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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Integrating the Animal

JANE COSTLOW AND AMY NELSON

Love all of God's creation, both the whole of it and every grain of sand. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love animals, love plants, love each thing. If you love each thing, you will perceive the mystery of God in things . . . Love the animals: God gave them the rudiments of thought and an untroubled joy. Do not trouble it, do not torment them, do not take their joy from them, do not go against God's purpose. Man, do not exalt yourself above the animals: they are sinless, and you, you with your grandeur, fester the earth by your appearance on it, and leave your festering trace behind you—alas, almost every one of us does!

—FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

Father attached a nail to the end of the knout. When he whipped the horse with this knout she hunched up, trembled, and staggered, with her mouth gaping and teeth bared. Her right groin, haunch and flank became covered with welts and scars the thickness of a thumb, from which blood flowed. By dinner time she stood still: she could not even tremble when they beat her. Father was gloomy and vile-tempered, tears gleamed in his eyes, and from my hiding place behind the cart, I sobbed whenever I looked at [the horse].

—IVAN VOL'NOV, *POVEST' O DNI AKH MOEI ZHIZNI*

There was hardly a cat or a dog left in Leningrad by late December. They had all been eaten. But the trauma was great when a man came to butcher an animal which had lived in his affection for years. One elderly artist strangled his pet cat and ate it, according to Vsevolod Vishnevsky. Later he tried to hang himself, but the rope failed, he fell to the floor, breaking his leg and froze to death. The smallest Leningrad children grew up not knowing what dogs and cats were.

—HARRISON SALISBURY, *THE 900 DAYS: THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD*

A fictional monk cautions his followers about the corrupting consequences of human pride by affirming the presence of the divine in the "untroubled joy" of more humble creatures. A middle-aged revolutionary chronicles the hardships of agrarian life and an abusive father by recalling the agonies of a beaten workhorse. And a famous journalist underscores the brutality of death and survival in a besieged city during World War II by dramatizing the plight of dogs and cats. These epigraphs highlight the contradiction be-

tween the spiritual summons for interspecies compassion and communion, on the one hand, and the gritty violence of human and animal lives, on the other hand. They also define a key dynamic of human-animal histories in general and the way these experiences are inflected in Russia in particular. For they suggest the extent to which animals are implicated both in human lives and in the stories humans tell in order to make sense of the world and their place in it. Following William Cronon's observation that nature, while "lacking a clear voice of its own," is "hardly silent" as a historical subject, this volume looks at how interactions between humans and animals have helped shape the narratives of Russian history and culture. Like the broader category of "nature" to which they are often assigned, animals play an important real and symbolic role in human lives. Our interpretations of these interactions may vary tremendously and certainly reflect human values, but the consequences of these encounters are real for humans and animals alike.¹

How animals shape and inform the human experience in real and symbolic ways is a main concern of the rapidly growing field of animal studies, an interdisciplinary project inspired by such foundational texts as John Berger's "Why Look at Animals" and Claude Levi-Strauss' dictum that "animals are good to think."² A growing body of scholarship provides ample evidence of the exciting possibilities for cross-fertilization between various fields in the humanities. Inspired by this example, the editors of this volume enlisted scholars trained primarily in humanities and social science disciplines. We found that the various approaches to integrating "the animal" into our predominantly human-centered fields opened up exciting possibilities for interdisciplinary dialogue and new approaches to social history and cultural analysis.³ At the same time, we see projects such as ours as productive beginnings in more wide scale and genuinely cross-disciplinary collaboration involving researchers in such animal-centered fields as ethology, ecology, evolutionary biology, and animal behavior.⁴

The connection between the emergence of animal studies as an area of academic inquiry and contemporary concerns with "animal issues," such as the controversies surrounding new biotechnologies, the challenges of protecting endangered species, the moral and practical dilemmas presented by factory farming, and debates about animal rights, seems obvious.⁵ Many scholarly and theoretical mainstays of animal studies literature are explicitly imbedded in the political categories and concerns of Anglo-European culture.⁶ These include a focus on individual rights, the limits and privileges of subjectivity, and the moral ramifications of oppression and cruelty. But as scholars begin to explore the question of the animal in Russia, it

seems clear that some of the standard tropes of the animal studies canon, including the concern about rights and the implications of representation, will either be muted or inflected quite differently.⁷

