



The Presence of Selected Russian Fictional Characters in English Detective Fiction: A Brief Overview

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the stereotypical portrayal of certain Russian fictional characters in English literature from the mid-nineteenth century up to post-1991 fiction. An attempt is made to highlight particular popular tropes that recur in the characterisation of Russians or associated caricatures. Passing reference is made to other literary traditions in Western Europe, in order to establish peculiarities extant in English language cultural traditions as distinct from other contemporaneous European cultures. It is argued that during this period Russian fictional characters were mainly to be found in detective fiction, and that these would have had a more significant cultural impact, primarily due to the popularity of those authors at the time. The most representative authors in this genre – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Dame Agatha Christie – both write Russian characters into their work. Their depictions were influential due to their broad readership, and drew, it is argued, from cultural stereotypes popular in their day. The repetition and re-depiction of familiar characters in crime fiction bring about tropes that are drawn on in the production of theatre and film. A selection of these tropes is apparent in nearly all significant works of English language fiction. Many of them are perceived as negative, while few, if any, are on the positive side. Cultural peculiarities are exploited as plot devices. One enduring feature of the works analysed here, is the phenomenon of ‘fake’ Russians. The implications of the stereotypes depicted here go far beyond detective fiction.

KEYWORDS

Russian fictional characters; English literature; detective fiction; stereotypes; tropes; ‘fake’ Russians

English characters appear among the numerous foreign characters in Russian literature and a short survey suggests a variety of cameo parts played by diverse English figures. Alexander Pushkin’s ‘Mistress into Maid’ (in *The Tales of the Late Ivan Petrovich Belkin*, 1831), includes a Miss Jackson, while ‘The Queen of Spades’ (1834) features a phlegmatic Englishman at the funeral of the old Countess. Prior to that, Denis Fonvizin included Vralman in ‘The Minor’ (1782), and Nikolai Leskov used many British and German characters. Wilka Charlesovna Tfyce is an unlikely named Englishwoman included in Anton Chekhov’s short story ‘The Daughter of Albion’, published in 1883. Britain appears as a setting for some works as well. ‘A Feast in Time of Plague’ published by Pushkin in 1830 is set in

England, as are some episodes of Leskov's 1881 work 'The Lefthander'. All of Pushkin's characters 'A Feast' are English or Scottish ('... her hair of Scottish gold'). In the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy many Western European characters appear as governors, doctors, military men, and even as immigrant aristocrats. Alexander Herzen, a socialist and philosopher, wrote about his sojourn in Britain in his popular autobiography *My Past and Thoughts* published in volumes between 1861 and 1870. English characters, therefore, have been present in Russian literature since the beginning of modern secular literacy.

In fact, in any of the ten periods in the history of Russian literature (1730–1980), as defined by *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*,¹ there are many foreign characters, among them English ones. Differences in the mentality of the British² and Russians³ are reflected in their attitude towards foreigners. This shows that the use of foreign stereotypes in literature is not confined to English language authors. It is difficult to discern just how prevalent the use of these characters when we compare Russian and English literary fiction, for one, there were a lot more books published in English. The overall impression is that until at least the mid-twentieth century, there is a clear asymmetry between Western European and American characters in Russian literature and vice versa. This phenomenon might be explained by the fact that there were more foreigners with the means and reasons to be in Russia than was the reverse case, albeit France and, to a lesser extent, other Western countries including the U.S.A., were popular destinations for Russians. Perceptions among the Russian readership make depictions of foreigners more popular, whereas it may be fair to say that English-language readerships do not focus their attention on a single national or cultural group in the same way. The presence of Russian aristocrats in France' [L'Éducation sentimentale] in Chapter 6 we find a typical reference, 'Now she lived with a very rich man, a Russian, Prince Chernukov, who espied her last summer during the races at Champ de Mars'⁴ [Elle était, maintenant, avec un homme très riche, un Russe, le prince Tzernoukoff, qui l'avait vue aux courses du Champ de Mars, l'été dernier.]. However, it was the onset of the Cold War in the 1950s, which really increased the number of Russian characters in English (as well as Western European and American) literature. While it is difficult to say whether later English authors were influenced by French authors for the reasons outlined above, it is at least true that the use of the French orthography of Russian names in English literature (Rossokoff, Tchernoukoff, Dragomirow et al) was lifted wholesale.

1. The Portrayal of Russian Characters in Classic English Crime Fiction

During period between the late nineteenth century and the Cold War, detective fiction was a particularly rich source of Russian characters, and this article will focus on the Russian characters of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Russians abound in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes short story, *The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez*,⁵ published in 1905, but likely written during the Russo-Japanese war that began on 10th February 1904, an event covered widely in the press. Agatha Christie writes Russian characters into *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *The Big Four* (1927) and *The Labours of Hercules* (1947). These representations hark back to Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 novella *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, where the murderers of the victims Madame L'Españaye and her daughter, are overheard speaking foreign languages, of which Russian is mentioned as a possibility.⁶ Poe's role as an early and highly influential

representative of the genre, generated the suggestion of a potential association of 'sinister' with 'Russian'.

