

‘Toska po Rodine: Comparing Preservation and Fragmentation in the Russian
Diaspora’s ‘Cultural Mission’ in the Interwar Period and the Modern Day¹

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Russian cultural mythology is rife with exceptionalism: ideas of the ‘Russian soul’ pervade the Russian collective consciousness, forming a nebulous myth of communion and belonging which has come to define national identity in the modern age. Many thinkers and movements throughout history have grounded this identity in land itself, imbuing the Russian landscape with cultural significance, serving as an anchor for collective identity across class boundaries. Successive waves of Russian emigration, however, have explored whether connection to national identity can be maintained in exile - beginning with the First Wave, who left in the years following 1917, fleeing Bolshevik rule, up to a recent flight of emigration precipitated by Putin’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The war has reignited these debates of identity, leading to a global reckoning with Russian cultural identity, significantly influenced by shifting geopolitical currents, which have intensified discourses around national identity worldwide. An enriched understanding of Russian identity, both in exile and within Russia itself, is therefore crucial to responding not only to Putin’s invasion of Ukraine but also to broader questions of identity and nationality in the twenty-first century. This essay will explore how the Russian diaspora’s conception of identity has developed from the collective ‘mission’ of cultural preservation employed by the First Wave into the multifaceted approach of emigres during the Putin era, characterised by fragmentation, hybridity and dislocation.

When engaging with such complex cultural debates, a plurality of viewpoints is inevitable. This essay does not seek to comprehensively catalogue all perspectives, but rather to understand the dominant attitude, if such an attitude can be identified at all. In order to do so, it employs a qualitative methodology largely centred around analysis of emotion and feeling, making use of literature and the written word in order to establish a connection with the emotional landscape of the Russian diasporas

¹ ‘Yearning for the Motherland’ – title of Marina Tsvetaeva’s 1934 poem ‘Toska po Rodine’.

of both past and present. The source base of this essay is therefore made up of a wide variety of written sources, including short stories, poetry, political manifestoes, news articles and blog posts. Although such a methodology is not without its flaws, it enables a more nuanced understanding of the diverse range of experiences and perspectives of emigration than quantitative methods could do. It also incorporates frameworks of thought including Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities' and Arjun Appadurai's exploration of the 'global cultural economy' to analyse fluctuating societal structures, including the shifting role of the nation state in modern identity and the instrumentalisation of culture in political conflicts.²

The First Wave of Russian emigration, at the time, represented one of the biggest migrant crises of modern history – estimated by Marc Raeff to be made up of between 1.5 to 2 million emigres.³ Having fled the upheaval of the revolutions of 1917, emigres of this period were strongly anti-Bolshevik – their vision of culture was consequently shaped by opposition to what they saw as the regime's corruption of authentic Russian cultural life, and a mission to reject Bolshevism, first articulated by writers such as Nina Berberovna, who claimed, "I'm not going into exile ... but on a mission".⁴ In exile, the Russian diasporic community positioned themselves as responsible for the conservation of this authentic culture until their return, and therefore sought to carve out a transnational identity that some historians have labelled 'Russia Abroad'.⁵ This sense of 'mission' is evident throughout cultural production of the time, for instance in Zinaida Gippius' 'Nashe Pryamoe Delo', a political pamphlet which distinguishes between 'Zarubezhnaya Rossiya' (Russia Abroad) and 'Rossiya-zemlya' (Russia-land).⁶ This new cross-border identity challenged the Bolshevik regime's dominion over Russian culture by imagining itself as the true Russia, untethered by geographical

² Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition, Verso, 2006, and Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

³ Marc Raeff. *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*. Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. 1 - 6

⁴ Dominique Hoffman, "Without Nostalgia: Nina Berberova's Short Fiction of the 1930s", PhD dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011.

⁵ Marc Raeff. *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*. Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. 1–5.

⁶ Zinaida Gippius. "Nashe Pryamoe Delo." [Wikisource], [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Наше_главное_дело_\(Гиппиус\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Наше_главное_дело_(Гиппиус)).

borders and boundaries, in a radical challenge to the sovereignty of the nation-state over culture. The social practice of reimagining cultural boundaries was not an individual practice, but a collective one – with attempts at societal reconstitution representing a collective mythologisation of European urban metropolises as sanctuaries of Russian identity abroad.

