To my parents, Francis and Mary Galie

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В такую погоду свои дома сидят, телевизор смотрят. Только чужие шастают. Не будем дверь открывать!

—"Трое из Простоквашино"

(People in our clan [*svoi*] sit at home in weather like this, watching television. Only outsiders [*chuzhie*] are roaming around. We are not opening the door!"

—From "Three from Prostokvashino")

Acknowledgements

It is an irony of this project that the study and teaching abroad opportunities that allowed me to comprehend Russia and Russian culture on a more substantial level are also what led me to believe that there is something within the culture that makes it resistant and even suspicious of these very cultural exchanges; at the very least, I came to believe that Russians have diminished expectations of what they can accomplish.

In any case, it was on one of these cultural exchanges that I began to notice, as I eventually found a group of Russian friends, how often I was encountering the rhymed words *svoj* and *chuzhoj*, specifically as they referred to people. At first, I heard them in speech, but later I began to see them in print as well, in newspapers, books, and advertisements. As I began to grasp on the most general level what concepts lay behind these terms, I realized that the English translations of them fell woefully short. Each time I encountered them, I found myself translating them in my mind using a different English word. The words *svoj* and *chuzhoj* are used across far too many registers and in far too many genres to be translated with the same two discrete English terms.

As I grew closer to this group of Russians, I was able to experience first-hand what it feels like to be accepted as *svoj chelovek* (*one of us*). The feelings of safety and camaraderie inherent in this relationship are powerful. So powerful, in

fact, that one would be forgiven in thinking that there is no downside to the relationship at all.

The first time I was able to apply my thoughts on this opposition in an academic setting was as a graduate student in the early 2000s in Irina Reyfman's Early Russian Drama course at Columbia University. A class presentation on Aleksandr Griboedov's play *Woe from Wit* led to further fruitful discussion with Irina, who eventually became my dissertation advisor. This book is an expansion of that 2007 dissertation, entitled *The Clan, the Clique, and the Alien in Russian Literature and Society*. I of course owe Irina a great deal of gratitude for her contributions to both the dissertation and this project in general. Ron Meyer at the Harriman Institute provided invaluable feedback on the manuscript, as did Valeria Sobol and Rich Robin. I thank them all.

I must also thank my first Russian friends in St. Petersburg who accepted a naïve American as one of their own. But my deepest gratitude goes out to the White Nights and to each and every St. Petersburg bridge that remained open for hours in the summer of 1999. Thanks to them, I was forced to spend many a night with these friends on the Petrogradskaya storona where I eventually became *svoj*.

Note on Transliteration

I have followed the Library of Congress guidelines on transliteration with exceptions made for the words *свой, чужой,* and *изгой.* Here I use the letter "j" for Cyrillic "й," to differentiate the singular *свой* from the plural *свои.*

Introduction: Fitting in Russian Style

It is now commonplace to remark on how interconnected the world has become; that we are all "citizens of the world," to quote Martha Nussbaum who paraphrases Diogenes in her book *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. College curricula in North America and Europe are being revamped constantly to emphasize multiculturalism and diversity, all in an attempt to give equal space to disparate customs, values, and experiences. The study of foreign languages and cultures is viewed as essential to an effective understanding of this diversity and its place in the world in which college graduates will operate. But what happens if, during the course of studying a foreign language and culture, one that you should presumably respect, you discover a linguistic and cultural opposition so powerful that it seems to impose a world view on its speakers that rejects the incorporation of others' customs, lifestyles, and viewpoints? One that drives a palpable wedge between one's own people and the rest of society?