'Sinister' was not only associated with Russian characters in English literature; rather, it became often part of the stereotypical 'sinister foreigner' trope. Charles Dickens includes the irredeemable figure of the Frenchman Rigaud/Blandois/Lagnier in *Little Dorrit* (1855–1857).⁷ When Wilkie Collins wrote *The Moonstone* in 1868, he included three murderous Indian jugglers, although the English characters are also deeply unsavoury for the most part.⁸ A suspicious foreigner, Eduardo Lucas, turns up in Conan Doyle's Holmes story *The Adventure of the Second Stain*,⁹ and Beppo and his Italian accomplices are featured in *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons*.¹⁰ The Luccas and Giuseppe Gorgiano, a vicious killer, are depicted in *The Adventure of the Red Circle*¹¹ which was first published in the U.K. in 1911. Even Hercule Poirot is not immune when it comes to the 'sinister foreigner' trope, although Christie's tongue is firmly in her cheek. In *The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez*,¹² Conan Doyle paints a thoroughly stereotypical portrait of the murderer, Anna, as a hysterical Russian nihilist, and Holmes' deduction is based on this. In his 1892 story *The Adventure of the Engineer's Thumb*,¹³ Conan Doyle's portrayal of Colonel Lysander Stark is notable for his 'Teutonic' characteristics of ruthlessness and callous violence. Occasionally, the boot is on the other foot, with foreigners becoming the victims, as in the Holmes story *The Adventure of the Greek Interpreter* (1893).¹⁴

Poirot's numerous faux pas in language and manners, came to be despised, famously, by the author herself. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, Princess Natalia Dragomiroff's handkerchiefs are labelled with a Cyrillic monogram, where 'H' corresponds to Latin 'N', which misleads the great detective.¹⁵

2. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

John Whitley in his introductory essay to Conan Doyle's work offers an interesting explanation for the use of foreign characters. He suggests that 'the real dangers in Late Victorian society came from within',¹⁶ yet the laws of the detective fiction genre dictate that the story should console and give solace to the reader (ibid), therefore the danger is best associated with outside characters. Conan Doyle frequently offers evidence of Whitley's insight. In the Holmes crime novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–1902), although Stapleton is British, he arrives from South America. Similarly, the British villains in a short story *The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist* (1903) formulate their evil plans while in South Africa. The aforementioned Beppo from *The Adventure of the Six Napoleons* is Italian, and therefore associated with the Mafia. Anna's and Colonel Stark's behaviour is explained, or not, by their foreign origin. Whitley goes on to point out the downside of this externalising process, stating, 'Such xenophobia naturally breeds jingoism' (ibid). The exception, in our opinion, is the overt jingoism of *His Last Bow: The War Service of Sherlock Holmes*, which was written in 1917 (ibid). The date of publication makes explanation unnecessary.

The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez echoes Oscar Wilde's 1880 play *Vera; or, the Nihilists* where both protagonists are Russian Nihilists. Wilde and Conan Doyle imbibe their women with similar characteristics, which are due to the 'cruelty', 'ferocity' and 'severity' of Russian life, something later described by Maxim Gorky in *My Childhood* (1913) as the 'crushing abominations of uncivilised Russian life'. With no experience of life in Russia, their likely sources of information were the (often sensationalised) stories about the

brutal persecution of nihilists and other revolutionaries in the press, though the effect of Gorky's work can also be assumed. Sensationalist journalism also affected the readers' expectations of the portrayal of life in the Russian Empire, which thus frequently relied on stereotypes. These stereotypes were partly motivated by the reportage on the Crimean War in the 1850, while in the second half of the nineteenth century, the clash of geopolitical interests of the two empires in Central Asia contributed to the negative portrayal of Russia by the British press. Only around 1907, against the background of the growing threat from Kaiser Germany, did Britain begin to take a favourable attitude to the idea of a British–Russian alliance. The abiding tropes of that conflict in journalism were that the Russians were brutal and aggressive hordes, and that the British leadership were incompetent. Conan Doyle refers to Russia and Russian historical events quite often. In the opening paragraphs of the first Holmes adventure, *A Scandal in Bohemia* (1891), Watson recalls hearing about Holmes' activities while Watson was enjoying married life, 'From time to time I heard vague account of his doings: of his summons to Odessa in the case of the Trepoff murder ...'.¹⁷ In chapter 13 of *The Hound of the Baskerville* whilst recounting precedent to Watson, Holmes says 'Students of criminology will remember the analogous incidents in Grodno, in Little Russia in '66 ...'.¹⁸ The Crimean War is mentioned in *The Adventure of the 'Gloria Scott'* (1893), as a reason for an inadequate ship being used to transport convicts to Australia.¹⁹ In *The Naval Treaty* 'The French or the Russian embassy would pay any immense sum to learn the contents of these papers.'²⁰ 'The adventure of the old Russian woman' is mentioned in *The Musgrave Ritual*.²¹ Wilde appears to have had a keen interest in Russia, and was politically influenced by Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), a noted anarcho-communist. It is perhaps the reason that his caricatures are more melodramatic, other worldly, and saturated with *sui generis* details and anachronisms,²² than those of Conan Doyle, which are more prosaic and restrained. Between 1894 and 1903, Conan Doyle published 17 short stories set in the Napoleonic Wars about Etienne Gerard, a fictional officer in the French Hussars. The humour is found in his satire of French vanity and English manners. In *How the Brigadier Rode to Minsk* (1902) Conan Doyle portrays the dashing officer saving a beautiful Russian lady from a vicious and ill-mannered Cossack, but also offers a very sympathetic portrait of a French-speaking aristocratic Russian officer.²³ Although Poe is celebrated as the first English language writer in detective fiction, he wrote little besides 'Murders at the Rue Morgue' in this genre. Conan-Doyle was deliberately writing detective fiction, and as such it can be argued that all subsequent writers in this genre were dancing to his tune. It is unlikely that a writer of any note in the century following the height of his success was not aware of his oeuvre, as his work was not so prolific as to dissuade the most unenthusiastic reader from consuming his entire output. Among those who could not be regarded as 'reluctant' consumers of popular fiction, Agatha Christie stands out as the most accomplished author to follow the path so effectively charted by the great originator of British popular fiction.

