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Something Strange Is Happening With Russian Romantasy

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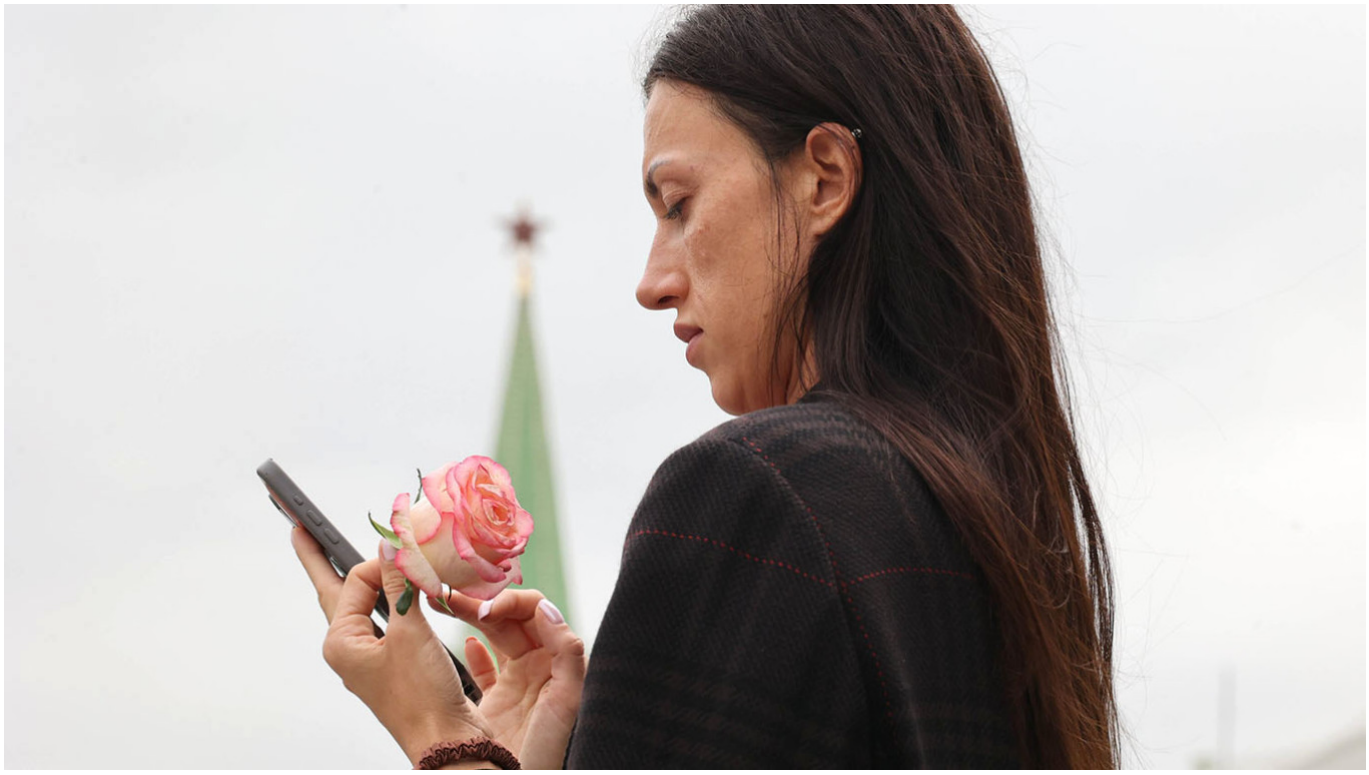

A woman in front of the Kremlin Tower in Moscow. **Yaroslav Chingaev / Moskva News Agency**

If the mysterious Russian soul is traditionally supposed to be understood by reading imperishable Russian literature, perhaps the best way to understand the feelings of Russian women in wartime is to read popular romantic fiction.

The Russian romance novel changes along with society. It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that the genre burst onto Russian bookshelves and then quickly blended with the workplace novel, detective fiction, the eternal Cinderella story and specifically Russian traditions.

Later, it was joined by the enormous industry of *popadanki*: modern women who find themselves transported into another time or world, where they have the chance to begin life again using the knowledge and experience acquired in their previous lives.

At first, the central fantasy of the *popadanka* consisted largely of precisely that fantasy. The heroine finds herself in a world whose rules are stacked against her, but makes a place for herself through her knowledge, character or luck. Part of the appeal lay in the high-status man — a king, prince, duke, mage, werewolf, dragon or vampire — who nearly always appeared.