Although the notion of ‘Russia Abroad’ represented a shift towards transnational cultural identity, at its core lay hopes of return to Russia itself, due at least in part to the importance of land in the Russian collective consciousness. This collective nostalgia represents a core tension of the ‘cultural mission’, perfectly expressed by Maria Tsvetaeva’s 1934 poem ‘Toska po Rodine’, in which the poet seeks to convince herself of the foolishness of nostalgia and homesickness, which she labels a ‘A languor long exposed as hoey’.⁷ Throughout the poem, however, Tsvetaeva describes her disillusionment with life in exile and subtly alludes to her yearning for home, until the mask slips completely in the final lines, where she admits her homesickness through her wonder at the sight of a rowan – a national symbol of Russia with deep importance to tradition and folklore.⁸ This fundamental tension of ‘Russia Abroad’ is perhaps best demonstrated by the nuanced range of opinions present within the First Wave itself: the scholar Maria Rubins describes how the interwar diaspora was defined by a generational divide, with the older generation more retrospective and committed to Russian identity, and the younger generation less connected to the motherland and more actively interested in European and Western culture.⁹ This divide demonstrates the paradoxical nature of ‘Russia Abroad’: a transnational identity which was founded on a deep sense of nostalgia and a longing to return to the nation of Russia itself. By contrast, the Russian diaspora of the modern day is far less united and lacks the same sense of ‘cultural mission’ that defined the First Wave.¹⁰ In an online interview, economic journalist Denis

⁷ Marina Tsvetaeva. *Toska po Rodine*. 1934. Accessed through RuVerses, translation by A. Z. Foreman. <https://ruverses.com/marina-tsvetaeva/homesickening/269/>

⁸ Marina Tsvetaeva. *Toska po Rodine*. 1934. Accessed through RuVerses, translation by A. Z. Foreman. <https://ruverses.com/marina-tsvetaeva/homesickening/269/>

⁹ Maria Rubins. *Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015.

¹⁰ ¹⁰ Denis Kasyanchuk and Alexandra Prokopenko, “Russia’s 650,000 Wartime Emigres,” *The Bell*, 16 July 2024. https://en.thebell.io/russias-650-000-wartime-emigres/&ved=2ahUKEwj-trOrvGPAXVwVEEAHWLbH9gQFnoECBkQAO&usg=AOvVaw1_oMVNZkFdsboFbx90-Qr7

Kasyanchuk views the hope of return which defined the First Wave's 'mission' with some cynicism – 'I think this is self-deception. From my point of view, in the foreseeable future no one will return to Russia'.¹¹ Some emigres have described how the war in Ukraine represented the final nail in the coffin for the nostalgia and idealism that characterised the First Wave – the writer Anastasia Edel claims "that Russia, real or imagined, expired on February 24, 2022".¹² This sense of cynicism is part of a long-term process of disillusionment and fatigue around ideas of return in the Russian diaspora, beginning with the younger generation of the First Wave mentioned above and continuing through successive generations of emigres throughout the twentieth century.¹³ This disillusionment is due in part to the trajectory of modern Russian history, which has oscillated between different ideological approaches including periods of authoritarianism and liberalisation, all traumatic in their own way. The impact of this is to preclude any singular universal conception of positive Russian identity amongst the modern diaspora, all of whom have been alienated by this political instability. The difficulty of imagining a positive Russian identity has resulted in a sense of cultural apathy amongst the modern diaspora and the disappearance of ideas of a 'cultural mission' from their collective psyche. Throughout this process of dislocation, even conceiving of connection to Russian identity outside of Russia itself has become an increasingly arduous exercise, underscoring the centrality of territory in historical constructions of Russian national identity. This complex realignment has instead created a confusing and painful void of identity whereby the primary emotion expressed by much of the modern diaspora is "resentment" at the loss of a formerly constitutive element of cultural belonging.¹⁴

This is not to say that there is no sense of 'mission' amongst the modern Russian diaspora. Some emigres, for instance, have sought to organise to oppose the agenda of the Putin regime. These efforts, however, lack the coherent vision of cultural conservation which was fundamental to the First Wave's

¹¹ Maria Karpenko. "Razgovor s nevozbraschentsyem." *Colta.ru*, 20 August 2024, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/vrazluke/29755-razgovor-s-nevozbraschentsyem>

¹² Anastasia Edel. "A Farewell to Russia." *Project Syndicate*, 22 Feb. 2023, www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russian-identity-culture-besmirched-by-anastasia-edel-2023-02

¹³ Marc Raeff. *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*. Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. 7

¹⁴ Serge Schmemmann. "Putin Has Tainted Russian Greatness." *The New York Times*, 20 June 2024.