3. Agatha Christie

Fêted in her own lifetime every bit as much as Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie (1890–1976) entered English literary life ten years before Conan Doyle's death in 1930. Her formative years fell into the period when relations with Russia were less hostile than during Conan

Doyle's youth. In keeping with the genre and the expectations of the readership, her characters reflected the stereotypes of representation, but the political tension between the USSR and the U.K., which had become poisonous by the mid-1920s, contributed to her wariness of Russian characters. *The Big Four*, a Poirot mystery, was written in 1926, a mere six years after British troops had been fighting the Red Army, and nine years after the Revolution had effectively severed diplomatic and social ties and forced the Russian aristocracy into exile.²⁴ In 1924 the U.K. recognised the USSR, only to suspend diplomatic relations in May 1927 for two more years. Christie's novel, published in January 1927, is a strong reflection of the confusion, pessimism and spy-fever that gripped the English-speaking world at the time, particularly the middle classes, who made up most of her readership. These quotes reflect the tone of the book. In Chapter 11, "Hardly that," said Japp dryly. "I don't think even a Russian would murder another man in order not to be beaten at chess ...". In chapter 15 Captain Hastings recounts that,

Extraordinary-looking Slavs were constantly calling to see him, and though he vouchsafed no explanation as to these mysterious activities, I realised that he was building some new defence or weapon of opposition with the help of these somewhat repulsive-looking foreigners. Once, purely by chance, I happened to see the entries in his passbook – he had asked me to verify some small item – and I noticed the paying out of a huge sum – a huge sum even for Poirot who was coining money nowadays – to some Russian with apparently every letter of the alphabet in his name.

These descriptions are largely negative, but they contrast with the melancholic, but sympathetic depictions in other novels like that of Princess Natalia Dragomiroff' (*Murder on the Orient Express*) or that of Countess Vera Rossakoff (*The Big Four*, and two short stories, *The Double Clue* and *The Capture of Cerberus* – both from *The Labours of Hercules*). Both female characters are depicted quite positively, even though both are criminals, in contrast with the blameless 'Slavs' described by Hastings. Rossakoff is even honoured as Poirot's love interest. Christie, along with the British establishment, appears to accept the view that ordinary Russians were dangerous subversives, and the aristocrats were tragic victims of injustice. She has her less sophisticated characters voice this, whether she believed it herself.

In his *Sociological Encyclopaedic Russian-English Dictionary*, Moscow-based sociologist Sergei Kravchenko defines Russophobia as 'a feeling of hostility and enmity towards people of Russian nationality'.²⁵ Though Agatha Christie perhaps cannot be termed as out-and-out Russophobe, she does not hold back in her negative description of these characters. While clearly admiring these women for their wit, manners and invention, there is a definite whiff of thievery associated with Countess Rossakoff, echoing the Victorian trope of penniless French aristocrats pilfering where possible, and begging when necessary. Countess Rossakoff is an impoverished Russian aristocrat, although her aristocratic descent is not quite certain, deprived by the revolution of her wealth and position in society, retaining her aristocratic allure, to the point of charming a fussy Belgian moralist detective into complicity in her crimes. Even though Christie is not overtly Russophobic, she does not portray Russian characters with sympathy, only their plight. The penniless aristocrat trope permeates much of English literature, from the beguiling and immoral Irene Adler, who outwits Sherlock Holmes, to Ian Fleming's character Tatiana Romanova, an amoral femme fatale for the James Bond film *From Russia with Love* (1957). Tatiana

Romanova is depicted as using a stolen spoon to eat her soup, and ultimately betrays her country for vain and selfish reasons. The suggestion is that she resents the Soviets as she is descended from the aristocracy.²⁶ These portrayals clearly mark the stereotypical model used. There are 'good/bad' Russians, who are generally impoverished aristocrats, forced into transgressive behaviour by circumstances beyond their control, while the rest of the Russians are simply 'bad'. Princess Dragomiroff is 'bad' as she exposes all of the failings of the Romanov imperial dynasty. Through her husband's foresight or happy accident, Princess Dragomiroff has retained the bulk of her fortune, and is therefore able to ride the Orient Express in luxury, accompanied by a maid. By 1934, when *Murder on the Orient Express* was published, political factionalism was at warlike levels, and Christie portrays the Princess in colourful detail, juxtaposing her decrepit physical countenance with her elegant, and obviously expensive, tailored clothing and her valuable jewellery.²⁷ Perhaps this is a direct reference to Alexander Pushkin's short story 'The Queen of Spades' (1834), which depicts the elderly Countess in a strikingly similar fashion, down to the protagonist witnessing her in indecent detail. In Chapter 5 of *Murder*, Christie has Mary Debenham telling Poirot of Dragomiroff, 'Well – that old lady, for instance. You have probably noticed her. A very ugly old lady, but rather fascinating. She has only to lift a little finger and ask for something in a polite voice – and the whole train runs.' In Chapter 3, Christie writes, 'Poirot's eye passed on.

At a small table, sitting very upright, was one of the ugliest old ladies he had ever seen. It was an ugliness of distinction – it fascinated rather than repelled. She sat very upright. Round her neck was a collar of very large pearls which, improbable though it seemed, were real. Her hands were covered with rings. Her sable coat was pushed back on her shoulders. A very small expensive black toque was hideously unbecoming to the yellow, toad-like face beneath it. She was speaking now to the restaurant attendant in a clear, courteous but completely autocratic tone.

You will be sufficiently amiable to place in my compartment a bottle of mineral water and a large glass of orange juice. You will arrange that I shall have chicken cooked without sauces for dinner this evening – also some boiled fish.

