

'Russia Abroad': Conceptions of Cultural Identity amongst the Modern Russian Diaspora

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1 Overview

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russians have fled their native country, seeking refuge in destinations across the world. This most recent wave of emigration represents a continuation of a consistent trend across Russian history, whereby political upheaval precipitates a wave of emigration, often distinctly political in nature. These waves have had diverse approaches to their cultural heritage. The first wave, emigrating following the October Revolution of 1917, for instance, saw themselves as arbiters of authentic Russian culture against the corrupting influence of the Bolshevik regime, leading to the transplantation of Russian society into foreign cultures, in what some scholars have labelled 'Russia abroad'.

Today's Russian diaspora faces a radically different political climate, as Russian culture has, in the West, become associated to an extent with the actions of the Putin regime. This project will examine how the modern Russian diaspora navigates this complex relationship with their cultural identity in light of the Russo-Ukraine War.



French magazine for Russian emigres in Paris.

2 Methodology

Engaging with such questions of cultural identity presents a methodological challenge, as quantitative data can fail to accurately communicate the intricacies and range of human experience and emotion. This project will therefore employ an interdisciplinary, qualitative approach, focusing on literary analysis as a conduit for cultural analysis, enabling access to a rich tradition of exile (*samizdat*) literature. It will also seek to engage with prominent Russian emigre voices of the modern day, including politicians, activists, and artists - if possible through interview, whether online or in person, potentially enabled by foreign travel. In order to achieve this, it will seek to tap into Russian emigre networks, including media organisations.

This research will also make frequent reference to the 'first wave' of Russian emigration, beginning after the October Revolution of 1917, as an example of purposeful cultural coherence amongst an exile community with which to compare the experiences and perspectives of the modern diaspora.



Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in Soviet Gulag.

3 Intended Outcomes

Success in this research will generate an in-depth and nuanced analysis of the cultural experiences of exile amongst the modern Russian diaspora, well supported by a range of primary source material deriving from the lived experience of Russians through history, from the 'first wave' of emigrants up until those of today. This research will also seek to take into account the politicised nature of debate and the risk of disinformation as it relates to Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

This project will seek to challenge stereotypes and generalisations of Russian political attitudes by exploring the nuances of Russian voices in exile. It will question the Putinist narrative of Russian ideological and cultural uniformity that has been used to justify both authoritarian domestic policy and expansionist foreign policy, as well as challenging similarly reductive perceptions in the West. More broadly, it will seek to encourage an interpretative approach to political and cultural analysis with room for discussion of lived human experience and emotion.



Russian flags in dumpster after rally.