But recently, Russian-language online literature has seen the particularly noticeable emergence of a more specific variety of this man: a general, commander-in-chief, head of the secret service, investigator or inquisitor — a person whose power extends not only over the heroine but over the surrounding society as well.

A typical extract would go something like this:

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If you look at what the world looks like for real Russian women today, what you will find is depressing. Russian women are losing control over their bodies and their way of life. I do not know whether Rosstat can be trusted, but even it cannot manage to put an attractive gloss on the situation.

Russian women are certainly well established in the workplace and some have even made it into management positions. But they earn noticeably less than men and shoulder most of the unpaid second shift of domestic labor at home. They have made far less progress toward political power: women remain few in number in the State Duma and their share has barely changed in recent years.

At the same time, the Russian state is intruding ever more actively into women's reproductive lives. Abortion formally remains legal, but there are fewer places where it can be obtained as administrative restrictions pile up in some regions. Russia is not unique in this — one need only look at the United States after the Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization case that concluded Americans had no constitutional right to an abortion. But a comparison with Europe, where women make up close to half of those in power, shows that recent reforms more often expand reproductive autonomy rather than restrict it. Correlation does not prove causation, but the contrast is striking.

Even within the Russian opposition, women remain a minority. Men still noticeably outnumber women on the register of "foreign agents," although the number of women is growing. Perhaps women genuinely have less desire to enter politics, or perhaps the state considers fighting against women beneath its dignity. In any case, the overall picture is visible even without official data: a woman bears a great deal of responsibility for her own life, but has noticeably less right to decide exactly how she should live it.

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Romance fiction is a poor tool for measuring public opinion. You cannot count the generals on book covers and conclude that they is exactly the kind of man Russian women want.

But popular fiction and sales charts are still useful mirrors of what fantasies are culturally permissible. It shows what writers and readers enjoy fantasizing about, what conflicts seem recognizable to them and what kinds of resolution bring emotional satisfaction.

Researchers of romance fiction have long drawn attention to this duality: the genre provides a temporary escape from everyday life while simultaneously reproducing (and, yes, sometimes subverting) familiar scripts of love, sex and the distribution of power between men and women.

As noted above, the male love interest in the recent incarnations of the *popadanka* story has most often belonged to a hero from the security or coercive apparatus.

This has already become such a recognizable trend that books are sold in entire themed series. On the self-publishing site Litnet, for example, there are collections called "A Popadanka for the General" and "After Divorcing the Dragon General."

Their blurbs repeat what is practically a ready-made formula: "powerful general," "stern dragon general," "commander-in-chief of the imperial army," themes of protection, submission, forced marriage, the heroine's dependence on the hero and the obligatory transformation of conflict into mutual love.

In one book, the heroine is literally bought by a general, after which he provides her and her child with a roof over their heads. The subsequent plot is supposed to transform a relationship of ownership and dependence into a romantic one.

The shift is also visible in our still-small pilot sample, although 20 of the most popular books per year is not enough for a serious statistical conclusion: in 2016, we did not find a single security-service hero among the top 20, whereas among the current top 20 for 2026 there were four — and that is based only on the blurb, which may not mention the male protagonist's profession.

It seems to us that the real percentage of "sexy inquisitors" among this year's leading romantic heroes is much higher. At least, among all the women's erotic fiction we forced ourselves to read while preparing this article, there simply were no other kinds of male leads.

But perhaps fate was simply having a laugh at our expense.

In any case, the growing erotic appeal of men from the security apparatus should be regarded not as a proven trend but as a hypothesis that needs to be tested on a larger sample. But the very appearance of entire commercial "litmob" collaborative writing efforts centered on the figure of the general demonstrates at least one thing: the publishing ecosystem considers this image comprehensible and attractive to female readers.

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And this is where things get really interesting.

What distinguishes the general from an ordinary alpha male is not that he is stronger or rougher. His power is institutional. He controls more than his own body, money or castle.

Behind him stand the army, the law, the state, the right to give orders and legitimate violence. The heroine enters into a relationship not simply with a strong man, but with a man who embodies the system of power. In effect, she marries the state.

Psychologically, this fantasy has a perfectly understandable structure. If the outside world is perceived as dangerous and difficult to control, the attractiveness of a man capable of providing resources and protection increases. Experimental studies have shown that even a brief reminder of resource scarcity can shift women's preferences toward signs that a man can provide more to her offspring. Other studies link a woman's own control over resources with changes in how important she considers a partner's economic qualities.