The attendant replied respectfully that it should be done. She gave a slight gracious nod of the head and rose. Her glance caught Poirot's and swept over him with the nonchalance of the uninterested aristocrat.' Then the Director of the railway company, Monsieur Bouc appears, "She is a personality," said M. Bouc. "Ugly as sin, but she makes herself felt. You agree?" Poirot agreed'.²⁸

In Poirot's first observation, there are uncanny echoes of Pushkin's fairy-tale in verse 'The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish' (1833).

The old man returns to the old woman,
And what does he see? In a great house,
On the porch, sits his old lady,

Regaled in the finest sable wrap,
With a brocaded cap on her head,
Festooned in a pearl necklace,
And be-ringed in gold,
On her feet she wears crimson boots,
She is surrounded by diligent servants, and,
She beats and pulls the hair of those who drag their feet

The old man says to the old woman,
 'Greetings, your Highness, Surely, now, your soul is satisfied?'
 But she sent him away with a flea in his ear,
 To work in the stables. (Translated by I. P. Turner and I. V. Boichuk)

As a voracious reader in her youth, it is likely that Christie had some familiarity with Pushkin's fairy tales: Dragomiroff resembles the fisherman's wife, updating the 'with a brocaded cap on her head' to reflect the Parisian styles popular at the time. Dragomiroff lives, not by the sea, but on the fashionable Avenue Kléber, near the Arc de Triomphe. Moreover, she is not of peasant stock. Similarly, Rossakoff chooses to festoon her neck with large pearls, reinforcing the idea that Christie is taken with this caricature of Russian nobility, well-heeled or otherwise.

While it is impossible to know whether Christie read Pushkin, the similarities are certainly there. A cosmopolitan Russian émigré aristocrat, travelling on the luxurious and glamorous Orient Express in the early 1930s with a servant and dressed almost as a character from a fairy-tale, also reflects the attitudes expressed by Pushkin's character. In the poem, the fisherman's wife 'pulls the hair of those who drag their feet'. In Chapter 15, Christie has Dragomiroff saying,

With such a man as that, do you know what I should have liked to have done? I should have liked to call to my servants: 'Flog this man to death and fling him out on the rubbish heap.' That is the way things were done when I was young, Monsieur.²⁹

At the time of writing, such ideas were considered savage, but Dragomiroff's youth does not fall into the era when this was acceptable, either. This is likely more reminiscent of the legendary sadism of Ivan the Terrible's henchman Malyuta Skuratov, or the notorious eighteenth-century excesses of noblewoman Darya Saltykova, infamous for beating her serfs to death. A well-read author such as Christie would have been aware of these notorious characters from history, and it is possible that her audience would also recognise them. Although it is possible that isolated incidences of physical mistreatment of tenants did still occur in the time of Dragomiroff's youth, her life is roughly contemporaneous with that of another literary character, Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina. In his novel, first published in English in 1887, Tolstoy mentions judicial beatings for peasants,³⁰ which still occurred after the Emancipation of the serfs after 1861, but not in the polite society of St Petersburg, and not to the point of death.

At this point, it may be useful to examine origin of the idea about unusual cruelty in Russian society. Russian criminologists K. Gutsenko and M. Kovalev explain that although corporal punishment was part of the Criminal Code reforms of the 1860s, beating was restricted to 20 strokes from the birch, and was a sentence handed down exclusively by the Volost (a traditional rural administrative subdivision) Courts,³¹ some older customary punishments persisted in prisons and prison camps in Siberia and elsewhere (the ancestors of the GULags). These are described in Tolstoy's last full-length novel *Resurrection* published in 1899, which describes how ordinary Russians became caught up in the unfair and brutal judicial system of the time. Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote a considerable amount about judicial corporal punishment in his *The House of the Dead*.³² British and American authors may well have been familiar with Dostoyevsky, but his musings on punishment may not be one of the significant ideas that a reader would take from the novel. However, violence, and society's attitude towards it, is a trope common to literature of the

period under review across Europe. Suffice it to say that beating someone to death and throwing them on the tip, was as unacceptable then as it is now. In fact, legal campaigners such as Peter Alexandrov (famous for his 1878 defence of the anarchist Vera Zasulich – prototype of Oscar Wilde’s *Vera, the Nihilist*)³³ championed penal reform, and the reform movement eventually succeeded in having corporal punishment abolished in 1904.

In *Resurrection* (1899), Tolstoy writes about the lengths the prison authorities go to in order to hide the birching of the prisoner Vasilyev from the main protagonist, nobleman Dmitri Nekhlyudov. Christie was not the only author of the time ascribing unwarranted brutality to Russian societal norms. French writer Georges Bernanos wrote *Journal d’un curé de campagne* (‘The Diary of a Country Priest’) in 1936, making it a near contemporaneous novel with ‘Murder on the Orient Express’. His eponymous priest characterises life in Russia thus, ‘Le gémissement du moujik sous les verges, les cris de la femme rossée, le hoquet de l’ivrogne ...’³⁴ (‘The groan of the muzhik (peasant) being birched, the cries of the beaten woman, the hiccups of the drunkard ...’). This colourful description might suggest that Eastern brutality, as opposed to Western civilised norms, was typical of the descriptions of Eastern Europe (it suffices to remember *The Dark Frontier* by Eric Ambler). And it was well-established. Consider Alexandre Dumas’ description of an extra-judicial and elaborate execution in his supposedly factual account *Vaninka* written in 1839 as part of his *True Crimes* series.³⁵ An extract reads,

About the end of the reign of the Emperor Paul I, that is to say, towards the middle of the first year of the nineteenth century, just as four o’clock in the afternoon was sounding from the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, whose gilded vane overlooks the ramparts of the fortress, a crowd, composed of all sorts and conditions of people, began to gather in front of a house which belonged to General Count Tchernayloff, formerly military governor of a fair-sized town in the government of Poltava.³⁶ The first spectators had been attracted by the preparations which they saw had been made in the middle of the courtyard for administering torture with the knout. One of the general’s serfs, he who acted as barber, was to be the victim. Although this kind of punishment was a common enough sight in St. Petersburg, it nevertheless attracted all passers-by when it was publicly administered.

