Reading Backwards
An Advance Retrospective on Russian Literature

Edited by Muireann Maguire and Timothy Langen

This book outlines with theoretical and literary historical rigor a highly innovative approach to the writing of Russian literary history and to the reading of canonical Russian texts.

—William Mills Todd III, Harvard University

Russian authors […] were able to draw their ideas from their predecessors, but also from their successors, testifying to the open-mindedness that characterizes the Slavic soul. This book restores the truth.

—Pierre Bayard, University of Paris 8

This edited volume employs the paradoxical notion of ‘anticipatory plagiarism’—developed in the 1960s by the ‘Oulipo’ group of French writers and thinkers—as a mode for reading Russian literature. Reversing established critical approaches to the canon and literary influence, its contributors ask us to consider how reading against linear chronologies can elicit fascinating new patterns and perspectives.

Reading Backwards: An Advance Retrospective on Russian Literature re-assesses three major nineteenth-century authors—Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—either in terms of previous writers and artists who plagiarized them (such as Raphael, Homer, or Hall Caine), or of their own depredations against later writers (from J.M. Coetzee to Liudmila Petrushevskaia).

Far from suggesting that past authors literally stole from their descendants, these engaging essays, contributed by both early-career and senior scholars of Russian and comparative literature, encourage us to identify the contingent and familiar within classic texts. By moving beyond rigid notions of cultural heritage and literary canons, they demonstrate that inspiration is cyclical, influence can flow in multiple directions, and no idea is ever truly original.

This book will be of great value to literary scholars and students working in Russian Studies. The introductory discussion of the origins and context of ‘plagiarism by anticipation’, alongside varied applications of the concept, will also be of interest to those working in the wider fields of comparative literature, reception studies, and translation studies.
Questions of crime and its punishment have exercised the minds and pens of Russian writers since the nineteenth century, and, indeed, some, such as Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, felt the wrath of Tsars Aleksandr I and Nikolai I and spent several years in exile (Pushkin in the south of Russia from 1820 to 1824, and at his mother’s estate in Mikhailovskoe from 1824 to 1826, and Lermontov twice in the Caucasus, from 1837 to 1838 and, fatefully, from 1840 to 1841). Both Anton Chekhov in *Sakhalin Island* (*Ostrov Sakhalin*, 1893) and Lev Tolstoy in his final novel *Resurrection* (*Voskresenie*, 1899), expressed outrage at prisoners’ living conditions in penal colonies, while also questioning the legal and moral bases of the concept of ‘justice’. In the twentieth century, the harrowing personal testimonies of the Gulag by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov have become celebrated works documenting the war waged by the Soviet state against its own citizens.

It is Fyodor Dostoevsky, however, who most consistently explored crime and its aftermath, not only the fact and practice of its punishment, but also its effects on the individual’s psyche and society’s collective conscience. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between two novels by Guzel’ Yakhina from 2015 and 2018, and their ‘reimagining’ by Fyodor Dostoevsky, especially *Notes from the House of*
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the Dead (Zapiski iz mertvogo doma, 1862). We posit the idea that Yakhina’s fiction forces us to vividly and directly confront the psychological and philosophical realities of Dostoevsky’s world. Looking through the lens of anticipatory plagiarism, we suggest that Dostoevsky’s works are, indeed, his response to the horror of twentieth-century totalitarianism.

On first reading, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Notes from the House of the Dead, published between 1860 and 1862, and Guzel’ Yakhina’s multi-prize-winning debut novel about the Stalinist terror, Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes (Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza), first published in full in 2015, offer striking similarities, despite being written and set more than 150 years apart. Both concern the loss of freedom and the struggle to survive in the extremely harsh physical conditions of political exile in Siberia, and both are based on personal experience. Dostoevsky’s own exile near Omsk between 1849 and 1854 served as the basis for his novel, while Yakhina asserts that her story is based on the experiences of her own grandmother, who was exiled from Kazan’ to Siberia for sixteen years between 1930 and 1946.

By retrospectively reading Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza we get a ‘new’ view of Dostoevsky’s work, whereby the modern reader can reinterpret Dostoevsky’s world of brutality and pain as a nineteenth-century analogue of Yakhina’s source text. Also relevant here is Yakhina’s second novel, Children of Mine (Deti moi, 2018), which extends the dialogue with Dostoevsky into metafiction and the postmodernist literary space. By juxtaposing these two writers we can integrate past and present literary and historical narratives, yielding significant insights into the key concepts of ‘survival’ in the narrative’s present, and its ‘progression’ into a literary and lived-in past. The representation of childhood, in particular the suffering of children, is germane to this argument, as it is a feature of both Dostoevsky’s other writings and those of Yakhina herself. Indeed, reference will be made to some of Yakhina’s published shorter fiction, some instances of which feature children as protagonists.

Dostoevsky’s novel is now commonly considered to be a seminal influence on modern Russian interpretations of incarceration, especially in works by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Evgeniia Ginzburg and Varlam Shalamov, for instance. Like these authors, Dostoevsky was punished for his political opinions: in 1848, for the crime of belonging to a secret student society and reading proscribed literature, he was sentenced to
five years’ penal servitude in a Siberian prison camp, or katorga. Notes from the House of the Dead adapts Dostoevsky’s harrowing experiences in what his twentieth-century biographer Joseph Frank would call ‘a world of moral horror’ through a fictional protagonist, Aleksandr Petrovich Gorianchikov. Like Dostoevsky, Gorianchikov was a nobleman; unlike his creator, he was a convicted wife-murderer. Both Dostoevsky and Gorianchikov suffer (often brutal) resentment from their fellow prisoners, most of whom are hardened criminals; both endure hard labour, constant dread of corporal punishment, and exposure to the worst side of human nature before ultimately finding legal and (more importantly) spiritual redemption through renewed faith in God and humanity. Dostoevsky was already drafting what would become Notes in his so-called ‘Siberian notebook’ even before leaving the katorga; in 1854, he wrote to his brother: ‘How many folk personalities and characters have I taken with me from katorga! I grew to know them, and therefore, I would seem to understand them pretty well. So many tales of tramps and robbers and generally dark and wretched lives. What a miraculous people’.