This stems, at least in part, from the unique and distinctive characteristics of Russian history and culture. Dominated in many respects by concerns about self-definition and its relationship to the West and straddling the landmasses of Europe and Asia, Russian culture is marked by preoccupations with issues of identity, marginalization, and uniqueness that extend the basic concern with an “animal other” to broader patterns of (human) self-definition. The “other animals” of our volume’s title suggest both our interest in the significance of nonhuman animals to human culture in general and our primary focus on the Eurasian plain, where the human-animal relationship is informed by a complex relationship with the West, as well as distinctive geological, geographical, and environmental elements and historical-cultural traditions.⁸ On the one hand, we hope that, like environmental history, animal studies might become an intrinsically transnational field. After all, animal populations and ecological and geographical boundaries are hardly contiguous with political borders and nation-states.⁹ On the other hand, we recognize that Russian culture has been and remains an imperial project where “Russianness” is infused with and relies on complex patterns of domination, interaction, and codependence with a myriad of non-Russians. Although these dynamics may be traced back for millennia, the chronological focus of our volume begins in the eighteenth century and centers on mainstream, “Russian” stories in a region where the stories of animals could and should be varied. The inclusion of a chapter on Sami reindeer herding should serve as a reminder of the multiplicity of human-animal cultures that inform the Russian experience and as a summons to future work in environmental history and animal studies that would be explicitly and self-consciously transboundary and multiethnic.

A central part of Russians’ narratives about national identity has involved professions of a distinctive relationship to the natural world. Stated broadly—and the chapters in this volume provide multiple, more nuanced accounts of this relationship—Russians have often understood themselves to be more “natural” than their western European counterparts. Whether professing a deep, soulful affection for “native nature”—and landscapes that even to their own eyes were distinctly less dramatic than what they saw in Europe, or in European painters’ renderings—or celebrating the vastness of their Russian, and then Soviet, motherland, Russians have tended to point to the *difference* of their natural environment. To that geographical difference has been added a cultural differential, a way of redeeming and recast-

ing perceived backwardness and a “lower” level of development vis-à-vis the West. Consider the role of the peasantry as a kind of “noble savage” in classic Russian literature; intellectuals’ epiphanies in the “bosom of nature”; the turn to nature (in lyric verse or as actual flight) as refuge from unyielding ideological regimes; perennial reliance on natural resource economies; a population strongly identified with agrarian traditions lasting well into the twentieth century; European perceptions and representations of Russia as a barbaric, inscrutable “savage.” All of these sometimes contradictory factors have contributed to distinctive, complex inflections of “Russia” in relationship to “Nature.” Animals often play key roles in these discourses of the natural, illustrating a symbolic configuration that exists both at the level of national cliché and as a reflection of complex and dynamic environmental, cultural, and political realities.

The animal most frequently associated with Russian identity is, of course, the bear. A brief consideration of that animal’s role as metonym for Russia suggests how broadly, and to what various uses, the association has been put. The rhetorical association of Russia and the bear has existed for centuries and is alternately ominous and sentimental: Macbeth’s “rugged Russian bear” is a figure for the epitome of wildness (Act III, scene IV); to eighteenth-century French travelers, Russians were the “ours du Nord”; Rudyard Kipling’s “The Truce of the Bear” (1898) admonishes his countrymen against political dealings with Russia, “the Bear that walks like a man!”¹⁰ The classical scholar Jane Harrison, on the other hand, articulated her considerable affection for Russia as a nation of bears—both dream-creatures and Bolsheviks:

One night soon after the Russian revolution I dreamt I was in a great, ancient forest—what in Russian would be called “a dreaming wood.” In it was cleared a round space, and the space was crowded with huge bears softly dancing. I somehow knew that I had come to teach them to dance the Grand Chain in the Lancers, a square dance now obsolete. I was not the least afraid, only very glad and proud. I went up and began trying to make them join hands and form a circle. It was no good. I tried and tried, but they only shuffled away, courteously waving their paws, intent on their own mysterious doings. Suddenly I knew that these doings were more wonderful and beautiful than any Grand Chain (as, indeed, they might well be!). It was for me to learn, not to teach. I woke up crying, in an ecstasy of humility.¹¹

What these images suggest, among other things, is a tendency to see Russia as the wild other of Europe, an exotic (or pathetic) human creature who is somehow closer to nature and the animal realm. But the association of bears and Russia may also have more literal roots: the flourishing Rus-

sian fur trade over the centuries meant that the skins of bear, fox, sable, and wolves were the most abundant evidence in European capitals of this cold, distant land.¹² European travelers to Russia frequently remarked on the presence of bears at the lively street fairs encountered in any Russian town, a form of entertainment that contemporary scholars link to pre-Christian bear cults. Russians' reverence for the bear suggested its status as a totemic animal whose role as a mediator between life and death was in part transferred with the arrival of Christianity to various Orthodox saints.¹³ Europeans' own countries were increasingly deforested and densely populated; rhetoric in this case is linked to environmental history and a delayed history of deforestation and destruction of habitat. In the nineteenth century, European hunters journeyed to colonial outposts in search of big game; they also went to Russia, in search of bear and wolves they could no longer hunt closer to home.¹⁴

Contemporary use of bear figures in Western political cartoons continues unabated: a Reagan-era cartoon makes fun of the cowboy president, shooting a Soviet Teddy. The visual shorthand is only encouraged with the arrival of Dmitrii Medvedev as president of Russia, since his name derives from the Russian word for bear, although his media persona brings him closer to a "teddy" than to the fearsome beast of some images. An image from 1919 depicts a more threatening (and more realistically drawn) bear turning against the human (but base) threat of Bolshevism to convey the West's hopes for a victory by counterrevolutionary forces in the Russian



FIGURE 1.1. Reagan shoots the Russian bear. Cartoon by Nicholson from "The Australian" newspaper: www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au



FIGURE 1.2.
 "The Bear Turns,"
Punch, or the London
Charivari 156
 (4 June 1919): 443.
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Civil War.¹⁵ Just how "wild" Russia is depends, apparently, on the international geopolitical moment.¹⁶

The chapters in this volume aim to deepen our sense of such cultural and political meanings by suggesting a variety of ways in which animals are integral to Russian history and culture. While political cartoons make easy use of allegorical "creatures," the animals within these chapters might be considered coauthors of human narratives of meaning. Many of the chapters deal with the symbolic importance of animals, whether as stigmatized deliverers of insult and shame to an eighteenth-century noble woman or as equine registers of masculinity in the Soviet period. Other contributions probe the significance of shifting perceptions of animals that are hunted or protected or the clash between the reformist agendas of educated elites and popular ideas and behaviors. Assumptions about the commonality between humans and animals inform several contributions, including Mikhail Alekseevsky's study of the similarities between remedies for human and animal disease in folk medicine and Katherine Lahti's analysis of the "animal" poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Andy Bruno's examination of reindeer herding on the Kola peninsula, on the other hand, highlights the "real"

importance of animals by focusing on what reindeer do rather than what they represent. Some contributions, such as Gesine Drews-Sylla's analysis of performance artist Oleg Kulik and Ann Kleimola's study of legendary animal trainer Vladimir Durov, also deal with the contradictions and real consequences of materialist perspectives on the nature of human-animal existence, perspectives that emerged in nineteenth-century scientific discourse and gained the upper hand in the Soviet period. The final chapters of the volume present compelling evidence of the human impulse to return or retreat to the animal for spiritual vitality in times of social turbulence and transformation.