‘mission’. This phenomenon is in part a result of the increasing cynicism of populations worldwide towards nation-states as markers of identity, and the rise of alternative structures of identity.¹⁵ Interviews and written testaments of emigres often give the impression of individuals largely focused their own personal aims, rather than any one collective mission – journalist Denis Kasyanchuk, for instance, agrees that ‘in emigration the focus shifts from state and society to oneself, the well-being of oneself and one’s family’.¹⁶ The atomisation of the modern diaspora’s relationship to Russian culture is demonstrated by the more individual and introspective style of modern diasporic literature, which often takes a strongly autobiographical approach, as with Maria Galina’s 2023 diary-novel *Near the War: Odessa, February 2022*.¹⁷ This shift towards the exploration of personal stories and experiences in modern Russian emigre literature represents a form of personal release and self-understanding, which might constitute a diasporic movement but differs significantly from the collective focus on the First Wave’s ‘cultural mission’. Such individualism can be read both an attempt at imagining a new diasporic identity separate from Russian cultural identity and a disavowal of the actions of the Putin regime, in particular the invasion of Ukraine.

Wider forces are at play in this breakdown of cohesive diasporic ‘mission’ – namely, the influence of globalisation and its impact upon conceptions of national identity. In ‘Modernity at Large’, Arjun Appadurai argues that the global flow of people, media, and ideologies has resulted in a worldwide process of “heterogenization” whereby static notions of nationhood have less salience than in the era of the First Wave.¹⁸ Notions of Russian identity have been further complicated by the collapse of Russian imperial unity and the fall of the Soviet Union, a political transition which has created a cultural atmosphere of fragmentation and marginality. As a result, modern Russian diasporic identity is marked not by ideas of nationality, but rather by hybridity, as emigre writers have prioritised diverse new aspects of identity. Some poets living in exile, such as Nastya Rodionova, have explored

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996

¹⁶ Maria Karpenko. “Razgovor s nevozbraschentsyem.” *Colta.ru*, 20 August 2024, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/vrazluka/29755-razgovor-s-nevozbraschentsyem>

¹⁷ Maria Galina. *Vozle Voyny. Odessa. Fevral 2022*. Greenberg Books, 2023

¹⁸ Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996

other languages, such as French, as mediums for art.¹⁹ Others, such as Maria Stepanova, have sought to situate themselves in the broader transnational history of exile, referring to figures such as Ovid and Dante.²⁰ In particular, many artists have sought to define themselves in their humanity, emphasising empathy and compassion as core pillars of this new identity. Galina Rymbu’s ‘Time of the Earth’, for instance, examines anthropocentric ideas of the natural world, championing individualism and a less exploitative approach towards our relationships both with the natural world and one another.²¹ Rymbu uses this as a foreground to a careful exploration of the intimate details of everyday life and human suffering, in doing so reframing exile not simply as loss, but as an opportunity to cultivate new forms of relationality.²² Taken together, these examples suggest that the traumatic experience of exile has prompted Russian emigres to pursue a diverse range of ‘missions’ focused on personal understanding and healing. Many of these efforts have contested the binary opposition of national belonging, exploring humanity itself as a meaningful locus of identity, perhaps in response to and as a means of escaping the harmful impact of nationalist ideology in discourse around Ukraine.

Another striking distinction between the First Wave of the Russian diaspora and the diaspora of the modern day is the structures they created in exile and the extent of their interconnectivity. Seeking to maintain geographical closeness to Russia, First Wave emigres flocked *en masse* to a small number of familiar cities, mostly in Europe, in particular Berlin and Paris.²³ Within these urban centres Russian emigres developed tight-knit communities, often clustered around particular neighbourhoods such as Montparnasse and Charlottenburg – such neighbourhoods became virtually Russified due to the sheer quantity and concentration of emigration as emigres actively resisted integration, seeking to maintain their Russian identity and resisting “denationalisation”.²⁴ The socially diverse character of these communities and their relative isolation from the cultural landscape of Russia itself meant such

¹⁹ Nastya Rodionova. *La Fourrure*. Performance at Villa Paradis, Marseille. 2024. Accessed through <https://www.nastyarodionova.com/>

²⁰ Maria Stepanova. *Holy Winter 20/21*. Translated by Sasha Dugdale, New Directions, 2024.

²¹ Galina Rymbu. *Time of the Earth*. Translated by Frank Keizer, Perdu, 2019.

²² Galina Rymbu. *Time of the Earth*. Translated by Frank Keizer, Perdu, 2019.