Moral Horror and Living Hell: The Prison Camp Experience in Dostoevsky and Yakhina

Guzel’ Shamilevna Yakhina was born in 1977 in Kazan’, and since 1999 has lived in Moscow. She was born into a middle-class family where her mother was a doctor and her father an engineer. She studied foreign languages (English and German) at the University of Kazan’, and subsequently completed a course in screenwriting at the Moscow Film School (Zuleikha was filmed by state television as an eight-part series, first broadcast in April 2020). Her first novel, Zuleikha, was published, rather surprisingly for a little-known writer, by AST, one of the major and most prestigious publishing outlets in Russia. It has since been reprinted several times, and translated into over thirty languages. She is the recipient of several international literary prizes (for instance, the ‘Iasnaia Poliana’ and ‘Bol’shaia kniga’ awards, both in 2015, and the French journal Transfuge’s literary award, 2017). Zuleikha is set between 1930 and 1946, a period that coincides with the exile of Yakhina’s grandmother, which began when the latter was
only seven years old. The novel’s front matter announces that the book is dedicated to all those who were ‘dekulakized and deported’ (though this acknowledgement is not included in the 2019 English-language translation). It is based on the published memoirs of exiled victims of dekulakization whom Yakhina consulted online, as well as the personal testimony of her grandmother, Raisa Shakirovna Shakirova. The village of Semruk which the deportees build with their own hands in the novel is modelled on the actual village of Pit-Gorodok, which existed until 1994. Some of the characters were inspired by real people, most significantly the German doctor Vol’f Karlovich Leibe (based on the first Rector of Kazan’ University, Professor Karl Fuchs).

Zuleikha’s central character is Zuleikha Valieva, the devout and obedient wife of the much older peasant farmer Murtaza. They live in a village in Kazan’ district, following a pattern of everyday life that has existed for centuries. Their lifestyle is in no way glamorized or idealized. The reader forms the impression that Zuleikha’s existence is characterized by endless, physically excruciating drudgery, oppression and hopelessness, although borne with resilience by a woman who knows no other reality. Compared to her later circumstances, however, this life is a veritable haven of stability. She and Murtaza are childless, their four daughters all having died in infancy. Zuleikha regularly and devoutly visits their graves in the neighbouring forest. Her life is one of constant verbal and physical abuse, exacerbated by brutal, soulless sex with her husband and incessant psychological battering from her mother-in-law (whom Zuleikha privately nicknames ‘Upyrikha’, meaning ‘vampire’ or ‘bloodsucker’), with whom she and Murtaza live.

All this ends suddenly and violently with the arrival of a party of OGPU soldiers, precipitating the murder of her husband and her own arrest, deportation and exile to Siberia (Upyrikha is left behind, presumably to die alone). What follows is an unflinching and detailed account of the horrors of the transit prison in Kazan’, and of the even more harrowing six-month train journey from Kazan’ to Krasnoiarsk, including the death of hundreds of deportees, especially the young: ‘the first to begin dying were the children. One after the other, as if playing tag, the children of the large family of the unhappy peasant left this world: to begin with the two infants (both on the same day) and then the older ones.’
After this hellish train journey marked by physical privation, constant hunger and multiple deaths, the deportees are sent up the Angara river to their ‘colony’ on barges. Zuleikha’s barge capsizes, resulting in the drowning of hundreds of men, women and children. Only a few survive, including Zuleikha (this incident is modelled on an event Yakhina states that her grandmother witnessed).\textsuperscript{11} Zuleikha’s survival is purely down to sheer good fortune. The role of such good luck in physical survival is a repeated theme in Yakhina’s writing. In her 2015 short story ‘The Rifle’ (‘Vintovka’), Maia is a wartime medical orderly who hides from German soldiers in a bombed-out building. The parallel here with Dostoevsky’s prose lies in the desperate fate of children, for Maia shoots a German soldier who turns out to be a boy of fourteen, and who takes a long and agonizing time to die. Maia’s own survival is ensured by a Red Army officer who lies over her and covers her body to protect her from the blasts and the shrapnel during an aerial bombardment.\textsuperscript{12}

Besides Zuleikha, a few survivors eventually reach their destination on the banks of the Angara, where they must manually construct their own ‘colony’ of robust and safe accommodation while foraging for food, both in the forest and the river, as winter approaches. This is another circle of hell, where death can come from the cold as well as bears and wolves in the forest, and where the odds in favour of survival, especially in the unforgiving cold of the Siberian winter, are very small. Yet the small band of deportees, including their supervising officer Ignatov, do survive, and, as the days, weeks, months and then years go by, they build a community, eventually including a school, hospital, canteen and suitable living accommodation. Indeed, their village of Semruk becomes a haven that is actually safer than the external world of arbitrary arrest and sudden disappearance. Moreover, relationships develop, especially between Zuleikha and her erstwhile captor Ignatov, the man who had killed her husband at the start of her journey.

Surviving extremity is not the plot’s main focus, however. People manage to survive physically in the face of the most debilitating and dehumanizing circumstances, but then they ultimately realize and articulate a still more vital need: hope for the future. This theme is conveyed not only through Zuleikha’s own experiences, but also through the perspective of various representatives of the intelligentsia, peasantry, and ordinary workers making up the population of the
settlement, as well as those who replenish its numbers with each new wave of deportee arrivals. A major theme of the novel is affirmation that a kernel of hope can survive and grow even in the worst time of sorrow. The seed of hope for Zuleikha is her son, Iuzuf, conceived just before her husband’s murder, whom she carries inside her throughout the debilitating journeys to Kazan’ and then to Krasnoiarsk, and who is born just after the deportees arrive at their destination on the desolate banks of the Angara river. Zuleikha’s early years in the exiles’ community are single-mindedly devoted to her son’s survival: when her milk dwindles, she feeds him on her own blood. The boy survives and grows, learning skills from the other exiles (such as painting), and even learning French from a former Petersburg bourgeoisie.