While many of the contributions draw directly from the interpretive paradigms of established animal studies literatures, four recurring themes in this volume help define the uniquely Russian inflection of the *Other Animals*. Most striking, perhaps, is the dominant presence of animals in utopian impulses that permeate Russian culture across centuries and diverse modes of artistic expression and social organization. This "utopia of inclusive rationality, the *pansophism* of the living world, the communal solidarity of humans and animals," is identified by one scholar not only in the visionary poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov and Nikolai Zabolotsky but in Russian philosophy and science.¹⁷ The importation of Western ideas associated with modernity, capitalism, and socialism presents a second dimension of a distinctively Russian experience. How educated elites assimilated and acted on new sensibilities about social class, "humane" behavior, and urban life in terms of specific behaviors toward nonhuman animals proved to be enormously influential in the nineteenth century. In the Soviet period, massive social engineering in the name of revolutionary change inspired equally ambitious and often devastating quests to transform nature and create a "new Soviet man." A third theme circles around efforts to identify and exploit the physiological roots of human and animal behavior and the ideological implications of these activities. A final theme that emerges from this volume deals with the destabilization of traditional human-animal hierarchies and categories in times of revolutionary upheaval, social transformation, or disintegration.

According to one line of thought, the utopian impulse toward an "embracing Wisdom" that includes animals and humans stems from the distinctive vision of Russian Orthodoxy. This view imagines the biblical Fall as something that affects all sentient life, including the animals. Humans, by this narrative, were driven from a place in which the fruitfulness of the earth would have been theirs without labor, "all creatures, when they saw that Adam had been exiled from paradise, no longer wanted to submit to him, the transgressor: the sun did not want to shine on him, nor did

the moon or the other stars want to appear to him” and both water and air want to turn from one who has disobeyed God. Likewise the animals: “The beasts and all the earthly animals, when they saw that he had fallen from his original splendor, began to disdain him, and all were ready to attack him, and the earth did not want to bear him any longer.” But God intervened, making the earth and the animals continue to serve man, so that “when man will be made new, and once more become spiritual, incorporeal and immortal, then all of creation, which God has placed under man to serve him, will be liberated from this labor, and will also be made new, incorporeal and spiritual.” This tenth-century account shows up in a late-twentieth-century essay on “Blessed Animals.” Together with stories of saints’ encounters with animals, it constitutes a vision of blessed community in which humans no longer force animals into submission but exist together in a version of the peaceable kingdom.¹⁸ Russian hagiography includes numerous stories of saints communing with animals and sharing their forest hermitage with bears. Religious stories of cross-species communication find folkloric equivalents in tales of women who go off into the woods and mate with bears, returning to their village with infants who are half-bear, half-human.

These are admittedly utopian visions of the possibility of cross-species communication; the tradition of patristics and saints’ lives also informed the vision of cosmic compassion and inclusivity apparent in our opening quote from Dostoevsky.¹⁹ But the stories we trace in this volume also locate specific practices that, arguably, manifest literal historical instances of cross-species communication. The Sami, whom Andy Bruno studies, wonder “and how are we not reindeer?”—a question born of centuries (if not millennia) of shared lives and labor. Jane Costlow and Anne Kleimola give us stories of animal trainers whose identities and livelihoods are inextricably linked with their animal partners; the bear trainers’ practice extends back at least for centuries and may have been related to shamanic rituals; the Durovs’ practice—eschewing any coercion or violent manipulation of the animal—grows in part out of this older tradition. The wilderness hermit of Petr Aleshkovsky’s novel *Life of Ferret* lives in harmonious, more than verbal communication with a great elk, who leads the lost hero through a boggy maze. These visions of communication and communion suggest the possibility of shared subjectivity grounded in habitation and practice—what one almost wants to call a trans-species culture; they are also grounded in the attentiveness, or contemplative spirituality, so central to Eastern Orthodoxy.²⁰ They provide, in other words, an intersubjective grounding that (for some Russians) seems more important than the discourse of rights that has proved so important in the West.