²³ Marc Raeff. *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*. Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. 5 - 6

²⁴ Marc Raeff. *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*. Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. 1 - 6

interconnected communities truly resembled a simulation of Russian society.²⁵ Interwar émigré literature powerfully conveys the sometimes suffocating extent of this interconnectivity, for instance in Gaito Gazdanov's *The Spectre of Alexander Wolf*.²⁶ The novel's primary plot explores the complicated emotional turmoil of exile, as characters reckon with their Russian identity in the setting of Russified Montparnasse – this plot, however, is largely driven by coincidence, as characters continually bump into each other in chance encounters that propel them towards their eventual fates.²⁷ These characters are haunted by constant reminders of their past as Russians, with the 'spectre' that haunts the protagonist throughout the text representing the guilt and regret inherent in the experience of exile.

Nonetheless, to the emigres of the First Wave, community meant more than just companionship: it was resistance to the existential threat posed by disunity against the regime at home. This introspective tendency was accompanied by a wide variety of institutions designed to protect Russian culture in exile: political agitation groups and literary journals; Russian language libraries and orthodox churches; even gatherings as eccentric as regular séances and jazz ensembles.²⁸ The mostly political character of emigration during the First Wave created a sense of collective mission to conserve authentic Russian culture until their return, with some seeking to reframe exile not as a punishment but as a patriotic cultural duty.²⁹ During this period, emigres envisioned a cultural warzone wherein Russian culture was under threat from both Western and Bolshevik influences, reflected by the calls to action exemplified by future Nobel laureate Ivan Bunin's 1924 speech on 'The Mission of Russian Emigrants', which called for the active instrumentalisation of culture through newspapers, literature, and education, in order to protect authentic Russian cultural heritage.³⁰ Bunin's tone is fiery and provocative: he derides the regime as murderous and un-Russian, and his

²⁵ Marc Raeff. *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1939*. Oxford University Press, 1990. Pp. 1 - 6

²⁶ Gaito Gazdanov. *The Spectre of Alexander Wolf*. Translated by Bryan Karetnyk, Pushkin Press, 2013

²⁷ Gaito Gazdanov. *The Spectre of Alexander Wolf*. Translated by Bryan Karetnyk, Pushkin Press, 2013

²⁸ Lev Mnoukhine. *L'Émigration Russe: Chronique de la Vie Scientifique, Culturelle, et Sociale, 1920 – 1940*. Volume 4. YMCA-Press, Paris, 1995. Accessed in Turgenev Library, Paris

²⁹ Zinaida Gippius. "Nashe Pryamoe Delo." [Wikisource], [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Наше_главное_дело_\(Гиппиус\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Наше_главное_дело_(Гиппиус)).

³⁰ Ivan A. Bunin. "Миссия русской эмиграции (Речь, произнесённая в Париже 16 февраля 1924 г.)". *Zarubezhje*, https://zarubezhje.narod.ru/texts/chss_0076.htm

language invokes a sense of military organisation. Such notions of instrumentalisation were central to the cultural agenda of ‘Russia Abroad’ – as a salve and coping mechanism for the pain of dislocation and exile, given the political the First Wave as mostly stateless refugees.

The character of community amongst the diaspora of the modern day, by contrast, is far more fragmented. In many ways, the sociopolitical character of the modern diaspora – estimated by some to be as high as 650,000 in number – is the inverse of the First Wave. It lacks the social diversity of the First Wave, consisting mostly of young, highly educated and affluent individuals, yet these emigres have diverse reasons for emigration, ranging from economic worries and political opposition to fears of conscription.³¹ Furthermore, the Kremlin has employed espionage tactics to sow distrust amongst the emigre community, including surveillance, rumours and even poisonings.³² This combination of factors diminishes the sense of cultural unity that was so strong amongst the First Wave, resulting in a diaspora marked less by solidarity than by competing individual trajectories. Furthermore, the diaspora is widely “dispersed across the globe”, precluding the formation of the concentrated Russian cultural enclaves characteristic of the interwar period.³³ Certainly, some forms of cultural community abroad do exist – recently established foundations for the conservation of Russian culture include the ‘Dar’ literary prize which rewards Russian language works of literature and the ‘We Exist!’ foundation, which seeks to rehabilitate perceptions of Russian culture in the West. Both of these projects, however, differ significantly from their predecessors in the cultural institutions of the First Wave. The ‘We Exist!’ foundation explicitly delineates their vision of culture “beyond geographic borders”, abandoning all pretence at any sense of a national ‘cultural mission’ – indeed, their foundation often showcases Western art.³⁴ By contrast, the ‘Dar’ prize has been perceived by some as pro-Russian, with 2025 recipient Maria Galina choosing to refuse the award due to its emphasis on the