So it begins, and the author goes on to describe a graphic and extraordinary scene including details of the collar used to fix the victim in place, the formidable whip used to attack him, and even the odd Greek origin of the serf, and his unlikely red hair, all but complemented by the ‘shady cranberry’ (*Fr. klukva ombrageuse*) that overlooked the horror. It is worth noting that Dumas never set foot in Russia until 1859 and is describing the events supposedly taking place of a year before his birth. The aforementioned ‘shady cranberry’ is particularly amusing. Dumas alighted upon the fanciful idea that a ‘*клюква*’ (*klyukva*) was a type of tree.³⁷ The portrayal therefore has the horrific scene played out in the shade of a giant cranberry, somewhat detracting from the seriousness of the event. So notorious is this among Russian speakers, that it has become an idiomatic shorthand for verbose foreign ‘experts’ on all things Russian. With Dumas being widely read in Great Britain, his influence was arguably deeper than that of Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky.

Dumas, Christie, Conan Doyle and other writers of the day, knew their audience. Among the famous London haunted houses, there is one located at The Grenadier public house, Old Barrack Yard, Wilton Row SW1, allegedly visited by the spirit of an officer who was whipped to death there in 1820 for cheating at cards.³⁸ In the U.K., judicial

floggings were repealed in 1948, and the last executions were conducted in 1964. Despite this, beatings were still administered in some schools well into the 1980s. Christopher James Evans depicts some sickening school corporal punishment scenes occurring in the 1970s in his autobiography *It's not What You Think*.³⁹ Kuprin's description of a savage domestic whipping in *A Quiet Life* would have been recognisable to a British readership, particularly because it reflected some of the more lurid crimes documented in the newspapers and journals of the day. Beatings are used to paint a picture of a violent and troubled character in much of the fiction of the day. In *The Adventure of Black Peter*, a 1904 Holmes mystery, Conan Doyle writes, 'He has been known to drive his wife and daughter out of doors in the middle of the night and flog them through the park until the whole village outside the gates was aroused by their screams.'⁴⁰ *The Hound of the Baskervilles* contains references to spousal beatings of Beryl Garcia by the villain Stapleton. The casual use of violence did not go unnoticed at the time. In *My Past and Thoughts* Herzen writes, '... women are never beaten anywhere so often and as painfully as in England'.⁴¹ In his 1947 essay *The English People* George Orwell writes

The prevailing gentleness of manners is a recent thing, however. Well within living memory it was still impossible for a smartly dressed man to walk down Ratcliff Highway without being assaulted, and an eminent jurist, asked to name a typical English crime could answer: 'Kicking your wife to death'.⁴²

Thus, Russia, it seems, had nothing to teach the British where violence was concerned. The British beating the British was possibly not seen by them as being evil in itself, on the contrary, beating is a form of biblical purification, driving out the sin, and bringing the victim closer to the divine. This is, of course, impossible if you are a godless heathen. Savagery was simply an expression of your evil nature, and Russians, if they worship God at all, are certainly worshipping the wrong one. Later this idea would be confirmed by the explicit atheism of the Bolshevik coup, and subsequent regime.

In the figure of Dragomiroff, Christie encapsulates all of the troubling aspects of a stereotypically violent British psyche in an exotic representation of 'the other'. In this case, a rich Russian aristocrat, a remnant of an empire that no longer existed, is beautifully drawn; her ugliness is offset by her refined couture, a combination that hypnotises all of those around her. Her eyes are like precious stones in her 'toad face', eyes being the windows on the soul, inner beauty captured by ugliness, trapped within its shell. We are in the fairy-tale realm. Her ostensibly violent attitude towards transgression is as fierce as her devotion to her friends. Her own violence towards Ratchett/Cassetti, is driven by her love and loyalty towards her friends and even servants. She excuses her maid's outward lack of polish, intimating that Schmidt is devoted to her, and that her loyalty is priceless. The luxurious apparel sported by Dragomiroff, so odd in the eyes of a contemporary Briton, recalls another famous aristocrat from the East, Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismund von Ormstein, Grand Duke Cassel-Felstein and the hereditary King of Bohemia. He is, of course, a protagonist in Conan Doyle's Holmes adventure story, 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891).⁴³ He can be said to represent a form of non-specific eastern stereotype, instantly recognisable to contemporary readers.

His dress was rich with a richness which would, in England, be looked upon as akin to bad taste. Heavy bands of astrakhan were slashed across the sleeves and fronts of his double-breasted coat, while the deep blue cloak which was thrown over his shoulders was lined

with flame-coloured silk and secured at the neck with a brooch which consisted of a single flaming beryl. Boots which extended halfway up his calves, and which were trimmed at the tops with rich brown fur, completed the impression of barbaric opulence which was suggested by his whole appearance. He carried a broad-brimmed hat in his hand, while he wore across the upper part of his face, extending down past the cheekbones, a black vizard mask, which he had apparently adjusted that very moment, for his hand was still raised to it as he entered.

It is all a bit too much from the reader's point of view. His name is overly elaborate, a real mouthful, his clothing is barbaric in its opulence. Their taste, his and Dragomiroff's, is questionable and very foreign. In Christie's *The Big Four* (1927), Hastings' depiction of the 'Extraordinary-looking Slavs', quoted above, reveals a great deal about her attitude and skills of manipulation. In playing on the cultural prejudices of the narrators, Christie and Conan Doyle, are injecting the prose with a wry humour not lost on the reader. Part of the joy of a 'whodunnit' is the superiority you feel over a narrator who hasn't quite worked it out. Naturally, the stereotypes themselves are also a source of humour. All the same, 'foreigners can be a trifle ridiculous' is certainly an overarching theme.