Zuleikha is the female alter ego of Dostoevsky’s Gorianchikov. He is a land-owning nobleman and a murderer, whereas Zuleikha is an uneducated, devout and at the same time superstitious peasant woman guilty simply of belonging to a land-owning social class outlawed by the state. The shift between female and male narration between these novels throws into relief the origins of Yakhina’s novel in her grandmother’s experiences, while intensifying reader empathy with an apparently more vulnerable heroine. Male perspectives are not lost in Zuleikha, however: Yakhina, unlike Dostoevsky, switches between different narrative viewpoints, including those of Dr Leibe and the OGPU officer Ignatov. The novel ends with the teenage Iuzuf’s departure from Semruk, hoping to make a future for himself as an artist in Leningrad. (Such an optimistic if unlikely outcome is foreshadowed in Yakhina’s short story ‘The Butterfly’ (‘Motylek’, 2014), whose eight-year-old homodiegetic narrator improbably escapes to Kazan’ from an island used to forcibly incarcerate those deemed mentally ill, and their relatives.)

We can thus read Yakhina’s Zuleikha as a modern antecedent to Dostoevsky’s Notes from the House of the Dead, anticipating the former’s depiction of unimaginable living conditions and the daily struggle to survive. In both novels the leading characters are socially stigmatized: Dostoevsky’s protagonist Gorianchikov is outnumbered by peasants who resent his noble background, and Zuleikha is a Tartar woman (and a devout Moslem, at least at the start of the novel) surrounded almost exclusively by Orthodox Russians. Both novels’ main characters are united by their eventual successful adaptation to difficult circumstances:
Despite their initial social (and in Zuleikha’s case, also ethnic) otherness, both become accepted by their fellow inmates after undergoing a moral evolution.

Equally, both novels are imbued with the narrator’s desire to retain humanity and moral values by forging individual identity through struggle and hardship. Thus, Dostoevsky’s narrative may be said to elaborate the idea, put forward in Zuleikha, that the place of confinement is a microcosm of society, where various social ranks and diverse nationalities are represented from across the entire expanse of the country. Significant passages from both works highlight this essential affinity. Yakhina describes the community of exiles who survive the journey up the Angara thus:

Looking into their faces, Ignatov remembers everyone who works in the camp. He finds them in the list, circles them with charcoal, counts them. Together with the Leningraders there are twenty-nine people. Russians, Tartars, a couple of Chuvash, three Mordovians, a Mari woman, a Ukrainian, a Georgian woman and a German who has taken leave of his senses with the high-sounding and affected name of Vol’f Karlovich Leibe. In a word, an entire international community.\(^15\)

The social composition of Dostoevsky’s prison is remarkably similar:

In our prison there were about two hundred and fifty people, a figure that was more or less constant. Some arrived, others finished their sentences and left, while others died. And what a variety of men there was here! I think that each province and each zone of Russia had its representatives here. There were non-Russians as well, and there were even some exiles from among the mountain tribesmen of the Caucasus. They were all divided according to the degree of their crime and consequently according to the number of years determined by their sentence. It must be assumed that there was no crime that did not have its representative here.\(^16\)

Dostoevsky’s prison offers a representative cross-section of trades and skills, providing the basis of a working community: ‘Here there were also boot-makers, shoe-makers, tailors, carpenters, metal-workers, engravers and goldsmiths. There was a Jew, Isai Bumshtein, a jeweller who was also a money-lender. All of them worked and earned their corn.’\(^17\) The colony of Semruk also contains an abundance of trades that enables it to
survive and then develop: Leibe the doctor, Lukka the fisherman, Bogar
the builder, Ashkenazi the cook, and Ikonnikov the painter.

There is one major difference between Dostoevsky’s and Yakhina’s
prisons, of course. Most if not all of the inmates of Dostoevsky’s prison are
actual criminals, whereas the inhabitants of Yakhina’s colony are simply
individuals unfortunate enough to be socially declassed. Dostoevsky’s
characters have fallen foul of the criminal justice system, whereas
Yakhina’s are the blameless victims of ideological rationalization.

Moreover, the casual, animal-like cruelty of Dostoevsky’s imperial-
era prison guards is a feeble imitation of the ideology-driven malice of
the twentieth-century OGPU guards. In his later novels, notably Demons
(Besy, 1872), Dostoevsky shows how political radicals no longer see
people as humans, but rather as raw material to be used in pursuance
of political goals.

The authorities in Yakhina’s work take sadistic pleasure in exploiting
this inner cruelty. The suffering, repression and deaths of ‘enemies
of the people’ are of no concern to the OGPU, who regard the loss of
human life merely in terms of cold statistics. From the comfort of his
own train compartment Ignatov occasionally thinks of the exiles in the
overcrowded wagons: ‘They are not people, he corrects himself. They
are enemies’. The huge number of deaths in the six-month transit from
Kazan to Krasnoiarsk (nearly 400, of whom 150 perish from typhus)
is considered simply inevitable ‘estestvennaia ubyl’ (‘natural wastage’).
The deportees are stripped of their humanity and identity; those who
survive the transit are then forced to pay for their ‘crimes’ through back-
breaking labour, and those who do not or cannot work are punished by
receiving fewer food rations.

There are subtleties in Yakhina’s presentation of the OGPU mentality,
all of them insidious. Ignatov is betrayed by his superior Kuznets, left to
die on the banks of the Angara together with his charges; the perfidious
Kuznets expresses astonishment that Ignatov is still alive when he
finally brings supplies several months later in the spring. Kuznets also
visits the settlement in the expectation of receiving sexual favours from
the female inhabitants. Early in the novel Ignatov is quick to distance
himself from his former comrade and friend Bakiev when he learns that
the latter has fallen out of political favour (he denies ever having known
him). The camp informer Gorelov is keen to intimidate the other exiles
not through class or ideological solidarity with his OGPU captors, but
simply to exercise power over them. Zuleikha Valieva has no hope of freedom or happiness for herself; she feels destined to end her days in Semruk, and her only ray of hope is the possibility of escape for her son (in reality, Yakhina’s grandmother was allowed to return home in 1946). In *Notes*, Dostoevsky’s insights into the dark areas of the human soul and the capacity for evil deeds among Gorianchikov’s fellow prisoners also echo the inherent evil of those representing the authorities in Yakhina’s work.