³¹ Denis Kasyanchuk and Alexandra Prokopenko, “Russia’s 650,000 Wartime Emigres,” *The Bell*, 16 July 2024. https://en.thebell.io/russias-650-000-wartime-emigres/&ved=2ahUKEwj-trOrvGPAXVwVEEAHWLbH9gQFnoECBkQAQ&usq=AOvVaw1_oMVNZkFdsboFbx90-Qr7

³² Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, “Paranoia and Poison — the Kremlin Panics Over Exiles,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 30 May 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/paranoia-and-poison-the-kremlin-panics-over-exiles/>

³³ Ekaterina Sachkova. “Why Isn’t the West Supporting These Russian Exiles?” *The World Today*, Chatham House, 9 June 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2025-06/why-isnt-west-supporting-these-russian-exiles>

³⁴ We Exist! Foundation, weexist-foundation.org

Russian language.³⁵ Neither of these institutions resemble the grassroots support and firmly national identity of those of the First Wave. Attempts to construct community in exile are therefore entirely reliant on the point of unity amongst the modern Russian diaspora – their distaste for the Putin regime and the invasion of Ukraine.

One contributing factor towards this fragmentation is the globally shifting format of societal interaction – namely, the twenty-first century trend of digitalisation. Superficially, digitalisation enables greater interaction within communities in exile, as communication across great distances can bring together individuals despite geographical limitations, and indeed, online sites such as Telegram have become popular forums for communication amongst Russians. However, research has shown that although digital communication enhances connectivity, it does not provide an equivalent alternative to face-to-face interaction.³⁶ The character of digital connection tends to be more fleeting and superficial, providing exposure to information and networks without fostering the deep and sustained engagement that underpinned the networks of the First Wave. In the case of today's diaspora, therefore, this enhanced interconnectivity has failed to strengthen a sense of community in exile. Furthermore, the heightened connection with Russia itself - an element largely absent from interwar exile networks who were cut off from the cultural orbit of the Bolshevik regime - creates a painful cultural limbo from which emigres often find it hard to disentangle themselves. The rapid flow of information compounds feelings of anxiety and fear around the development of the political circumstances of Russia.³⁷

Digital consumption of both Western and Russian political media narratives, furthermore, has created a gulf of information and belief between emigres and their former social networks which can lead to adversarial and even confrontational relationships, described by some as a 'social death'.³⁸ The poet

³⁵ Maria Galina, "Open Letter from the Winner of the Dar Award of the First Season," *Dar Prize*, 24 May 2025, darprize.com/en/2025/05/24/otkrytoe-pismo-pobeditelya-premii-dar-pervogo-sezona-marii-galinoj/

³⁶ Paul S. N. Lee et al., "Internet Communication Versus Face-to-Face Interaction in Quality of Life," *Social Indicators Research* 100, no. 3 (2010): 375–389, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9618-3>

³⁷ Masha Gessen, "The Russians Fleeing Putin's Wartime Crackdown," *The New Yorker*, 28 Mar. 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/28/the-russians-fleeing-putins-wartime-crackdown>

³⁸ "Emigrantsiya — ta zhe smert". Konstantin Bogomolov. "Emigrantsiya — eto smert, samaya muchitelnaya iz vozmozhnykh." *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 7 July 2023, <https://newizv.ru/news/2023-07-07/konstantin-bogomolov-emigratsiya-eto-smert-samaya-muchitelnaya-iz-vozmozhnykh-412856>

Galina Rymbu explores the painful dichotomy of this connection in her epistolary work ‘Mama Writes. I Write’, in which Rymbu contrasts her warm memories of her family with their increasingly hateful rhetoric, in a series of shocking exchanges which lay bare the emotional rawness of modern exile. Over the course of the poem, her mother’s tone shifts from loving and maternal messages such as “Today is Mother’s Day. A mother’s love is absolute” to “I’m sick because of you ... It’s not right to hate Russia”.³⁹ This exchange is emblematic of the erosion of the cohesive communicational monoculture of the First Wave, replaced with a confusing and harmful digital infoscape which further complicates modern exile identity.