Along with this visionary impulse in Russian culture, we also find instances of animals figuring in moral discourse in ways that will seem more familiarly “Western.” Animals function within the Russian folktale as examples of virtue and vice, or foolishness and wisdom, in ways not unfamiliar to readers of Perrault and Grimm.²¹ Animals get used as vehicles of social satire in contexts ranging from cheap prints (the *lubok* of Peter the Great as a cat²²) and fantastic Romanticism (Gogol’s bureaucratic madman imagines dogs engaged in epistolary correspondence) to the circus. The potential uses of such emblematic, reductive satire were not lost on the Soviet state, which invoked bestial clichés to represent foreign imperialists and enemies of the people.

The Soviet propaganda apparatus eagerly represented enemies of the state as vermin to be destroyed; this history reminds us of the complex ways in which representations and realities are interlinked in Russian history, with tragically violent consequences.²³ Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov famously comments that “no animal could ever be so cruel as man.” Ivan’s statement proved appallingly prophetic in the twentieth century (although its place in Dostoevsky’s novel reminds us that the human impulse to cruelty was not invented with the new age, it was merely allied to new forms of technology and surveillance). What is striking here is the extent to which Russia’s great writers included animals in their complex examination of moral choice and the consequences of human freedom. These animals are sometimes emblematic (as in Dostoevsky’s use of the spider as a figure for human evil), but they can also become complexly imagined victims, whose subjectivity is often coextensive with that of humans: Raskolnikov’s memory-dream of a flogged horse whom he rushes to defend is perhaps the most famous example. Tolstoy’s extended description of the vitality and beauty of the horse Frou-Frou helps us grasp the reality and tragedy of Anna Karenina in a way that moves beyond the distinction of human and animal. Both of these tragedies of violence and will are related by their authors to Russia’s experience of modernity—a force of rapid change associated with urbanization, technology, and the repudiation of tradition. The consequences in these novelists’ universes are dire for *both* humans and animals.²⁴

The preoccupation with violence in Russian literature extends to the lived experience of people and animals as well. Indeed, it is difficult to *overstate* the importance of violence and brutality in modern Russia, where the state often intensified the devastation of “natural” disasters, such as the famine (and ensuing cholera and typhus epidemic) of 1891, or was largely responsible for them, as in the “harvest of sorrow” that followed the forced collectivization of the peasantry in the early 1930s. The excesses of state-sanctioned violence against civilian populations in the Soviet period (in

the form of political repression, the use of forced labor in the Gulag, and the mass deportations and relocations of ethnic and religious minorities deemed to be a threat to Soviet power) might have overshadowed the legendary extremes of the tsarist regime, which sent manacled conscripts into Siberian exile on foot and prescribed lashing with the lead-tipped knout for a range of offenses. But when combined with the almost unfathomable destruction of revolutionary upheaval (first in 1905–1907 and again in 1917), civil war, and two world wars, this “brutality” lends a unique cast to Russia’s pursuit of modernity, a project involving the importation of economic structures and political ideologies such as capitalism, liberalism, and socialism, as well as the ideas and sensibilities that attended the rise of bourgeois cultures in western Europe and the United States.

The “practices of modernity,” such as pet keeping, animal protection movements, and the expansion of zoos, that helped support the extension and maintenance of imperial domination, state power, and class control in the West developed in the Russian context as well.²⁵ Amy Nelson and Ian Helfant explore the concern of urban elites about the abusive behavior of workers and peasants toward horses and other livestock while, at the same time, aristocratic hunters’ perceptions of the predatory wolf undergo a marked shift. As in the West, this new sensibility in Russia is linked to the changing relationships between people and animals in daily life associated with increased urbanization. It is also related to the history of emotions, as kindness toward animals and empathy for them become cultural values over the long nineteenth century.²⁶ Like animal protection societies in France, the United States, and Finland, Russian reformers worked to curb such “everyday cruelties” as nest robbing and killing songbirds by young boys. A contemporary of Anna Sewell’s more famous equine hero, Tolstoy’s fictitious horse, Kholstomer, narrates a life of altruistic service to humans whose callousness echoes the careless cruelties described in *Black Beauty*.²⁷

But for all of these resonances, there are important differences as well. The mutualistic relationships between humans and animals in reindeer-herding communities of the arctic north and the complex significance of bears, whose often brutal subjugation was motivated by a sense of ursine-human commonalities, indicate the weakness in the greater Russian context of the Anglo-European preoccupation with individual rights. While the West has focused on asserting and expanding claims of rights and concurrently circumscribing and concealing violence, in Russia the focus has been on the significance of suffering. In her contribution to this volume, Katherine Lahti suggests that Mayakovsky’s poems not only recognize that suffering is shared by humans and animals but assume that it is integral to existence as well as redemptive.