Refined elegance, then, is apparently confined to the British Isles, whose tasteful and modest ways contrast with the 'barbaric opulence' of the Eastern European, and the effete mannerisms of the Francophones, including Poirot himself. The Orient Express may be full of foreigners, but the English are the least foreign. Even when a character like Mary Sutherland from the Holmes adventure *A Case of Identity* (1891), dresses in an eccentric manner, it is excused by reasons of the mental trauma of being jilted at the altar.⁴⁴ Having said that, Mrs Ferrars, a character in the Poirot mystery *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926)⁴⁵ causes envy among her acquaintances, by taking trips to Paris to purchase clothing. Parisian couture had a deservedly good reputation after the 1890s, but the envy generated by these trips is possibly more pecuniary than sartorial. Sartorial acceptability goes only as far east as Paris, it seems. In any case, Parisian and English tastes are of a type apart from exotic, and slightly vulgar, Central and Eastern European styles. Dragomiroff's expensive toque may be Parisian, still it 'is hideously unbecoming to the yellow, toad-like face'.⁴⁶ This is the tone one can detect from Christie and Conan Doyle, who would never consider that a Russian might appreciate couture through their own sense of aesthetic.

Christie's depiction of Dragomiroff actively courts the stereotypes of the Russian aristocrat, she somewhat over-orders food for a woman of such slight stature and advanced age. Take her instructions to the restaurant attendant about the food to be taken to her compartment (see above).⁴⁷ This may be an aristocratic excess, but it may also be an allusion to the Russian fondness for a 'full table'. Anton Chekhov's stories are replete with over-consumption, with the characters often dying as a result. That said, descriptions of her fairy-tale ugliness, extravagant fashion, odd eating habits, and imperious tone, fail to detract from her essential goodness and nobility as portrayed by Christie. Dragomiroff, regardless of her otherness, unites the characters on the train in admiration for her loyalty and devotion to her friends, and even servants.

Russia itself makes an appearance in the *Murder on the Orient Express* when Colonel Arbuthnot gives evidence to Poirot in Chapter 8.

Because I remember – sniffing, you know – just when I was talking about the utter washout Stalin's Five-Year Plan was turning out. I know the idea – woman – brought the idea of the

position of women in Russia into my mind. And I know we hadn't got on to Russia until pretty near the end of our talk.⁴⁸

This indicates a prevailing awareness of Russia throughout the 20s and 30s. Incidentally, the Soviet radio play of the story from 1968 changes the conversation from Russia to France, probably, for reasons of censorship.⁴⁹ Despite Dragomiroff's 'Russianness', her character exudes a 'cosmopolitan' air. She was born in Russia, received French citizenship (not all emigrants did, as Ivan Bunin could have testified), has numerous friends in America, and travels the world, speaking several foreign languages fluently. Even her maid is German. The idea of 'Russian-ness' as applied to characters depicted as living and true, reinforces their stereotypical qualities, as each character demonstrates those qualities. The typicality of the 'Russian' can be effectively migrated to characters that adopt these qualities for reasons of subterfuge, or those characters ascribed 'Russian' stereotypical tropes in order to depict their otherness to the readership.

4. Fake Russian Characters

Conversely, the stereotypes of 'real' Russian characters are reinforced when one considers 'fake' Russian characters. There must be a way to understand that they are supposed to be Russian and therefore it is necessary to exaggerate anything stereotypically Russian. In one of Conan Doyle's Holmes mysteries, *The Adventure of the Resident Patient* (1893), the criminals in pursuit of the victim choose to assume the guises of a Russian nobleman and his son. Dr Trevelyan, the dupe, tells Holmes of the nobleman, 'He was an elderly man, thin, demure, and commonplace – by no means the conception one forms of a Russian nobleman'.⁵⁰ In the 1985 TV adaptation of the story by the British Granada TV company, Dr Trevelyan asks questions not written in the original work, which makes only a general reference to them. The last of his questions is 'Do you drink alcohol?' to which the nobleman answers enthusiastically, 'Vodka!'. He responds by asking, 'Every day?' before realising that his patient is having a cataleptic fit. This shows that this stereotype still resonated with British audiences nearly a century later.

In Christie's Poirot mystery *The Big Four* (1927), we encounter another fake Russian, Dr Savaronoff, a chess champion living in Westminster in a rented apartment with his niece Sonia Daviloff and their servant Ivan. Ivan was the first person that Poirot and Hastings meet in their visit, 'The door of the flat was opened to us by a manservant with a peculiarly wooden face. It seemed impossible to believe that that impassive countenance could ever display emotion'⁵¹ – an inscrutable countenance reminiscent of Trevelyan's nobleman. Fake Russians also pop up in French detective fiction. Maurice Leblanc's famous gentleman burglar Arsène Lupin pretends to be a Russian Prince at one point.⁵² The character Sonia Daviloff's name only differs in two letters from the name of another Russian character familiar to French readers – Sonia Danidoff. She appears in the Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain 'Fantômas' canon, notably in *Le bain de la princesse Sonia*.⁵³ The nuances or accuracy of Russian proper names are neglected, or regarded as insufficiently important by British and French authors alike. We may surmise that it is possible that they assume that their own ignorance is shared by their readership.