The changing global political atmosphere and perceptions of Russian identity also go some way to explaining the disintegration of the First Wave’s ‘cultural mission’ amongst the diaspora of the twenty-first century. In the immediate wake of the revolutions of 1917, the general perception of Russians in the West was largely positive, largely due to the common enemy found in Bolshevik Russia. There was also some sense of fascination with Russian culture, tinged with a sense of exoticism.⁴⁰ Moreover, contemporary Russian culture was characterised by a sense of exceptionalism and superiority, leading to the development of a somewhat didactic relationship whereby emigres sought not only to conserve Russian culture in exile, but also to proselytize its virtues in their host countries.⁴¹ This sense of exceptionalism was also extended to other diasporas throughout history – the writer Zinaida Gippius, for instant, sought to communicate the uniqueness of the First Wave as not ‘simply an ordinary crowd of refugees’.⁴² Stylistically, literature from this period is strikingly Russian in character, commonly using tropes from and making references to the classical Russian canon. One such example is Ivan Bunin’s collection of short stories ‘Dark Avenues’.⁴³ Bunin’s prose evokes

³⁹ Galina Rymbu. "Mama Writes. I Write." *n+1*, 4 Apr. 2025, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/mama-writes-i-write/>

⁴⁰ Jahangir Jahangirli, and Jahandar Jabarov. "The Historical Evolution of Russophilia in Europe: A Study of the Development and Transformation of Positive Attitudes Towards Russia." *Eminak: Scientific Quarterly Journal*, vol. 3, no. 43, Nov. 2023, pp. 113–133. [https://doi.org/10.33782/eminak2023.3\(43\).661](https://doi.org/10.33782/eminak2023.3(43).661)

⁴¹ Maria Rubins. *Russian Montparnasse: Transnational Writing in Interwar Paris*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015.

⁴² Zinaida Gippius. “*Nashe Pryamoe Delo*.” [Wikisource], [https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Наше_главное_дело_\(Гиппиус\)](https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Наше_главное_дело_(Гиппиус)).

⁴³ Ivan A. Bunin. *Tyomnye Allei*. 1943. Accessed at <https://almabooks.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Dark-Avenues.pdf>

Tolstoy in its philosophical depth and moral inquiry, and Turgenev in its focus upon the natural world as a background for exploration of national identity. Further, the stories themselves are brimming with cultural references to Russia: Bunin evokes “the energetic pleasure of rural life” with sensory description that immerses the reader in the constructed Russia of Bunin’s imagination.

In the twenty-first century, however, the perception of Russian culture in the West has been dramatically altered by geopolitical transformation – in particular the Kremlin’s aggressive foreign policy, including the invasion of Ukraine but also other events including the Skripal poisonings of 2018 and accusations of election interference. These events have taken place in the context of a pre-existing cold war suspicion of Russia as an enemy by Western populations, leading to the development of what the journalist Serge Schmemmann labelled “a conception of all Russian culture and individuals as inherently imperialistic”.⁴⁴ Some have even called for a total boycott of Russian culture until the end of the invasion, as a necessary step in vanquishing “Russia’s totalitarian project” – and indeed, since February 2022 many cultural venues have shut their doors to Russian artists.⁴⁵ Others, such as Russian emigre author Mikhail Shishkin have argued for the instrumentalisation of culture as the “antidote to imperialist thought”, seeking to build work towards peace in Ukraine and Russian reconstruction through cultural transmission and creation.⁴⁶ In the modern political climate, culture has once more become instrumentalised as a geopolitical tool, increasingly valued based on its perceived alignment with state power. This instrumentalisation, however, differs from that of the nostalgic and conservative approach of the First Wave in that it is inherently forward-looking, seeking to imagine new identity rather than recovering an old one.

This abandonment of historical notions of Russian culture is linked to the atmosphere of shame that increasingly distances Russian emigres from national heritage. This sense of shame makes itself manifest both in internal emotional turmoil and in external instances of discrimination and

⁴⁴ Serge Schmemmann. “Putin Has Tainted Russian Greatness.” *The New York Times*, 20 June 2024.

⁴⁵ Oleksandr Tkachenko. “As Ukraine’s Culture Minister, I’m Asking You to Boycott Tchaikovsky Until This War Is Over.” *The Guardian*, 7 Dec. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/dec/07/ukraine-culture-minister-boycott-tchaikovsky-war-russia-kremlin>

⁴⁶ Mikhail Shishkin. “Don’t Blame Dostoyevsky.” *The Atlantic*, 24 July 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/russian-literature-books-ukraine-war-dostoyevsky-nabokov/670928/>