Of course the most profound distinctions between the pursuit of modernity in Russia and the West ensued as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Committed to overcoming the inequities of a society invested in the privileges of wealth and birth in favor of proletarian hegemony, the Soviet regime embraced industrial modernity and launched a vicious assault on the "backwardness" of small-scale, peasant agriculture in the 1930s. Andy Bruno's discussion of the revolution's impact on the Sami, a group of semi-nomadic reindeer herders, documents both the scope and limitations of the socialist program to implement economies of scale and "collectivize" reindeer on state farms. For the indigenous Sami, as well as for traditional peasant communities, the Soviets' forcible transformation of their way of life had profound repercussions. These measures and the ideological imperatives that drove them profoundly influenced animal populations as well.

Of particular import was the Soviet veneration of science and technology as a way by which humans might perfect their own society and overcome the inherent defects of the natural world. As Maxim Gorky declared in a notorious collective work praising the building of the White Sea-Baltic Sea Canal: "In changing nature, man changes himself." Celebrated as a triumph of socialist labor and reeducation, the construction of the canal under appalling conditions by forced labor (with humans occupying the position of "beasts of burden") led to the deaths of up to ten percent of the workforce.²⁸ An enthusiasm for such monumental engineering projects and grandiose efforts to extend industrial agriculture into environmentally marginal territory (that is, the opening of the Virgin Lands under Khrushchev) became hallmarks of the regime's determination to refashion the earth according to man's best interests and designs, an effort appropriately described as "correcting nature's mistakes."²⁹ The contradictory impact of these efforts has been expertly documented by Douglas R. Weiner, whose studies of Soviet nature protection and conservationism highlight both the hegemonic ambitions of the Soviet state and the persistence of ecological sensibilities that developed in the late nineteenth century and throughout the Soviet period.³⁰

As Marxist revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks initially rejected (but then co-opted) such "bourgeois" practices as pet keeping, favoring a utilitarian ethos that assigned value—for people and animals—according to an individual's contribution to building socialism. Hunting dogs and working dogs (who tended herds of socialist livestock, guided polar explorers, and defended the borders of the motherland) were valued members of the community, while the parasitical "lapdogs" of the bourgeoisie and homeless strays were not.³¹ Concern about the threat that stray animals presented to public health intensified after World War II, partly because the renewed

popularity of pet keeping and increased urbanization in this period contributed to the growth of stray dog and cat populations. The Soviets' choice of a stray dog named "Laika" for the passenger slot in Sputnik 2 in 1957 stemmed in part from a kind of hard-nosed practicality that found utility in a creature otherwise stigmatized as parasitical and potentially dangerous.

Like scientists elsewhere, Russian researchers used animal models such as dogs to learn about anatomy and basic life functions such as circulation and respiration. The expansion of scientific work involving vivisection in the nineteenth century was fueled to some extent by the assumption, derived from the Enlightenment, that animal and human bodies were similar. This belief was both offset and later in tension with various assertions of human uniqueness that invoked the soul, consciousness, morality, or the emotions.³² In Russia, the materialist side of this dichotomy gained the upper hand, beginning with Ivan Sechenov's work on reflexes and neurophysiology in the 1860s and was officially sanctioned as consistent with Marxism during the Soviet period. Most capably advanced by Ivan Pavlov, whose work on digestion, the conditional reflex, and higher nervous activity garnered a Nobel prize in 1904, this materialist approach investigated the physical processes and chemical foundations for behavior in humans and animals. Stray dogs, which were readily available and, as social creatures ("man's best friend"), able to adapt to the unique demands of laboratory life, served as Pavlov's most famous research subjects. The choice of dogs for use in the Soviet space program was logical given how much researchers already knew about domestic canine anatomy and behavior. Although many of his claims have since been discredited, the salience of Pavlov's research continues to the present day. As Gesine Drews-Sylla notes in this volume, performance artist Oleg Kulik has scandalized audiences in Russia and across Europe by appropriating the (mis)behavior of Pavlov's legendary dogs, using his dog persona as a grotesque send-up of the Soviets idealized "new man."