In *Notes from the House of the Dead*, too, some figures in authority revel in the cruelty they are able to inflict on their charges. Dostoevsky describes one particularly sadistic Major:

> He was a terrible person exactly because he was a commandant with almost unlimited power over two hundred souls. As an individual he was merely ill-disposed and malicious, nothing more. He looked on the convicts as his own natural enemies, and that was his first and main error. He did actually possess some capabilities, but everything, even the good qualities, appeared in him in some twisted form. Unrestrained and malicious, he would burst into the jail even at night-times, and if he noticed a convict lying on his left side or on his back then the following morning he would have him punished. ‘Sleep on your right side, he would say, as I ordered.’ Inside the jail he was hated and feared like the plague.\(^{20}\)

Dostoevsky’s Major represents the evil in a man’s heart that can manifest itself when that man has the ultimate power of life and death over others. Gorianchikov’s account of this man’s sadism may be said to “echo” Zuleikha’s personal insight that the ideology fuelling so much cruelty is inherent in human nature. The seductiveness of rationalist ideas in Dostoevsky’s subsequent works paves the way for dehumanization and for a political credo where the end justifies the means.

Yet, over time, the settlement of Semruk becomes a refuge where a semblance of normal life is created by the inhabitants themselves. It is, additionally, relatively secure from the political repression continuing in the rest of the country; under such circumstances, the lack of any prospect of release is both welcome and reassuring. Moreover, the inhabitants of Semruk are isolated from the ravages of war in the European part of the country. Dostoevsky’s ‘house of the dead’ is more “humane” in a progressive sense because it does contain the possibility of freedom through eventual release, a metaphorical resurrection; externally
imposed rules ensure that prison conditions are never inhumane, an apparent positive development in penal conditions.

Nevertheless, the relationship between incarceration and wider society in the two novels is existentially inverted. Zuleikha’s prison is virtually unregulated, every confinement is potentially a life sentence, and yet it is freer (for its surviving inmates) than the outside world. Semruk is, for its permanent residents, a strange kind of Paradise. On the other hand, whereas Dostoevsky’s katorga is governed by external regulations and the inmates serve fixed, finite terms, it remains uncompromisingly a place of punishment.

Yakhina does not flinch from describing relentless and harrowing physical details of human suffering and endurance, including Zuleikha’s near-drowning under the capsized convict barge, or the deportees’ shared struggle when forced to forage for food in the taiga and the Angara river and construct accommodation fit to last the winter in the most challenging circumstances. The lot of Dostoevsky’s prisoners is comparatively lighter, as most of them will be released when they have completed their sentence, and there is still some compassion and tolerance by the criminal justice establishment; they are still regarded as human beings, although classified among the worst and most base individuals in their society. The exiles in Stalin’s Russia have no human worth, nobody cares if they live or die. Ignatov is the human face of this uncaring system, and he does not lack some redeeming human qualities. Though he fears retribution from his superiors when some prisoners escape from the train (rather than when they die), he does ensure that the exiles are sufficiently fed during their journey, even rejecting his own superior food.

In other words, if we (re-)read Dostoevsky’s Notes from the House of the Dead as a successor text to Yakhina’s twenty-first-century narrative, our “new” treatise can reveal themes which transcend Dostoevsky’s 1862 narrative, although they are characteristic of most of his work. We have already discussed the contrasting symbolism of the penal colonies in each book, the differing potential for redemption in each, and the ironic polarization of political radicalism—the radical politics persecuted by the authorities in Zuleikha’s case have become the orthodoxy of Dostoevsky’s era. In a sense, the chronological reversal imposed by backwards reading makes sense of Dostoevsky’s own sentencing as well as the fates of the few political prisoners in Gorianchikov’s katorga: they
are being punished for the sins of their figurative twentieth-century children, their political heirs.

Teardrops Unavenged: The Treatment of Children

We turn now to another theme common to Yakhina’s and Dostoevsky’s fiction: the suffering of children. The Soviet state terrorizes not only its adult ‘enemies’ but also their children. Yakhina’s child characters are deliberately targeted and subject to oppression and physical violence by adults who represent the state in its various forms. Nature can be equally cruel: Zuleikha loses her four daughters in infancy, and we learn that her mother-in-law, the ‘Upyrikha’, allowed her three older children to die of hunger so that only the fourth, Murtaza, would survive on her milk. The full horror of these times she conveys in a whisper to Murtaza:

‘Do you hear, my son? We didn’t eat them. We buried them. Ourselves, without a mullah, at night. You were just young, you’ve forgotten it all. They don’t have any graves, I’ve told you this till I’m blue in the face, that in the summer of that year everyone was buried, but without graves. Cannibals were roaming the graveyards in hordes, and as soon as they saw a fresh grave they’d dig it up and eat the corpse’.

In the same breath Upyrikha goes on to deny neighbours’ rumours that she and Murtaza did in fact eat the other three children; her insistent refutation is a clear, if implicit, acknowledgement that she and her youngest son did commit cannibalism.

In Yakhina’s short story ‘The Butterfly’ the eight-year-old Mitia (known as Motylek, the titular butterfly) has to endure a relentless barrage of physical beatings by various authorities on the island where he is incarcerated, most savagely inflicted by his own sadistic and alcoholic grandfather, before escaping to Kazan. This island has its own child population, regimented and repressed by both teachers and hospital personnel, who take a perverse and sadistic pleasure in hunting down children who try to escape. The gradations and intensity of torture and pain inflicted on the young boy are grisly and disturbing, as are the physical tribulations he faces in order to leave the island.