Russophobia – the lawyer and NGO executive Ekaterina Sachkova claims that from a professional standpoint, “earning trust as a Russian takes years”.⁴⁷ Many emigres also experience deep feelings of culpability and responsibility for the actions of the Putin regime. Dmitry Aleshkovsky, a news photographer and relief volunteer describes this experience in an interview with historian Masha Gessen: “I couldn’t stop my hands from shaking for the first five days. I would have preferred to literally burn up in shame. All of us are responsible for this war. Even those who did a lot to prevent it didn’t do enough – because the war started”.⁴⁸ Russian psychologist Anastasia Piatakhina Giré reveals in a blog post the various coping mechanisms that her Russian clients employ to alleviate these feelings of deep shame and humiliation, ranging from “creating enough geographical distance” and “street protests” to social isolation and alcoholism.⁴⁹ One might argue these feelings of guilt and responsibility that many emigres feel for the actions of the Russian state arise from the intergenerational trauma of successive authoritarian regimes, described by Piatakhina Giré as “the shame we were made to feel by our parents”.⁵⁰ This development of thought has led to an internalised conception of Putin’s aggressive imperialism as the ‘true’ Russia and an abandonment of the nostalgic idealism of the First Wave.

Perhaps another reason for this sense of shame and collective responsibility is the residual attachment to Russian culture evident in many emigres’ descriptions of their complex relationships with their homeland. Despite efforts to construct a new postnational identity in exile, many Russian emigres still describe feelings of nostalgia for their past – the journalist Denis Kasyanchuk, for instance admits to watching broadcasts from the surveillance camera next to his house every day out of homesickness.⁵¹ These feelings evoke a sense of cultural dislocation that is integral to modern exile, whereby emigres

⁴⁷ Ekaterina Sachkova. “Why Isn’t the West Supporting These Russian Exiles?” *The World Today*, Chatham House, 9 June 2025. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2025-06/why-isnt-west-supporting-these-russian-exiles>

⁴⁸ Masha Gessen, “The Russians Fleeing Putin’s Wartime Crackdown,” *The New Yorker*, 28 Mar. 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/28/the-russians-fleeing-putins-wartime-crackdown>

⁴⁹ Anastasia Piatakhina Giré, “Russian Shame,” *Psychotherapy.net*, 17 Mar. 2022, <https://www.psychotherapy.net/blog/title/russian-shame>

⁵⁰ Anastasia Piatakhina Giré, “Russian Shame,” *Psychotherapy.net*, 17 Mar. 2022, <https://www.psychotherapy.net/blog/title/russian-shame>

⁵¹ Maria Karpenko. “Razgovor s nevozbraschentsyem.” *Colta.ru*, 20 August 2024, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/vrazluke/29755-razgovor-s-nevozbraschentsyem>

experience a liminal condition suspended between their host countries or Russia itself. Interviews with emigres often confirm this feeling, encapsulated in this quote by Lika Kremer, a media executive: “I want to go back and wake up in my own bed. But all my people are gone”.⁵² Clearly, despite attempts to distance themselves from their national heritage, the new Russian diaspora’s post-national identity is not yet fully realised, and some sense of nostalgia for Russia remains. This emotional attachment can be linked to not only feelings of nostalgia and homesickness, but also the narratives of Russian exceptionalism discussed above. The intergenerational presence of this exceptionalism estranges emigres from integration into their host countries and prevents a wholesale abandonment of Russian identity – many emigres feel that no other country can compare to Russia or replace Russianness as an element of their identity and therefore make no attempt at integration.

This attachment, however, differs from that of the hopefulness of the First Wave in that it is characterised by a sense of loss, described by some as being “culturally hollowed out”.⁵³ Such feelings are evident in modern Russian emigre literature, which can be highly experimental but nonetheless makes subtle allusions to nostalgia for positive memories of Russia, often framed through the lens of childhood. Galina Rymbu’s poem ‘Mama writes. I write’, for instance, engages with ideas of transnationalism throughout, for example in the poet’s mother’s claims that “Our family was always bound to Russia. It’s a shame you forgot your motherland. Forgot your home.”, and the poet’s response: “I am home now. Are you?”.⁵⁴ As the poem progresses, however, the conversation between mother and daughter dissolves into a stream of consciousness which lays bare the poet’s yearning for familiarity and, indeed, family. This highly symbolic section explores the Rymbu’s personal relationship with Russian identity as demonstrated by phrases such as “I am your beast. I am your sovereign”.⁵⁵ Indeed, the very notions of motherhood which define the poem evoke the Russian idea

⁵² Masha Gessen, “The Russians Fleeing Putin’s Wartime Crackdown,” *The New Yorker*, 28 Mar. 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/28/the-russians-fleeing-putins-wartime-crackdown>

⁵³ Anastasia Edel. “A Farewell to Russia.” *Project Syndicate*, 22 Feb. 2023, www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russian-identity-culture-besmirched-by-anastasia-edel-2023-02