Hence the act of naming of Russian characters is particularly telling. Dr Savaronoff receives an inheritance from one Madame Gospoja. The name Savaronoff sounds more Bulgarian than Russian to the Russian ear, but to the English ear, it sounds Slavic enough to pass muster. Gospoja sounds almost identical to the Russian word *gospozha*

(mistress) and is unthinkable as a Russian family name. Scant attention was paid at this time in general to a correct version of Russian names. Russian names have always been a problem for Western European authors: Friedrich Schiller skilfully used Russian names like Igor, Oleg, Marfa, Gleb, Olga, and Ksenia in his unfinished 1805 play 'Demetrius, but strange names like ' Vaninka, Telyatina (veal), and Telega (cart) abound, as can be seen in Dumas' work. Making up Russian-sounding but non – Russian names was a habit not confined to the English-speaking literati. This shows the efforts made to depict Russians in a sympathetic and accurate light were lacking, at best, and deemed of no importance, at worst. Little to no effort was made by highly literate and erudite authors to depict these characters in a nuanced or accurate way.

Hastings and Poirot notice various Russian items on display in Dr Savaronoff's flat. 'One or two wonderful ikons hung upon the walls, and exquisite Persian rugs lay upon the floor. A samovar stood upon a table.' But we now know that Dr Savaronoff is a fake Russian, and the likelihood of him rescuing a samovar are slim considering Inspector Japp's earlier statement to Poirot, 'Savaronoff fell foul of the Bolsheviks at the outbreak of the Revolution. He was even reported killed. In reality he escaped, and for three years endured incredible hardships in the wilds of Siberia.' This suggests that in Christie's fictional world, even the criminals seek to enforce Russian stereotypes.

Conan-Doyle and Christie did not, of course, exist in a vacuum. English-speaking authors had also included Russian characters in works created in previous and following literary epochs. For example, Oscar Wilde's 1880 play 'Vera; or, the Nihilists', is a melodrama set in Russia, all the characters being Russians.

The existence of the Iron Curtain undoubtedly caused an increase in the interest of the Western reading audience in Russian characters, and naturally, many writers tried to satisfy this demand. The use of Russian characters is convenient, it is postulated, because they are sufficiently foreign as to be exotic, and therefore malleable to these authors. This allows convenient dramatic licence to be made in their character plots to suit the needs of the author. At the same time, they are not so alien as to not fit into the European cultural milieu. The Russian Revolution served only to heighten this sense of mysterious familiarity and inject an element of threat into the mix. Russians, once seen as exotic, could now be classed as dangerous and actively subversive.

A special place in this regard belongs to the novel *The Great Fortune* (1960) by English writer Olivia Manning, one of the characters of which is Prince Yakimov, an impoverished White-Russian émigré. In Anthony Burgess' 1962 novel *A Clockwork Orange* the author creates an argot called 'Nadsat', used by the central character and his associates. It is based on Russian words, which are then Latinised and inserted into English grammatical structure.⁵⁴ The author's choice of Russian is primarily due to the historical context in which he was writing. At the time the Cold War was at its peak, with the Cuban Missile Crisis bringing the world to the brink of a catastrophic, and potentially terminal, Third World War. From the middle of the twentieth century the number of Russian characters in British and American literature increased dramatically, as evidenced by the popularity of works by Martin Cruz Smith (*Gorky Park* 1981,⁵⁵ *'Polar Star'* from 1989⁵⁶ and the subsequent 'Arkady Renko' stories), Anthony Burgess ('Honey for the Bears' from 1963),⁵⁷ Tom Clancy ('The Hunt for Red October' from 1984),⁵⁸ Peter Wright ('Spycatcher' from 1987⁵⁹ – a work of non-fiction), and Duncan Kyle AKA James Meldrum ('The Semonov Impulse' from 1975),⁶⁰ as well as many others.

However, a detailed analysis of all these works is beyond the scope of this study, primarily as the volume of the source material precludes it. Ian Fleming's characters are similarly too voluminous to tackle here. Somerset Maugham's extensive list of Russian characters is well served by an article 'Russia and Russians in S. Maugham's Journalism (on Material from the Writer's Notebooks)' by A. D. Savenkova.⁶¹ Spy thrillers are, of course, a source of many Russian fictional characters, a good example is 'Red Centre', a 1987 work by English writer Frederick Nolan.⁶² The end of the Cold War did not signal the end of interest in Russia. British writer Simon Sebag Montefiore has written a number of books about the history of Russia, including a biography of Potemkin in 2001, an account of Stalin's rule in 2003, as well as fiction about Russia, including 'Sashenka' in 2008, which is set in Petrograd in 1916, Moscow in 1939 and in the Caucasus, and London and Moscow in 1994.⁶³ Of course, his works set in Russia are replete with Russian characters. For a recent example, Katharine McMahon's in 'The Rose of Sebastopol' (2007), depicts the events of the Crimean War; Russians in the book are numerous, but nameless.⁶⁴ Likewise, American writer Steve Berry in his 2003 book 'The Amber Room' has a Russian character, Danya Chapaev, in a leading role.⁶⁵ This demonstrates the continuing effect on the literary elite, of the stereotyping of Russians in the formative period of English fiction writing.

5. Conclusion

It is clear from our evidence above, that there is a certain stereotypical way of depicting Russian characters in English literature, a feature that has many similarities with French literature not explored here. The infrequency of Russian characters in English literature from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Second World War is characteristic of Western European literature in general. The tide only turns Post-war, when, with a geopolitical shift of mounting significance, Russian and Soviet characters increase in frequency in Western literature and culture in general; a situation that lasts to the present. It is apparent that there have been some significant factors in this. The collapse of the Soviet Union allowed significant numbers of former Soviet citizens to emigrate to Europe and North America, creating a rich vein of mysterious immigrants from which to mine cultural material. Also, mass media and the internet have allowed for a de-mystification of Russia and its culture, with which authors and filmmakers can access to previously restricted information. This dissonant combination of accessibility, coupled with cultural 'strangeness', will ensure that Russian characters continue to appear into the future.