Moreover, if we take Yakhina’s text as primary and read Dostoevsky’s works as if refracted through it, we can put historical flesh on to the bones of an abstract philosophical thesis. The physicality of Yakhina’s
evocation of violence gives human meaning to Dostoevsky’s more metaphysical musings on suffering and redemption. Yakhina’s understanding of materialist reductionism removes any idealism, and thus any realistic hope for a happy end, in a society governed and enforced by an intolerant and murderous ideology. The individual survives only by chance. Solzhenitsyn insisted in his chronicles of the Gulag, both fictional and non-fictional, that physical survival is dependent on spiritual transformation (perhaps significantly, the first chapter of Zuleikha is called ‘One Day’). Zuleikha survives by physically withstanding and then spiritually transcending her brutal environment, focusing on her duty to bring up her son and help him to survive, and thus she can also be seen to symbolize a ‘feminization’ of the prison and exile experience that is absent in Solzhenitsyn (or Dostoevsky).

Yakhina’s novel shows that exile is mitigated by humanity, manifested as simple kindness and love between those abandoned by an uncaring state, with little hope for survival, never mind spiritual rebirth. They create their own community which is more or less unsupervised externally, and over the years all the deportees originally exiled to Semruk die there, as, the reader knows, eventually will Zuleikha. Yakhina’s child characters Iuzuf and Motylek also escape hell on earth, at great risk to their own lives, though there is no suggestion that their physical survival will guarantee a better quality of life: Iuzuf hopes to become an artist, Motylek in adult life is a casual labourer.

Children in Dostoevsky’s works also suffer as innocent victims of adult weakness and/or cruelty. In Crime and Punishment’ (Prestuplenie i nakazanie, 1866) the younger children in Semen Marmeladov’s household go hungry because he drinks away the family income; his teenage daughter Sonia has to earn money as a prostitute to feed the family. In the same novel Arkadii Svidrigailov preys on young girls, sexually exploiting and abusing them, and only his dreams speak of an awakening consciousness. Stavrogin in Demons takes delight in humiliating and abusing eleven-year-old Matresha, who hangs herself in shame after he has raped her (Stavrogin willingly fails to prevent her suicide). In The Brothers Karamazov (Brat’ia Karamazovy, 1881) the schoolboy Il’iusha Snegirev dies, and at his funeral the novice monk Alesha Karamazov delivers a moving eulogy to the grieving schoolboys on the need for Christian love:
My fine Sirs, all of you henceforth are dear to me, I shall enclose you all in my heart, and I ask you all to enclose me in yours! And who has brought us together in this fine and good feeling, of whom we shall now always, for our entire life, remember, and we intend to remember, it is Il’iushechka, of course, a kind boy, a nice boy, a boy who will be dear to us for ever and ever! We will never ever forget him, may his memory in our hearts be eternal and good, henceforth and for ever and ever!23

There is no more abhorrent example in Dostoevsky’s work of the suffering of innocent children than the tale told by Ivan Karamazov to his brother Alesha of the murder of an eight-year-old serf boy by a retired army general, who sets his hunting dogs on him. The hounds tear the boy apart in front of his mother. It is in the face of such cruelty that Ivan rejects ‘supreme harmony’ and God’s world:

it is not worth the teardrop of even one tortured child who beat his chest with his tiny fist in his stinking dog kennel weeping his unexpiated tears and prayed to his Lordy-Lordy. It is not worth it because his tears remained unexpiated. They must be expiated, otherwise there can be no harmony.24

Yakhina’s children suffer because of the state’s ideology and its policy towards ‘enemies’. Dostoevsky mitigates official corporate responsibility through the suffering of his children simply as a result of human agency. However, Dostoevsky’s fears for the future replicate the fate of children in Yakhina’s second novel Deti moi, published in 2018.

This novel again begins in a non-Russian community, this time among Volga Germans in the early 1920s. The village is Gnadental’ (‘Fertile Valley’, renamed ‘Gennad’ev’ after the mass deportation to Kazakhstan of the German population during the Great Patriotic War), and its inhabitants bear names from German and Austrian culture over years and genres: Bach, Grimm, Hoffman, Wagner, Handel, Dürer, Dietrich, Böll, Fromm, Brecht, Mann, Wenders, Grass, Lang.25 As with Dostoevsky’s characters Devushkin, Raskol’nikov, Razumikhin and Myshkin, names here have a symbolic function. If in Dostoevsky names suggest their owners’ psychological characteristics, in Children of Mine they possess an allegorical significance: the novel is not just about physical survival, but the fate of culture in a militant age.

This novel is fundamentally about an adult’s efforts to save and protect the life of a child. The hero is Iakov Ivanovich Bakh (Bach), a
teacher in the German colony of Gnadental’, who has to raise Anna alone as her mother, his wife Klara, dies in childbirth (the child is not his: Klara became pregnant after she was gang-raped by three itinerant brigands). He begins by stealing milk from the local farms, then, after he is discovered, “earns” milk rations for the baby by writing stories and later fairy tales (skazki) for a local newspaper, under the direction of the hunchbacked Party official Hoffman (Gofman):

He read through the text. Did he write this himself, or was someone moving his pen, suggesting les mots justes and weaving them into elegant and exact expressions? He couldn’t add anything to what had been written. It seemed in these last lines that he had poured out on to the paper all the remnants of what had built up inside him over these years of isolation and silence. Three months of constant feverish writing—hundreds and hundreds of pages covered in writing: everything that Bach knew and remembered of his native colony and its inhabitants, what he surmised, doubted and managed to rethink—all of this was now cast in words and passed on to the voraciously reading hunchback. Gnadental’ appeared in these jottings as a motley, noisy place full of merry and brightly dressed people, the pealing of bells, the singing of women, the cries of children, the lowing of cows and the clucking of fowl, the splashing of oars on the Volga, the fluttering of sails and murmuring of waves, the smell of fresh wafers and watermelon honey—Gnadental’ as it used to be. Gnadental’ as it is.