Many writers have commented on the startling contrast between the often brusque, dismissive behavior that Russians display towards strangers on the street and the warmth and generosity they show at home, behind closed doors. These doors, often imposing, metallic structures accessible only with an equally formidable, weapon-like key, separate the public and the private, and, perhaps more importantly, the stranger or the alien, from one's own people or one's

own clan. Once this sanctum has been breached, however, a heady mixture of argument, cigarette smoke, and delectable food awaits. However, not everyone can be admitted. Not everyone can be trusted. After you ring the ear-splitting buzzer next to a typical Russian apartment door, the password that will grant you entry after the barked "*Kto*??" (Who??) from the other side is not your name or the name of the person you are hoping to see. No, the magic word is the much more nebulous "*Svoi.*"[1] This word, *svoi*, or more specifically its singular form, *svoj*, is difficult to translate, but its meaning can be rendered as "one of us/one of the group/one of the clan." When someone has been dubbed "*svoj*," or "*svoj chelovek*" (a person who is one of us) in Russian society, the group that has bestowed the status is confirming, in effect, that that person has always been there, that her presence is a given, and, perhaps most importantly, that everyone around her can let their guard down.[2] The person in question is easy to talk to and will be capable of understanding everyone else in the group immediately. She *knows* and is *known*. All pretenses are dropped. Although the designation has little to do with age, gender, or socio-economic status, it doesn't mean there are no criteria at all for membership.

There is an opposite pole, however, to the word *svoj*— its rhymed counterpart, "*chuzhoj*" (stranger, alien, outsider, foreigner), a label, as we shall see, to be avoided at all costs in present-day Russian society.

"So what?"—one might say. Doesn't everyone pick and choose the individuals they want to associate with, excluding significantly more people than they include? In a word, yes. The desire to fit in is certainly not specific to Russian culture. David Berreby makes this very point in *Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind*: "There is apparently no people known to history or anthropology that lacks a distinction between 'us' and 'others.' Dividing people into overlapping categories is something all human beings do (with exceptions for which there are ready explanations, usually involving brain damage)" (125).

Olga Yokoyama, in her article *Russian Genderlects and Referential Expressions,* also points out that other cultures express the distinction between "one's own" and "others/aliens/strangers." She sees something unique, however, in the manner in which Russians categorize people along these lines: "There is no

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1 The response is in the plural even if the person attempting to access the apartment is alone, effectively capturing the notion that it is more important that a group of such people exists than that an individual member is at the door, awaiting entry.

2 This project involves an analysis of the opposition in Russian culture, literature, and society. Although my research was somewhat superficial, it seems the two words, in their respective variants, interact in a similar fashion in Ukrainian and Belarusian. It would be an interesting project to delve deeper into the opposition in the other two East Slavic worlds.

doubt, though, that the English also have their own way to make distinctions between their relatives and others/strangers/aliens. The radius for what they consider their own people, however, cannot compare in scope with a Russian's" (401–429). One of the differences particular to the Russian context does indeed lie in this scope, to be sure, but there is more to the story. Another difference is twofold and can be found both in the criteria used to bestow or deny the status of *svoj* and in the consequences that result from the decision (especially if an individual or group is deemed unworthy). In other words, there is much more at stake for a Russian speaker than there is for someone from another culture when that individual is confronted by (his culture's version of) the opposition.

Take the fundamental human activity of oral communication, for instance. Yokoyama argues that native speakers of Russian base their very *conversational strategies* on the extent to which their interlocutor is perceived as *svoj*: "One might extend this to suggest that, in Japanese, speakers' awareness of their sex is fundamental to their cognitive/linguistic universe; but in Russian, the primary task of the speaker is to determine the degree of "svoj-ness," i.e. the degree of distance between the self and the addressee" (417). If the degree of "svoj-ness" is high, the interlocutor presumably gains access to an altogether different (more intimate) manner of interaction, a manner that encompasses both form and content.