In the period under review in this article, roughly from the 1880s to the 1960s, the appearance of Russian characters in English literature shows a clear tropism for works in detective fiction which 'is traditionally defined as an offshoot of adventure literature'.⁶⁶ We often find them in the works of Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. This is important, since they represent the best-known authors in the most popular genre of fiction. This, of course, means that their depictions of Russians are seen by the widest possible audience, and are internalised by many, including Russians. The impact was measured by Narkevich in 1974, where he found that about 500 works of detective fiction were being published annually in the U.K. and U.S.A.⁶⁷ The repetition and re-depiction of familiar characters in crime fiction bring about tropes that are drawn on in the production of theatre and film. John Whitley spoke of this as an attempt to externalise danger and

thereby psychologically neutralise it. Occasionally, cultural peculiarities are exploited as plot devices, as with Princess Dragomiroff's handkerchiefs marked with the Cyrillic alphabet, or Countess Rossakoff's similarly marked cigarette case.

A selection of these tropes is apparent in nearly all significant works of English language fiction. Many of them are perceived as negative, like 'ferocious', 'morally degenerate', 'cruel', 'decadent' (particularly connected to furs), 'immoderate', 'superfluous', 'barbarously splendid', 'revolutionary' (in the political sense), 'other', 'alcoholic', and 'peasant-like'. These are the tropes most often assigned to the working or under classes. On the positive side are ideas of 'nobility', 'aristocracy', 'outstanding intelligence', 'dedication' and even 'heroism'. These tend to be characteristics attributed to the gentry and the upper classes, which is often in concurrence with their depiction of classes from the authors' native countries. When it comes to depicting clothing and mannerisms, Western writers are on decidedly shaky ground. Most dress and express their characters as Central European, more Budapest than Bryansk, more Vienna than Vladivostok. Command of Russian naming styles is not paid much heed, either, with English-speakers rating as poorly as their Western European counterparts. As the cultural backdrop changed in the post-war period, portrayals of Russians in English-language fiction moved from the exotic to the political. This reflects a rising fear of the Soviet Union, and a greater cultural awareness of the Cold War.

One enduring feature of the works analysed here, is the phenomenon of 'fake' Russians, the idea that non-Russian characters adopt a 'Russian' persona as a way to mask nefarious actions. The tricky Russians also pretend to be people they are not, putting on a veneer of 'civilisation', and hiding their diabolical acts in plain sight. The implications of the stereotypes depicted here go beyond detective fiction. It is difficult to say whether these portrayals reflect our cultural attitudes, or actively form negative stereotypes in the mind of the reader. In the difficult times in which we live, nuance is at a premium. As the number of Russian characters in Western culture continues to grow, this analysis serves as a basis to understanding the origins of current tropes.

Notes

1. Moser, *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*.
2. Fox, *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules*.
3. Gudzenko, *Russkii mentalitet*.
4. Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*.
5. Conan Doyle, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.
6. Poe, *The Premature Burial*. *Stories*, 135.
7. Dickens, *Little Dorrit*.
8. Collins, *The Moonstone*.
9. Conan Doyle, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.
10. *Ibid*.
11. Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of Red Circle*.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.
14. Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.
15. Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*.
16. Whitley, "Introduction," 8.
17. Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.
18. Conan Doyle, *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes*, 286.

19. Conan Doyle, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*.
20. Conan Doyle, *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes*, 804.
21. *Ibid.*, 725.
22. Boichuk et al., "Local Color in Oscar Wilde's Play," 93–5.
23. Conan Doyle, *Brigadier Etienne Gerard*.
24. Christie, *The Big Four*.
25. Kravchenko, *Sociologicheskij enciklopedicheskij russko-anglijskij slovar*, 362.
26. Fleming, *Dr No. Moonraker. Thunderball*, 427–565.
27. Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*.
28. *Ibid.*, 29–30.
29. *Ibid.*, 207.
30. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*.
31. Gutsenko and Kovalyov, *Pravookhranitel'nye organy*.
32. Dostoyevsky, "Selections from the House of the Dead."
33. Aleksandrov, "Delo Zasukhich."
34. Bernanos, "Journal d'un curé de campagne," 67.
35. Dumas, *Vaninka*.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Razvesistaia kliukva*, Wikipedia.
38. Jones, "The Grenadier Public House"; *London's Most Evocative Pubs*.
39. Evans, *It's Not What You Think*, 25–7.
40. Conan Doyle, *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes*, 948.
41. Gertsen, *Byloe i dumy*, 609.
42. Orwell, *The English People*.
43. Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.
46. Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, 29.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, 149.
49. Kristi, *Vostochnyi ekspress. Radiopostanovka. Chast' 1*.
50. Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*.
51. Christie, *The Big Four*.
52. Souvestre and Allain, *Arsène Lupin et Fantômas*.
53. *Ibid.*, 211–23.
54. Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*.
55. Smith, *Gorky Park*.
56. Smith, *Polar Star*.
57. Burgess, *Honey for the Bears*.
58. Clancy, *The Hunt for Red October*.
59. Wright, *Spycatcher*.
60. Meldrum, *The Semonov Impulse*.
61. Savenkova, *Rossiiia i russkie v publitsistike S. Moema*.
62. Nolan, *Red Centre*.
63. Montefiore, *Sashenka*.
64. McMahon, *The Rose of Sebastopol*.
65. Berry, *The Amber Room*.
66. Revich, "Detektivnaia literatura," 90–1.
67. Narkevich, "Detektivnaia literatura," 67.

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