While there are obvious differences between the two, it is impossible to read *The Russian Context* without thinking of its predecessor, Genevra Gerhart's *The Russian World* - one of those rare books that are both so original in concept that they seem to create their own genre and so remarkably useful that it soon becomes difficult to imagine how one ever got along without them. The book has become a favorite among those who have used it over the years in large part because it simply filled a huge need by bringing together widely scattered and often hard-to-obtain information in a manner that is clear, concise, and lively. In no other single source could students find out the interior layout of peasant huts, how to read a mathematical formula out loud, what Russians call playing cards, the names of common insects, how a Russian samovar works, and the social significance of specific names in the years before the Bolshevik revolution.

And, I must confess, it is not just students who have benefited from *The Russian's World*. As a person for whom a sturgeon is a sturgeon is a sturgeon, and who does not like rushing to an encyclopedia while engrossed in a story or a novel, it was only after perusing this book that I understood the difference between beluga and osër. The picture of a drozhki gave me a much better sense than I had before as to how it differed from the enclosed kareta. The revelations did not just apply to Russian realia; sad to say, it was not until I came across the informative chart that concludes Chapter 1 (Chapter 2 in the second edition) that I finally realized just how a person is related to a "second cousin once removed."

In *The Russian Context* Eloise Boyle and Genevra Gerhart continue the tasks of the earlier work, but they have shifted the emphasis somewhat, from a focus on daily life to exploring the realms of society and culture. The authors of the various chapters all attempt to provide the kind of "general knowledge" that informs the use of language and the perception of the outside world on the part of any native speaker. James West's chapter on "Art and the Language of Russian Culture," where he shows how cartoons in the popular press regularly rely upon images from famous Russian works of art, effectively illustrates just why it is necessary to possess such knowledge. Early in that chapter he discusses several cartoons which refer to Repin's painting of Ivan the Terrible, in which the horror-stricken tsar clutches the head of his son, whom he has just murdered. In the first of the cartoons a museum visitor rushes by that very painting, afraid that "Next thing you know, you'll be involved as a witness." It would enrich a person's understanding of the cartoon to know that it is making use of an extremely famous by painting by one of the best-known Russian artists of all time; in this case, though, the basic humor is probably accessible even to someone who had never heard of Repin, since the bloody scene shows on the canvas and the widespread fear of getting involved already get the point across. However, what would one make of the next cartoon, showing one hockey player cradling the head of another after (apparently) striking him with a stick? Ivan the Terrible is mentioned in the cartoon as the culprit about to receive all of a two-minute penalty, and that would only be all the more confusing to the poor non-Russian who might be quite familiar with hockey fights and could even be aware that Ivan the Terrible was a Russian tsar, but who knows nothing about Repin's painting. Such a reader would remain mystified by the cartoon. Why this strange pose? Did Ivan the Terrible really play hockey? It is easy to imagine a non-native figuring out the precise
linguistic meaning of the Russian caption and still missing the entire cultural resonance that is responsible for nearly all of the effect.

Thus the ability to comprehend what one reads or hears requires a knowledge not just of the language, but of cultural referents called forth by various words and phrases. The "Russian context," like that for any language or society, is infinitely rich and varied; in a way, it may be even more difficult to become "fluent" in a language's context than in the language itself, but this volume will provide readers with an excellent start.

Part of that context consists simply of factual knowledge, of knowing the geography, the history, and the political structure of the country. These days, following the breakup of the Soviet Union, much has changed in terms of both the administrative units within Russia and the political structure, and the reader will find up-to-date information on both topics. History is presumably a more stable element, though as William Comer reminds us in the political joke that he quotes, in Russia even the past, particularly during the Soviet era, has been subject to change, depending on just who is writing about it. Still, historical references abound in newspapers, in films, in literature, and for that matter in everyday exchanges. The opening chapter, "Russia's History," contains just what its title promises - information which is absorbed by Russians simply from having grown up in the country. It offers, in a no-nonsense, almost outline form, the historical background that provides an essential part of the context within which the language is used.