Hoffman is unable to contain his enthusiasm: ‘You have dug down to the truth, my bearded comrade! You have opened up the soul of this unsociable entity, the Volga German. You have opened it up like a tin of vegetables’.

The role of literature, Hoffman tells him, is to ‘turn the soul inside out’ through tales and legends, as in children’s stories, the ‘foundation of the soul’.

Hoffman is delighted that Bach has turned real life into a fairy tale. For Bach the fairy tale is his only way to feed his adopted family.

Hoffman reveals the true function of art in this society, just as Bach had expressed it in his tales:

You’re a Shakespeare, a Schiller! What is created in that unkempt German head of yours, eh? What demons are lurking in there? […] Some spirited turns of phrase, however, I admit that. Here we have a fairy tale with the workers’ morality, and instructions on how to look after an apple-tree orchard: both the cultural revolution and the agrarian question, all in this
tiny text. And how beautifully you’ve phrased it: this shouldn’t just be read, it should be recited, as a poem. To be sung like a hymn!

The novel is structured according to a timetable that does not follow calendar time, but major events, as in folklore. Thus, for example, the year 1918 is ‘the Year of Ransacked Houses’, 1921 is ‘the Year of the Hungry’, 1931 is ‘the Year of the Great Lie’ and 1933 ‘the Year of the Great Hunger’. Moreover, Bach knows perfectly well how the laying of the ‘foundation of the soul’ fits the new world order:

Bach had long since understood exactly what kind of fairy tales Hoffman expected of him. Stories of a religious nature—about the Virgin Mary, the apostles and the saints—were strictly forbidden; subjects with a mystical quality—about magicians, magical objects, unicorns and dead knights—were also not particularly welcome; but stories about simple people— weavers, cobblers, fishermen, peasants, old and young soldiers—were always needed. Surprisingly, witches and devils were also required, and wood demons with little devils, giants of all breeds and sizes, cannibals with robbers: sublime magic Hoffman did not favour, but ‘representatives of the people’s beliefs’ he certainly did. ‘All your magicians with their crystal balls and sorcerers with their staffs—all of them are former heroes, believe me,’ he would explain to Bach. ‘Let former people read about them: young grammar-school girls with their grubby army officers and ladies with an intellectual bent. But the people will understand about itself and about those it fears to meet in the granary or neighbouring forest.’ The involvement in fairy tales of representatives of the ruling class—of kings, barons and earls—was also welcomed as it ensured that each story had an ideologically correct ending. Also welcome were stories about animals: cowardly sheep, diligent bees, carefree larks, but Bach tackled similar subjects reluctantly as he couldn’t imagine himself as a hare or a seal.

The degradation of literature for the purposes of political education and ideological propaganda is a far cry from Dostoevsky’s well-known 1880 speech at the unveiling of Moscow’s Pushkin monument calling for writers to act as prophets for their people. Moreover, both in this address and in the journalism collected as Dnevnik pisatelia (Diary of a Writer, 1873–1881), Dostoevsky practised direct communication with his readers, openly engaging in polemics with fellow writers and intellectuals such as Nikolai Leskov, and not only on literary matters: he was also happy to discuss philosophy, history and politics. Though this
was not necessarily an ‘equal’ correspondence (there is ample evidence that Dostoevsky was not interested in argument or discussion, but simply in making points as forcefully as he could), it was a dialogue that assumed another’s participation and at least implied a response: Dostoevsky’s response to the call for the creation of the ‘engineer of human souls’ was to depict the offspring of such engineers. In terms of reading ‘backwards’, we can see Dostoevsky denouncing with increasing vehemence exactly the utilitarian use of literature postulated by Hoffman 150 years later in *Children of Mine*.32

Bach’s tales are not intended as explicit moral guides, but as parables, exercises in indirectly assimilating the ‘correct’ values. Yakhina’s Soviet-era writers view production and reception as a top-down vertical process, negating the horizontal line of cultural communication envisaged by Dostoevsky, which would be both subverted and inverted by the radical characters Dostoevsky termed ‘devils’. The socialist fairy tales created by Yakhina’s character Bach were transformed by Dostoevsky into nightmares.

Bach’s lifelong mission is to provide and care for Anna, whom he cherishes as his personal responsibility although she is not his biological daughter. She serves as a constant reminder of her mother, the woman he came to love and revere. Bach takes a vow of silence for the rest of his life with Anna (whom he calls ‘Antje’), unwilling to communicate with the outside world after his literary ‘career’ and the debasement of his craft. Bach’s unwillingness to speak, and his success as a writer, provide an ironic commentary on the use (and abuse) of thought and communication by those who try to control them.33 They are joined by the homeless itinerant boy, Vasilii Volgin, known as Vas’ka. Anna and Vas’ka become Bach’s ‘children’, whom he guides through childhood until they leave together to join school in the neighbouring town of Pokrovsk. The novel’s epilogue confirms that we cannot expect a happy ending: Bach is arrested in 1938, sentenced to fifteen years’ imprisonment and in 1946 is killed in a mining accident in his place of internment in Kazakhstan. In 1948 the entire German population of the Volga region (438,000 people in all) is sent into exile in Kazakhstan. Anna Iakobovna Bach graduates from the Clara Zetkin school in the town of Engel’sk (formerly Pokrovsk); in 1941, as a person of German descent, she is deported to Kazakhstan where five years later she loses a leg as the result of an industrial accident. Vas’ka survives the war and
on 8 May 1945 is in the German village of Gnadenthal on the river Elbe (there is an actual German village called Gnadenthal, but it is not on the Elbe). He travels to Kazakhstan to find and marry Anna Bach, then settles down to become a schoolteacher of German. The novel ends with the announcement that Bach’s anthology *Fairy Tales of Soviet Germans (Skazki sovetskikh nemtsev)* appeared in 1933 and ran to six editions with over three hundred thousand copies, in addition to several successful theatrical adaptations. This collection, of course, is as fictional as its author.