Perhaps because of the perceived high stakes involved in the matter, one sociologist with whom I have corresponded claims that a Russian's entire existence can be reduced to a lifelong search for his own people (*svoi*). Anna Shor-Chudnovskaya, a sociologist and researcher at the Sigmund Freud University, Vienna, states:

> Русский человек мучительно ищет Своих. Если Вы посмотрите диссидентскую литературу 20-го века, там будет все время повторяться эта тема— как выйти к Своим. И на фоне этого мучительно поиска, русского человека совершенно не интересует, как нужно, положено (нравственно) обращаться с Чужими (уважать их права и т.п.). Отношения с Чужими— это формальные (рыночные) отношения буржуазного мира. Отношения со Своими—это родственные, дружеские, как и говорят по-русски, свойские отношения. И именно потому, как мне представляется, что в российском обществе очень слабо выражены формальные отношения, так важно и так тяжело понять, кто Свой, а кто Чужой— понять-то это хочется окончательно! Русский человек верит в

> "окончательно Своих", "Своих навсегда",—"Своих, заданных Свыше"? (Personal communication)

> A Russian is on an excruciating search for One's Own People. If you look at the dissident literature of the twentieth century, this theme repeats itself over and over—how to reach One's Own People. And in the context of this excruciating search, a Russian is completely uninterested in how he is expected (morally) to treat Strangers/Aliens (respecting their rights, etc). Contact with Strangers/Aliens constitutes formal (market) relations of the bourgeois world. Contact with One's Own is a kindred, friendly, as they say in Russian, chummy kind of relationship. And, to my mind, for the very reason that formal contact is so weakly defined in Russian society, it becomes so crucial and difficult to figure out just who is One of Us and who is a Stranger/Alien. And people want to figure it out once and for all! A Russian is certain of "a conclusive group of one's own," "a group of one's own forever"—"a group of one's own destined from Above"?

My intention in this book, then, is to show that modern-day Russians require a certain set of almost unobtainable criteria from those with whom they interact in order for them to find those people trustworthy. My project incorporates an analysis of a specific worldview and how that worldview has been shaped by the way in which Russians use and interpret the two aforementioned words, *svoj* and *chuzhoj*. The book will illuminate, for the Western reader especially, how the opposition presents an at times insurmountable hurdle before a native Russian speaker on the path to the kind of world citizenship (or even Russian citizenship) advocated by Martha Nussbaum. I should point out, to my Western readers especially, that Russian speakers are exposed to this opposition from the moment they begin to process their parents' voices and begin to learn the language. Its negative pole, *chuzhoj*, then, cannot serve as a translation of the (Western) concept of "the Other."[3] "The Other" is a cultural construct not necessarily reflected in the language and lacking a related lexical pair; the words *svoj* and *chuzhoj*, on the other hand, interact closely with each other to this day in every linguistic register. If Russian academics had indeed decided to translate

3 The word in Russian is usually rendered as the formerly archaic, now relatively neutral, Иной (*Inoi*).

"the Other" as *Chuzhoj*, someone would most likely have immediately posed the question, "Well, then, what/who is *Svoj*?"

The project will prove useful to Russian speakers as well, as it is my belief that although native Russians are quite aware of the opposition and its use, they are perhaps too closely aligned with it to consider it worthy of deep exploration. That is to say, they are aware of it in a way that precludes an unbiased assessment. That said, lengthy articles have been published by Russian-speaking writers using the opposition as a lens to interpret many works of literature and concepts in Russian culture;[4] T his scholarly output, however, stops short of questioning the lens itself or how it came into existence. Since the two components of the binary are not *completely* untranslatable, especially into other Slavic languages, many Russians would, and do, state that these concepts are not unique to their language and culture. That argument is not without merit. However, my aim is to show that Russians perceive, evaluate, and subsequently treat those who have been dubbed *svoj* or *chuzhoj* in demonstrably different ways than Americans or French people do when categorizing people into the groups that most closely correspond to those terms in English or French.

This treatment (of those dubbed *chuzhoj*, specifically) led Christof Ruhl of the World Bank to remark, in 2004, on Russians and their society: "The people just don't care. On a very broad scale, it's a country where people care about their family and friends. Their clan. But not their society." Elaborating on that sentiment, Nancy Ries, in her book, *Russian Talk*, a socio-anthropological investigation into the Russian manner of conversing during the time of Perestroika, describes the shunned *chuzhie* (the plural form of *chuzhoj*) as evil in Russians' minds, pointing to their "... conviction that there is an unbridgeable chasm between good selves and evil others, or in Russian vernacular, 'ours' and 'alien' (*svoj-chuzhoj*)" (114).