⁵⁴ Galina Rymbu, “Mama Writes. I Write.,” *n+I*, 4 Apr. 2025, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/mama-writes-i-write/>

⁵⁵ Galina Rymbu, “Mama Writes. I Write.,” *n+I*, 4 Apr. 2025, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/mama-writes-i-write/>

of the 'motherland'. The language in this section becomes highly descriptive, exploring the poet's memories of childhood and familial relationships: "the dusty almost earthy color of the sack of potatoes and squash that papa carries home from the dacha" and her mother's "smell that I will always remember: of wind from the steppe, green onion and milk, Siberian apples, nettles and the cat".⁵⁶ The poetic recollection of such memories addresses the painful rootlessness of exile, whereby the exploration of other aspects of identity cannot fully replace belonging to a national community.

To conclude, the different cultural trajectories of the First Wave and the modern diaspora reveal the complexities of transnational belonging and the fragmentation of the Russian 'cultural mission'. For the First Wave, exile was imagined as a utopian opportunity to preserve authentic Russian culture untouched by Bolshevik corruption, aided by a politically homogenous and socially cohesive emigre community concentrated in various urban enclaves across Europe. By contrast, the modern diaspora finds itself scattered across the globe and struggling to imagine a positive relationship with Russian national identity, in part due to the widespread disillusionment born out of political instability.

Another factor in this shift, however, is the painful reality that many emigres have accepted Putin's Russia as the defining image of the nation. This transformation is in many ways a result of the disappearance of the unique social and political circumstances of the First Wave which enabled the paradoxical notion of 'Russia Abroad', a transnational project ultimately founded on the hope of return and reconciliation. In the intervening years, Russian exile has become a liminal condition mediated by digital networks which, paradoxically, often only further undermine diasporic unity, as the globalisation of media and communication have both eroded cohesion within emigre communities and strained their ties to familiar social networks within Russia. Moreover, since the interwar period global processes of cultural heterogenisation have diminished the importance of constructs of nationality in personal identity, compounded by the collapse of imperial Russian unity over the course of the twentieth century – resulting in many emigres looking to other aspects of identity as anchors of self. As a result, the modern diaspora has increasingly focused upon humanity itself and shared values

⁵⁶ Galina Rymbu, "Mama Writes. I Write.," *n+1*, 4 Apr. 2025, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/mama-writes-i-write/>

of empathy and compassion as a basis for identity, seeking to heal and understand personal traumas associated with exile and dislocation as well as to signal their opposition to humanitarian atrocities committed in the name of Russia with Putin's war in Ukraine. The transnational character of modern emigre identity therefore lacks the hopeful sense ubiquitous in First Wave thought – it might be better described as a sense of mourning.

Identity amongst the modern diaspora is therefore necessarily a highly varied and individualised hybrid of various cultural markers, unified by a sense of collective shame and responsibility for the actions of Putin's regime, arising in part from experiences of Russophobia described by a wide range of emigre voices. Indeed, in the West, Putinist aggression has increasingly become conflated with Russian culture itself. Such narratives, alongside continuous media exposure to the atrocities of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, have led the modern diaspora to abandon historical conceptions of Russian culture, instead seeking to create a new forward-looking identity contrasting the retrospective character of the First Wave. Some have looked to cultural production and transmission as the solution to the eternal quandary of identity in exile, seeking to reimagine Russian culture as inclusive and open. Concurrently, some Western and Ukrainian commentators have called for the instrumentalisation and censorship of culture as an accompaniment to military and economic action against Russia. These debates not only evoke the First Wave conception of culture as an active battleground but perhaps raise the question of a Ukrainian 'cultural mission' mirroring and even opposing that of Russia. Yet beneath these questions and transformations of cultural identity, there remains a residual sense of exceptionalism inherited from the First Wave and early traditions, deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the modern Russian diaspora. This lingering nostalgia, expressed in much of twenty-first century emigre literature, demonstrates the difficulty of forging new identities in times of flux, perhaps further complicated by the modern Russian diaspora's alienation from ideas of national belonging, and therefore from the cultures of their host countries. This leaves Russian emigres in a disorienting cultural limbo, estranged from both their host countries and their homeland – caught between a transnational identity not yet fully realised and a loss of faith in the antiquated idea of a 'cultural mission'. This tension of identity and aching, unextinguished longing

finds poignant expression in the closing line of Galina Rymbu's poem 'Mama Writes. I write':
"Somewhere far away, deep in time, she is holding me tight."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Galina Rymbu, "Mama Writes. I Write.," *n+1*, 4 Apr. 2025, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/mama-writes-i-write/>

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