*Children of Mine,* unlike *Zuleikha,* is occasionally enlivened by touches of humour, though with a dark edge. Several digressions feature Stalin; in the most notable of these, Stalin stops his personal motorcade to get out of his car and observe at close hand a wild dog. Soon an entire pack of dogs appears, and they begin moving threateningly towards him. As he moves away from his escort the dogs attack; in panic, Stalin rushes back to the safety of his car. The guard who kills the lead dog is later investigated for having waited too long before shooting, thereby possibly putting the Leader’s life in danger. Clearly, the author’s sympathies lie with the dogs. Ivan Karamazov’s story of the serf boy set upon by his master’s dogs provides an ironic retrospective comment on the worth of human life, with Stalin in the role of victim. Far from having the power of life and death over others, Stalin is reduced to potential dog-meat.34

**Conclusion**

*Zuleikha* and *Notes from the House of the Dead* share a common premise: the helplessness of the individual confronted by the implacable coercion of the state. Both novels use lived, historical experience to explore and decry the state’s callousness and its assault on individuality. Yakhina’s novels express greater concern with the physical process of how an entire way of life can be eradicated, whereas in *Demons* and still later in *The Brothers Karamazov,* Dostoevsky would present his fear of the logical (and possible future) outcome of nihilism. In *Children of Mine* the destruction of the ‘fertile valley’ and an entire way of life in Gnadenthal’ can be seen as a microcosm of the larger Soviet reality, just as the rural communities of Skvoreshniki and Skotoprigon’evsk in *Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov* respectively serve as fictional backdrops to the formulation and enactment of momentous political ideas.
If we ‘read backwards’, the real, physical pain and loss depicted by Yakhina is converted into the existential sufferings of the archetypical Dostoevskian hero whose personal philosophy has gone awry. The idea often ascribed to Ivan Karamazov that ‘everything is permitted’ is the revenge of the nineteenth century on modernity: in Dostoevsky’s novels, horrendous lived experiences become abstract ideas, such as the reported atrocities which inform a friendly discussion between two educated brothers, Ivan and Alesha Karamazov. Through the trope of inhumane cruelty, the nineteenth-century literary ‘canon’ reconfigures twentieth-century reality. This is a postmodern irony that recalls, analogously, Vladimir Sorokin’s symbolic dismemberment of the Russian classical canon in works such as A Novel (Roman, 1985–89), and his semiotic reimagining of it in The Blizzard (Metel’, 2010).

Dostoevsky’s oft-quoted faith as articulated in The Brothers Karamazov that ‘beauty will save the world’ is the final comment on a nihilism lacking any moral restraint or literary prettification. In Zuleikha, ‘beauty’ is reduced to the mutual respect forged by Zuleikha and Ignatov, a relationship born largely of expediency rather than sincere feeling.

The fate of the children particularly foreshadows a world without moral signposts to the future. Bach’s ‘children’ survive in a hostile environment through chance not design, as do the children in other works by Yakhina. Hoffman’s praise for Bach’s ‘fairy tales’ in Children of Mine makes a child’s universe more ‘real’ than life itself, thereby anticipating Dostoevsky’s fears of a utilitarian literature. Dostoevsky’s response to the twentieth century’s horror is to denounce its reductive simplification, though the wild dogs threatening Stalin remind us that not everything in the ‘fairy tale’ ends happily ever after, even for dictators.
Notes

1 *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* was first translated into English as *Zuleikha* in 2019 by Lisa C. Hayden (London: OneWorld). For simplicity’s sake, we will henceforth refer to this novel as *Zuleikha*, even when discussing the Russian edition and/or our own translation of relevant passages.

2 Yakhina has several times indicated that *Zuleikha* in many ways reflects her grandmother’s experience: see, for instance, her interview “‘Mne nravitsia skladyvat’ istorii’”, *Voprosy literatury*, 3 (2016), 151–59, especially p. 154.

3 For discussion of the image of the child in Dostoevsky, see the classic study by William Woodin Rowe, *Dostoevsky: Man and Child in his Works* (New York: New York University Press, 1968).

4 See Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal 1850–1859* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 49–162, for a full account of Dostoevsky’s crime, trial and sentencing, and his subsequent experience in the Omsk prison stockade.

5 Ibid., p. 87 and *passim*.

6 ‘Skol’ko ia vynes iz katorgi narodnykh tipov, kharakterov! Ia szhilsia s nimi, i potomu, kazhetsia, znaiu ikh poriadochno. Skol’ko istorii brodiag i razboinikov i voobshche vsego chernogo, goremychnogo byta. Chto za chudnyi narod’. Fedor Dostoevskii, cited in ‘Primechaniia’ [Editors’ Notes], in F. M. Dostoesvkii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*, ed. by V. G. Bazanov and others, 30 vols (Leningrad: Nauka, 1970–1995), IV (1972), 271–325 (p. 275). I thank the editors for directing me to this source and providing the translation.

7 See Yakhina, “‘Mne nravitsia skladyvat’ istorii’”, p. 152.

8 The novel was initially received rather condescendingly by critics in the ‘thick’ journals. Valeria Pustovaia accused Yakhina of writing nothing more than ‘belles lettres’ (*belletristika*) and avoiding ‘great literature’ (*bol’shaia literatura*), though she did not define either genre: see Valeria Pustovaia, ‘Boi’shoi roman s vishenki’, *Voprosy literatury*, 3 (2016), 125–38. In the same issue, Elena Pogorelaia considered the novel primarily in ethnographic terms, as an account of the litany of evils visited on the Tartar community in the Stalin years, in her article ‘Chelovecheskoe, slishkom chelovecheskoe’, *Voprosy literatury*, 3 (2016), 139–50. This was also the main thrust of the argument put by Mariaia Savel’eva in ‘Utverzhdenie cherez otritsanie’, *Oktiabr*, 12 (2015), 132–36. Sergei Beliakov discussed the novel in detail as a dissection of Stalinist crimes within a ‘fairy tale’ narrative,
though his argument is contrived and over-reliant on plot recapitulation: ‘Sovetskaia skazka na fone GULAGa’, Ural, 8 (2015:8), pp. 226–30. On the other hand, reviews by non-professional readers on blogs and websites were overwhelmingly more enthusiastic, which undoubtedly accounts for much of the book’s commercial success; see, for instance, www.livelib.ru/book/1001173596 and www.litres.ru/guzel-yahina/zuleyha-otkryvaet-glaza-9527389/otzivi/ [accessed 8 May 2020].