Kulik's startling and deliberately offensive transposition of purportedly neutral scientific discourse into the realm of street theater speaks volumes about the explosive—and for many, deeply unsettling—changes that have rocked Russian society in its transition to a post-Soviet reality. Arja Rosenholm's discussion of masculinity and horses in twentieth-century Russia provides us with a snapshot of the chaotic multiplicity that characterizes so much of contemporary Russia: Marshall Zhukov, hero of the Great Patriotic War (the term the Soviets and Russians use to denote World War II), still sits astride his great bronze horse outside the Kremlin walls. In the summer of 2007, however, that equestrian statue confronted a mammoth billboard advertising watches, which depicted a jockey on horseback as one of its im-

ages of speed, efficiency, and maleness. Contemporary Russia has finally become “postmodern”: layers and fragments of history sit side by side at the Kremlin walls, and capitalism, communism, and consumerism circulate in discourse and memory. What collapsed in the early 1990s? What continues to exist and how? It has become something of a cliché to suggest that the apparent stability of Soviet identity vanished with bizarre rapidity, leaving in its wake a vacuum that a confusing plethora of identities and discourses rushed to fill: nationalism, Orthodoxy, decadence, skinheads, feminism, gay rights, New Russians. As one recent anthropologist puts it in his study of the “last Soviet generation,” “Everything was forever, until it was no more.”³³

How have animals figured in this process—and how have the upheavals and implosions of these years affected animals’ lives? Our answers at this point can only be tentative and incomplete, fragmentary field notes from an ongoing process. One thinks for example of a series of rapidly evolving *stages* in the lives of pets, particularly dogs: in the early post-Soviet atmosphere of fear and apprehension, many Russians acquired dogs less as companions than as security guards for their apartments. But in the late 1990s, this shifted to an interest in dogs as signs of status; that shift came with the emergence and expansion of a private sphere and the possibility (in terms of both time and money) of leisure for a growing middle class.³⁴ One notes, too, the reemergence of hunting and equestrian sport, a phenomenon that has brought new (or renewed) sites of leisure and publishers eager to engage their readers’ dreams of weekend activities. One recent issue of the Russian version of *Guns and Ammo*, for example, features a lengthy article on *borzois*, complete with pictures of avid weekend “coursers” on the Volga steppe.³⁵ The transition to a market economy has also meant shifts in agriculture and livestock production. While the early 1990s saw chronic shortages (the infamous “Bush legs” occasioned jokes about homegrown poultry and fears about the feed used on American farms), that period of crisis has largely passed, and contemporary Russian markets boast groaning counters of sausage and milk products. On any given day, the peasant markets are bustling with shoppers and sellers, with cuts of meat that (as in the Soviet era) may look bewilderingly strange to Americans used to plasticized, supermarket standards.

The artistic response to this state of flux (from free fall to the relative stability of the Putin years) has included, interestingly enough, a turn to the animal. The chapters that follow investigate a fascinating array of “manimals” and hybrids in the post-Soviet landscape. Jose Alaniz focuses on the most “realistic” author of this group, Petr Aleshkovsky, whose hero seeks refuge from post-Soviet brutality in a far northern forest populated by to-

temic animals. Gesine Drews-Sylla's discussion of Oleg Kulik highlights his transgressions of the boundaries between species (and propriety): Kulik "becomes" a dog in a series of installations and actions that make reference to major figures in Western animal rights and deep ecology—but without their political inflection. And Darya Kabanova considers the dystopian fiction of one of contemporary Russia's most famous writers, Tatyana Tolstaya. In the bizarre future world of *The Slynx*, a cataclysmic event has altered nature and created a complex universe of hybrid species, only some of whom can remember the world that used to be.