Benevolent sexism also plays a role. This is a model where a man should protect, provide for and take care of a woman who, in return, accepts a more dependent and traditional role. Paradoxically, some women may prefer such a man even when they simultaneously perceive his behavior as patronizing and restrictive.

In a series of five studies, the attractiveness of such a partner was explained primarily by the fact that he signaled a willingness to protect, provide and invest in the relationship. Such a man is especially attractive to women with a stronger need to feel secure in a relationship.

Departures from this pattern of behavior — choosing a different model of relationships — are condemned by society, and most likely, under present conditions, departing from this model may simply be unsafe for a woman. Thus, even despite potentially disagreeing with this model, women decide it is safer to agree with the person posing a threat than to defend their own interests.

The romance novel takes this construction to its ideal form. The general is frightening, but the heroine is not afraid. He is rough, but she alone sees his vulnerable soul. He may command thousands of people, but before her he gradually lays down his weapons and becomes a tender and playful partner.

The world remains hierarchical and dangerous. The heroine is given no opportunity to change its rules. Instead, she receives a personal exemption from those rules.

This is perhaps the most important detail. The female protagonist does not defeat the system. Instead, she integrates herself into it and becomes the beloved woman of the man who runs the system, like President Vladimir Putin's reported partner Alina Kabaeva.

Hence the inevitable motif of healing the powerful hero, whose cruelty is reframed through his pain. If he is cold, it means he once suffered. If he trusts no one, it is because he was betrayed. If he is capable of violence, it means the harsh world forced him to become that way.

The heroine's task is not to demand that he cease to be dangerous, but to discover that he is not a danger to her specifically because he loves her. And human history — including in contemporary Russia — knows many examples of women making such a choice.

Choosing a powerful, high-testosterone male as a protector threatens the woman herself with unpleasant consequences. Not only do Russian men have economic and political power over women, but physical power as well. That is why the situation regarding violence against

women in Russia is alarming. In 2024, 963 Russian women were killed by their partners or other family members and journalists have founds that courts are often lenient toward Ukraine war veterans accused of domestic violence. But as we'd say in Russia, the naive feminine rowan trees stubbornly keep trying to move closer to the masculine oak!

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It is also interesting to compare this Russian romantasy with its English-language counterparts. There, too, the male heroes are far from gentle and psychologically healthy. English-language romance is experiencing its own boom in dominant, dark and sometimes downright monstrous men. In 2025, the U.S. market grew especially rapidly thanks to the romantasy genre. In contemporary dark romance, it is easy to encounter a billionaire, mafioso, cowboy, athlete, biker, vampire, demon or faerie lord. Recent research on the genre itself likewise emphasizes its fascination with power imbalances, morally ambiguous heroes and the exploration of dangerous fantasies within the safe space of fiction.

The distinction, therefore, is not between a domineering Russian man and an egalitarian Western man. Both can be domineering, but the source of their power differs. The typical English-language alpha hero is a free agent. The billionaire is powerful because he created or inherited his own economic empire. The cowboy owns land and a horse. The mafioso exists in outright defiance of the state. The vampire, mage or faerie lord possesses innate supernatural power. Even when such a man is dangerous and despotic, his erotic capital is usually built around his personal autonomy: he is so strong, rich or talented that he makes his own rules.

The masculine general represents a different kind of fantasy. His power does not merely belong to him, but to the system. His epaulettes, rank, subordinates, access to force and ability to decide other people's fates become part of his sexual appeal.

While English-language fantasy lionizes the man who cannot be controlled, its Russian counterpart focusses on how he could command the world around him.

That is precisely why General Ratmirov seems to me more frightening and more interesting than just another literary cliché. Perhaps he is a miniature model of a much larger social shift. When a woman's own economic, political and bodily autonomy becomes less secure, fantasy may offer another form of adaptation: find the strongest man within the existing system and turn his power into your protection.

Then the final pie, lace collar and fourth pregnancy begin to look somewhat different. This is not simply bad literature. It is a very compact model of a social contract: he gets power over the world, while she gets power over his heart; he protects her from the world, while she agrees to live and feel secure in a world whose structure he has no intention of changing.

And what are we supposed to do about that? Perhaps we should simply leave them alone and watch what happens next.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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