9 See Iakhina, “‘Mne nravitsia skladyvat’ istorii’”, pp. 154–56; also her interview “‘U menia est’ chetkoe otnoshenie k figure Stalina i periodu ego pravleniia”, Biznes-online, 1 November 2015, www.business-gazeta.ru/article/144322 [accessed 29 November 2019].

10 Guzel’ Iakhina, Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza (Moscow: AST, 2019), p. 173. All translations of texts from Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza and Deti moi are our own.

11 In The Gulag Archipelago, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes the deliberate sinking of barges carrying exiles in the White Sea and Caspian Sea. See Solzhenitsyn, Arkhipelag Gulag (St Petersburg: Azbuka, 2019), p. 39. On the terrible conditions of the train journeys of Solzhenitsyn’s fellow exiles and prisoners to their various destinations, see Arkhipelag Gulag, pp. 409–16.

12 Guzel’ Iakhina, ‘Vintovka’, Oktiabr’, 5 (2015), 73–86.

13 Guzel’ Iakhina, ‘Motylek’, Neva, 2 (2014), 126–46. This story can also be read as a nightmare experienced by its main character Mitia, where in the course of his dangerous escape he eavesdrops on Ivan the Terrible planning his siege of Kazan’ in 1552. ‘Motylek’ is also the Russian title for the 1973 film Papillon, set on the Devil’s Island prison colony administered by the French in the early twentieth century.

14 E. F. Tugusheva comments on Zuleikha’s character development: ‘In a world turned upside down, where violence becomes the demonstration of power, national identity does not manifest itself, and as a whole cultural memory becomes displaced into the sphere of individual consciousness, and in the first instance is the instinct for survival, inner strengths and even super-strengths, considering exile itself for the deportees at the limit of all human possibilities.’ See E. F. Tugusheva, ‘Etnokul’turnoe svoeobrazie khronotopa v romanakh G. Iakhinoi “Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza” i A. Ganievoi “Zhenikh i nevesta”’, Izvestiia Saratovskogo universiteta. Novaia seria. Seriia Filologii. Zhurnalistikii, 18 (2018:3), 351–55 (p. 354).

15 Iakhina, Zuleikha, p. 243.

16 Fedor Dostoevskii, Zapiski iz mertvogo doma (St Petersburg: Azbuka, 2013), p. 14. By way of establishing a larger trope, in Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo uezda (Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk) from 1864 Nikolai Leskov describes the prison
train heading to Siberia from Kazan’ as similarly diverse, containing a
Russian schismatic, a Jew, a Pole and a Tartar, representatives of various
nationalities being punished by secular authority.

17 Ibid., p. 24.
18 Iakhina, Zuleikha, p. 178.
19 Ibid.
20 Dostoevskii, Zapiski, p. 42.

21 ‘Teardrops unavenged’ is a phrase taken from the conversation between Ivan
and Alesha Karamazov on the sufferings of children at the hands of cruel
and sadistic adults. See Fedor Dostoevskii, Brat’ia Karamazovy (Moscow: AST, 2018), p. 249. Yakhina’s third novel, Convoy to Samarkand (Eshelon na Samarkand, 2021), again focuses on the unhappy fate of children. It is
based on the resettling of hundreds of orphaned and homeless children
in the 1920s, in this case transported by train from Kazan’ to Samarkand
in Central Asia. See Guzel’ Iakhina, Eshelon na Samarkand (Moscow: AST, 2021).

22 Iakhina, Zuleikha, p. 57. Upyrikha is roughly aged one hundred, and her
son Murtaza is in his sixties, so he would have been an infant in the 1860s.
There is no historical evidence of a famine in the Volga region at that time,
though the famine of 1891–92 in the Volga basin resulted in up to half a
million deaths.

23 Dostoevskii, Brat’ia Karamazovy, p. 777.
24 Ibid., p. 248.
25 In actual fact there have been Soviet writers whose surnames resonate with
Germanic culture: Franz Bakh (Bach) (1885–1942), Franz Shiller (Schiller)
(1898–1955), David Vagner (Wagner) (1914–1977).

26 Guzel’ Iakhina, Deti moi (Moscow: AST, 2018), p. 191.
27 Ibid., p. 193.
28 Ibid., p. 195.
29 Ibid., p. 211.
30 Ibid., p. 240.
31 For detailed analysis of this landmark speech, see Marcus C. Levitt, Russian
Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press, 1989).
32 Yakhina has also published a short story on the ‘power’ of literature, though with a darkly ironic twist. In ‘Shvaipol’t’ the down-at-heel former book trader Seregin steals from an old woman what he believes to be an original copy of the first book printed in Cyrillic by the German printer Schweipolt Fiol dating back to 1491, but then, as he flees other robbers, he drowns in a river. The volume vanishes with him. See ‘Shvaipol’t’, *Esquire*, 125 (July 2016), 25–42.

33 For more discussion of this theme see N. I. Pavlova, ‘Poetika vizual’nosti v romane G. Iakhinoi “Deti moi”: k voprosu o fenomene literaturnogo uspekha’, *Kul’tura i tekst*, 34 (2018:3), 52–66, especially pp. 62–64.

34 Stalin is an unambiguously negative character for Yakhina. In her short story ‘The Celebration’ (‘Iubilei’, 2018) the Great Leader quickly becomes bored with the celebrations surrounding his seventieth birthday in the Kremlin and is driven to his dacha outside Moscow. In the otherwise dark and deserted streets of Moscow he notices a lone passer-by, and instructs his chauffeur to drive him down and kill him, for no reason other than the sadistic pleasure of taking someone’s life. See ‘Iubilei’, *Oktiabr*, 1 (2018), 97–104.