In her contribution to a volume of essays on Russian nature, Aria Rosenholm suggested that the foregrounding of human-animal relations at times of historical crisis has a long history in Russia.³⁶ These contemporary artists seem to bear out that claim; just *why* that might be is an intriguing if confounding question. The environmental crises of the late Soviet period helped to bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union and fundamentally discredited the grand projects of modernization the state had undertaken. An oral history of the Chernobyl disaster relates the profound distress of a liquidator (one of the thousands of unsuspecting soldiers sent in to evacuate and "clean up" the contaminated area) who sees abandoned animals wandering through a landscape they had once shared with Ukrainian peasants: "We met these crazed dogs and cats on the road. They acted strange: they didn't recognize us as people, they ran away. I couldn't understand what was wrong with them until they told us to start shooting at them."³⁷

Radiation, one might say, knows no boundaries, either political or biological. The hybrid animals of post-Soviet writing might well be read as grotesque representations of environmental, as well as social, collapse.

But the animals of post-Soviet Russia are not just, and not only, hybrid grotesques. Here, too, we confront Cronon's "multiple competing narratives." We also find in contemporary Russian culture stories of near mystical communication between humans and wild animals and an apparent return to the nationalist deployment of animal stereotypes associated with the early twentieth century. A recent promotional film produced for the official youth organization *Nashi* ("Our Guys") aims to persuade young men to enlist in the army and defend their country, and it shows a globe being overtaken by an octopus America, whose tentacles are seeking to infiltrate the Russian land mass. Russia itself is—in this cartoon version—a land of pine trees and bears in fur hats. The bears are bumbling about with bottles of vodka, oblivious to the encroaching, monstrous United States.³⁸

How might we read these contemporary "stories"? The recent film *The Mother Wolf of Vesegonsk*³⁹ reminds us that the tradition of animal training is alive and well in Russia (the filmmakers' collaboration with the wolf

group is detailed in an extra on the DVD that is almost as interesting as the film itself). The film presents a cluster of associations with the traditional Russian village, hunting, and masculinity; but here (in contrast to the narratives Arja Rosenholm discusses), this revisitation of cultural topoi brings insights close to those that Ian Helfant relates to Aldo Leopold, where the sudden sense of kinship between hunter and wolf triggers a reappraisal of hunting itself and the antagonistic relationship between wilderness and the domestic. The director uses film to represent the wolf in all her wild beauty and otherness, in a manner neither sentimentalized nor vilified. The film taps into long-standing images and practices but arguably goes somewhere new with them, providing not just a hackneyed form of nationalist nostalgia but engagement with a complex contemporary situation informed by a sense of impending environmental crisis.

On the other hand, the *Nashi* clip represents an official state response to the political apathy of post-Soviet Russia; oddly enough, this seems consonant with what Drews-Sylla identifies as Kulik's retreat from politics, his skepticism regarding democracy. The *Nashi* clip, however, is a disturbing return to stereotypes and a fortress mentality—although one needs to acknowledge the complexity of a moment in which the United States has been seen not just by Russia but by much of the world as possessing imperial ambitions. One of the startling things for an American viewer is to see oneself as a monstrous multitentacled octopus. This might remind us of the enduring complexity for American scholars investigating Russia and the Eurasian land mass. One might argue, of course, that these images do not really have anything to do with animals, but the geopolitical situation *will* have an impact on animals, both human and other.

William Cronon, whose thinking has helped frame this introduction, reminds us that "the special task of environmental history is to assert that stories about the past are better, all other things being equal, if they increase our attention to nature and the place of people within it."⁴⁰ For those of us seeking to understand the relationships of humans and the other animals, Cronon's counsel represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Our stories about the past (and about the present) will be better if they increase our attention to the lives of our other animal companions. Our hope is that this volume will contribute to that work, turning our attention to the place of animals within human history, beginning to imagine what a history of animals in Russia might be.