

## Book Review:

Сценарии перемен: Уваровская награда и эволюция русской драматургии в эпоху Александра II [Stsenarii peremen: Uvarovskaia nagrada i evoliutsiia russkoi dramaturgii v epokhu Aleksandra II]. В Kirill Zubkov. (Nauchnaia biblioteka) Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie. 2021

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Сценарии перемен: Уваровская награда и эволюция русской драматургии в эпоху Александра II [Stsenarii peremen: Uvarovskaia nagrada i evoliutsiia russkoi dramaturgii v epokhu Aleksandra II]. By Kirill Zubkov.

Literary prizes are an important part of post-Soviet Russian culture. Some, such as the National Bestseller Award or the Debut Prize, drive sales and launch literary careers. Others, such as the prestigious Andrei Belyi Prize, or the Prokhorov Foundation's NOS Award, are good indicators of the current tastes of the Russian literary establishment. The history of early literary prizes in Russia has not, however, received the kind of sustained critical attention that similar institutions have enjoyed in French or German cultural studies. Kirill Zubkov's comprehensive monograph fills this gap by offering an insightful analysis of Russia's first literary prize—the Uvarov Award. Launched in 1856, the Uvarov Award was a product of its time, the period of Tsar Alexander II's Great Reforms. It was founded by Aleksei Uvarov in honour of his father Sergei, former government minister of national education, and administered by the Russian Academy of Sciences. The award was intended to recognize outstanding submissions from playwrights and historians, but the Academicians often could not agree on a politically and aesthetically suitable candidate. As a result, in its first twenty years only four plays received the award; Uvarov shut down the literary category entirely in 1876. This scarcity of winners, however, was not caused by a lack of qualified submissions, most of which are still retained in the award's archive at the Russian Academy of Sciences. Zubkov's study is a first attempt to analyse this archive as a sustained corpus of nineteenth-century Russian plays 'unfiltered', as it were, by censorship or any other editorial quality control. But Zubkov goes further than merely providing a careful description of his archival findings. The overarching argument of this study concerns the wider issues of the role literary prizes such as the Uvarov Award played in the history of Russian civil society. Zubkov maintains that, contrary to general assumptions, Russian literature of the period of the Great Reforms did not just criticize the state and its policies. Some writers, and especially playwrights who relied on direct contact with their audiences, offered the public alternative models of civil behaviour. Moreover, the agents of the state—in this case, academics and critics—sought to promote these models by using state-sanctioned literary prizes such as the Uvarov Award to recognize relevant texts. To this end, the five chapters of this book each focus on a different aspect of the Russian public sphere, as refracted in the history of the Uvarov Award. Chapter 1 uses Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere to discuss how both the submissions (including several plays written by women) and the reviewing process reflected the political and aesthetic views of the Russian literary establishment. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on particular styles and dramatists, such as the 'denunciatory' drama in the style of Mikhail Saltykov-Schedrin and plays composed by the award's most famous laureates, Nikolai Ostrovskii and Aleksei Pisemskii. Chapter 4 rereads historical plays submitted for consideration alongside Russian academic histories of the same period, while Chapter 5 discusses theatrical representations of nihilists and the question of realism as a style of drama. Zubkov's monograph is an invaluable addition both to the field of Russian theatre studies and to the history of Russian literature's involvement with politics. According to Zubkov, the Uvarov Award can be seen as a microcosm of the Russian public sphere during the reign of Aleksander II, and also as a reflection of Russia's failure to support progressive values. Instead, the government sustained an exclusionary public sphere which represented neither the full spectrum of the Russian theatregoing public nor the many different types of contemporary dramatist. Zubkov's volume, with the help of its three appendices—full lists of submissions, reviewers, and expert judges—aims to correct this misrepresentation, painting a broad, diverse picture of Russian cultural life during the era of the Great Reforms.