This perceived "unbridgeable chasm" has shaped contemporary Russian society in significant ways and contributed to a certain level of dysfunctionality. If you trust only a small group of people in your life, it is difficult to imagine large protest movements (or even neighborhood watch groups) operating effectively. Ries, again: "This kind of ideology effectively reduces the ability to perceive social groups as interdependent and may impede mediating processes at many levels of society, even the most immediate and local" (114).

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4 These works and concepts include: Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *Chto delat'* (*What is to be Done?*), the works of Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaya and Boris Pasternak, and the troika versus the train in Russian culture. These articles are found in the 1995 collection *"Svoe" i "Chuzhoe" v literature i kul'ture* (One's own and the foreign in literature and culture).

There are, after all, practical advantages to cultivating relationships with those outside your close-knit circle of friends and family, a practice discussed at length in *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1973), a seminal article by Mark Granovetter, Professor of Sociology at Stanford University. Granovetter explores in-depth the importance of more distant relationships to an effective social network. Granovetter here describes the hypothetical job search of a member of a social group, but the sentiment can be applied to the viability of most any social structure: "[T]hose to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive" (1371). He goes on to speak of the harm that can result in ignoring or not making full use of people outside of your close circle of friends and family. Now, if you will, imagine the consequences in the Russian context, where these people are often actively shunned.

But this tendency to avoid and denigrate perceived outsiders has not always been present in Russia; there are, I will argue, specific time periods and works of literature that set Russian society on a certain path and then accelerated its progress. This book traces that path in detail, beginning in the eighteenth century, a time when the words *svoj/chuzhoj* certainly existed as antonyms, but when the negative pole did not result in significant harm to those who had acquired the status. The word *svoj* was most often used in reference to one's family members and, at times, servants.

The memoirs of E. P. Yankova (1768–1861), eventually published by her grandson in 1885 under the title *Grandmother's Stories: Memories of Five Generations* (Rasskazy babushki: iz vospominanii pyati pokolenii) contain numerous examples of the opposition operating within a network of closely and not-so-closely related noblemen and women of the time. The stories depict the interaction of Yankova's relations via the system of *svoistvo*[5] (relationship by marriage), which of course contains the word *svoj.* The negative pole of the opposition was used to describe people with whom one did not have a close relationship. These people may have even been "friends," in the looser definition of the word we have seen in circulation since the appearance of Facebook (in Russian, people one friended on Facebook—*frendy*—are decidedly not the same as *druz'ya*— *friends*).

Moving ahead to the early part of the nineteenth century and Aleksandr Griboedov's beloved drama *Woe from Wit* (*Gore ot uma*), I demonstrate that the work marks a crucial and devastating shift in the interpretation of the word *chuzhoj*. The shift occurs during the ball scene when Sofya Famusova dubs her

5 With the accent on the final syllable.

childhood friend Aleksandr Chatsky "insane," doing so by using very specific wording ("не в своем уме"— "not in his [right] mind"). This "diagnosis" results in Chatsky's eventual departure from a group of people he thought was "his own" (*svoi*). It is not just the content of *Woe from Wit* that impacted the opposition, however. The manner in which the work was received and disseminated (for decades) in Russian society also affected the ways in which the opposition operated. The play and its reception fundamentally changed the criteria that Russians now use to accept people into their inner circles (*svoi*) as well as marking the moment when the social interpretation of the words began to dominate.

My last chapter travels even further into the nineteenth century, to the 1870s specifically, to Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons* (*Besy*). On a fundamental level, I consider this novel to be the author's attempt to correct Russian society's insistence on using a rigid and entirely social interpretation of the *svoj/chuzhoj* opposition when evaluating a person. I will show that Dostoevsky was very well acquainted with Griboedov's play and with the effect it had had on the Russian reader earlier in the century. In *Demons*, the author uses the reader's familiarity with *Woe from Wit* to accomplish a certain goal, namely, to try to steer the reader away from a purely social interpretation of the opposition.

