devoted to the foreigner” (Troyat, 1998). Troyat compares Russia during the empresses’ reign to an uncontrollable ship without a captain and a rudder.

In this novel the theme of barbaric Russia is especially prominent, lawlessness and injustice reign in the country, the reader is shocked by the contrast between the splendour of the Russian court and the hard life of the oppressed people.

The pentalogy “The Light of the Righteous” (*La lumière des justes*) devoted to the Decembrists is the most significant work from the series of Troyat’s novels about Russian history. Working on Pushkin’s biography the writer studied the life and morals of Russian society in the early 19th century and recreated the world that no longer existed with all its outdated traditions and noble illusions in every small detail. Troyat emphasized the importance of the Decembrists’ uprising for the fate of Russia, “Describing the Russian revolution in the trilogy “While the Earth Exists” (*Tant que la terre durera*), I was fully aware that this cataclysm was the last in a series of blows undermining the social foundations of Russia, the most significant of which no doubt, having been dealt by the uprising on December 14, 1825”. In the novel, the author wanted to show how the idea of freedom was brought to Russia from France by the officers of Alexander I’s army who entered Paris first in 1814 and then, after the fall of Napoleon in 1815. The images of the main characters (Nikolai Ozarev and Sophie) are fictitious but all the details of the Decembrists’ uprising, their being confined in the fortress and interrogated by Nicholas I fully correspond to historical reality. The main characters of the novel are surrounded by real historical personalities: Princess Trubetskaya, Princess Volkonskaya, Countess Muravyeva, Polina Annenkova.

The theme of Russia can be traced not only in the biographies of Russian tsars. The characters in the writer's novels are Russian, the action takes place in Russia. The author is interested in showing cultural and emotional relationships connecting the Russian and the French peoples, to describe the deep spiritual crisis of the characters who were forced to choose between the country where they were born and the country where fate had brought them. The problem of belonging to two countries is close to the writer himself and can be traced in many of his books: the trilogy "While the Earth exists" ("Tant que la terredurera"), 1947-1950, the trilogy "A Muscovite" ("Le Moscovite"), 1974-1975, «Grimbosq», 1976, The Beating of the Lonely Heart ("Le Bruit solitaire du cœur"), 1985, "Alyosha" ("Aliocha"), 1991, "Yury" ("Youri"), 1992 and others. The dramatic events in the characters' lives take place on the background of the historical events of the epoch that was well studied by the writer (the trilogy "A Muscovite" describes the events of 1812-1815, the characters of the trilogy "While the Earth exists" take part in the most significant historical events of the time: the Russian-Japanese war, World War I, the Revolution; the action takes place until the beginning of World War II). Troyat writes, "All my 'Russian novels', to use this convenient phrase, are in fact the same history-the history of French-Russian relations in the reign of different tsars". Many books are autobiographical, the writer includes hundreds of details from his own memories as an emigrant child.

CONCLUSION

Henri Troyat wrote in French but drew inspiration from Russian history and culture. The theme of Russia runs through all his works and combining the features of two cultural traditions, embodies the idea of the interaction and mutual influence of France and Russia. Essays and memoirs, historical novels about Russia, fictionalized biographies of Russian tsars and Russian writers-Ivan the Terrible, Catherine the Great, Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy are a connecting link between two cultures Russian and French. Troyat's books help the reader to gain an insight into the mysterious Russian soul, to understand the country's peculiar manners and customs, form in the minds of French people an idea of Russia as a country with great culture, rich in dramatic historical events.

In the biographies of Russian tsars the writer focuses his attention on the role of a strong personality in the formation of the Russian state, depicts the Russian rulers against the background of revolutions and other internal political events, showing their contradictory characters through their relationships with other people.

Troyat admires the genius of classical Russian authors. He writes about Pushkin with reverence, describes the tragic end of Gogol's life with bitterness and pain, does not conceal his admiration for Dostoevsky's talent. But he is especially close to Chekhov who won his heart with his modesty, straight forwardness, disgust for surface gloss, stoicism.

Biographies of famous people written by Troyat are distinguished by an excellent knowledge of the documents and literary sources, his masterful psychological analysis, his ability to throw new light on well-known facts.

In Troyat's books the stereotypes about Russia as a barbaric and wild country are replaced by an image of Russia as a special world, unlike any other, mysterious, disturbing and at the same time attractive. This is an image of Russia, a dreamland, based on his parents' stories, the memories of his childhood, on Russian literary works and the writer's dreams.

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