By the time *Demons* was published, the word *chuzhoj* had acquired extremely negative connotations as well as the ability to inflict real damage. This damage is clearly laid out in the opening pages of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina,* also written in the 1870s. After Dolly Oblonsky discovers her husband Stiva's infidelity, she makes a quick inventory of the words at her disposal to express her anger— even uttering a few conventional ones—but she ultimately decides that the word *chuzhoj* would serve as the most effective insult. Tolstoy even has the narrator step in to emphasize the difficulty Dolly has in uttering the epithet: "'Вы мне мерзки, гадки, чужой, да, чужой совсем!—с болью и злобой произнесла она это ужасное для себя слово *чужой*" ("'You are vile, loathsome, a stranger, yes, a stranger!'—and painfully, spitefully, the terrible word 'stranger' fell from her lips,'" part 1, section 4). The English translation of the word, especially in this context, is decidedly inadequate, even comical—is "stranger" more terrible than "loathsome" or "vile"? To a Russian, however, her sentiments made perfect sense (and still do). In *Demons,* Dostoevsky endeavors to show the harm that can result from granting this word so much power. To drive this point home throughout the novel, Dostoevsky uses various methods to illuminate for the reader what he considers to be alternate and entirely valid interpretations of the opposition, interpretations that Russians have somehow managed to forget.

This project's theoretical framework, especially on the topic of "forgotten" meanings of the word *chuzhoj,* relies on the work of the Soviet semioticians. I refer in particular to an article by V. V. Ivanov and V. N. Toporov from 1965 entitled "Slavic linguistic modeling semiotic systems" ("Slavyanskie yazykovye modeliruyushchie sistemy"). Most subsequent scholarly treatments of the opposition reference this article as the first to address the subject. Here the authors separate the spheres in which the opposition manifests itself into the social, ethnic, and supernatural. According to the authors, the social interpretation includes groups of people that are to some extent interconnected; the *chuzhoj* member would be anyone that cannot be viewed as a primary symbol (*preimushchestvennyi simvol*) of the given (*svoj)* group. The ethnic interpretation, in turn, is concerned with the ancient enemies (*chuzhie*) of the Slavs (*svoi*), and includes the Tatar and the nomad, or, in mythological manifestations, the Russian folk characters Zmei-Tugarin, Idolishche, and Solov ei-razboinik. The supernatural deals with the divide between the human (*svoj*) and the inhuman, beastly, or magical worlds (all *chuzhoj*).

The semioticians point out, however, that a certain fluidity exists among the categories; in many cases a person or entity could be perceived as both (or either) *svoj* and/or *chuzhoj*. For example, Ivanov and Toporov begin with a discussion of the pagan gods of the East Slavic and Iranian worlds. Although the authors divide the deities into East Slavic *svoi bogi* (one's own gods) and Iranian *chuzhie bogi* (foreign/outsider gods), they recognize a blending of the two from a very early stage. This blending can be seen in the assimilation of a number of Iranian gods into the East Slavic pantheon. The authors assert that this phenomenon occurs in both the ethnic and social spheres as well.

In the realm of fairy tales, mythology, and the supernatural, the Slavic characters Baba-Yaga (the witch), Rusalka (the mermaid), and Medved' (the bear) appear occasionally as *svoj* and occasionally as *chuzhoj*. In fact, Vladimir Propp, in his 1946 *Historical Roots of the Fairy Tale* (*Istoricheskie korni volshebnoi skazki*), defines three types of Baba-Yaga:

> At a basic level, the fairy tale contains three different forms of Yaga. For example, there is the Gift-Giver Yaga, whom the hero visits. She quizzes him and he (or the heroine) receives a steed, expensive gifts, etc. Another type is the Child-Snatcher Yaga. She kidnaps children and attempts to fry them up, after which an escape and rescue ensue. Finally, there is the Warrior Yaga. She flies into the heroes' huts, flays them and makes a belt out of the skin and so forth. (53)