But the requisite knowledge extends beyond the major historical events and figures to cultural history as well - to the artists, writers, composers, performers and film directors who have shaped the sensibilities of the nation, and as well to their more notable creative efforts. The historical overview that forms a part of each of the chapters on the arts turns out to be important not just for providing the names of artists and their works, but also for providing another essential part of the context: a sense of the chronology and of the varying influences that helped determine the directions of Russian culture.

Also important is an awareness of specific places that are a part of every educated person's vocabulary, and in this regard certain sections of The Russian Context can serve as a useful guide to those visiting Russia. Thus the chapter "Geography" includes information about the major sites in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and discusses a number of areas throughout the country that are well-known to every Russian. The chapter on "Theater in Language" contains comments about the major theaters in Moscow and St. Petersburg, rekindling memories of my own first trip to Russia, when a Moscow teacher took a couple of hours to offer a brief synopsis of the city's drama scene. I suddenly realized that in Moscow on did not just choose which play to see by gave equally (or more) serious consideration to the theater and the director. And that too turns out to be part of the Russian context.

But this volume is ultimately concerned with a language and its mutual interactions with culture. I have said that The Russian's World is not a language primer, and the same is true of The Russian Context. And yet in many vital ways it is truly about language. On the most basic level, in every chapter and virtually on every page, one will find useful vocabulary. Those with a serious interest in music can quickly learn the basic terminology they will need to discuss musical notation or to talk about instruments. Scientists will find an enormously valuable
introduction to the scientific lexicon and how it is constructed. The manner that scientific language has evolved over the years, discussions of how scientific imagery spread among the intelligentsia in late nineteenth-century Russia and found its way into literary discourse, and observations on the manner in which after the Bolshevik revolution technical terms came to be employed with far greater frequency in both ideological and cultural contexts.

Thus the interest here is not just in vocabulary, but in the way that language itself has become part of the cultural fabric, and nowhere is this phenomenon more in evidence than in the sayings and phrases that have entered the language. As the chapter on proverbs illustrates, the differences between the clusters of sayings found in two languages can say much about broader cultural distinctions; while many Russian proverbs will be readily understandable to speakers of English (and may even read like direct translations from one language into the other), others require a familiarity with Russian customs, often from the distant past. And, since Russian sayings, like those in English, are often only partially quoted or are modified to fit a particular situation, understanding the point a speaker is trying to make often requires the ability to recognize the underlying proverb. Toward this end the chapter's appendix, which lists over 200 of the more widely used proverbs sorted by difficulty, will prove especially valuable for many.

The sayings that have their origins in literary allusions tend to be still more culture-specific and more difficult for a non-native speaker to recognize. Even (especially) children's literature is important in this regard, since nearly everyone of a particular generation will share similar experiences in terms of the fairy tales, songs, poems and literary works that were part of their youthful years. References to these items appear frequently in newspapers and in spoken conversation, but the non-native is likely to be less familiar with them than the works of "high" literature. If virtually every adult Russian today knows the children's poetry of Chukovskii and Marshak, the same can hardly be said of those who have learned Russian as a second language. To deal with this lacuna, Robert Rothstein and Halina Weiss, in their chapter on children's literature, provide a generous selection of Russian children's songs and rhymes, describe the best known folk tales, and mention or quote from the most significant works of children's literature.

Two other chapters offer a wealth of literary quotations and references, items that, again, will be familiar to most Russians. The sheer number of phrases from Pushkin show the degree to which entire lines from his works have simply become a part of the language, almost as readily usable (and recognizable) as the individual words that comprise the quotations. Similarly, among prose writers it is the very titles of Gogol's works or the names of his characters that have entered into the lexicon. It is not necessarily the greatest of the writers, though, who have most enriched the language; the fables of Krylov are quoted nearly as often as the works of Pushkin, and the mere mention of "a swan, a crayfish and a pike" is immediately evocative to any Russian. Arguably the most amazing work of all in this regard turns out to be a play by an author virtually unknown to general audiences outside Russia: Griboedov's *Woe from Wit*. In addition to the names of the characters, several dozen quotations from the play (listed in the chapter on theater) are readily recognizable to Russians. The student of the language who comes across the concluding words of that play ("What will Princess Maria Alekseevna say!") in another context and who is not aware of the source (or the fact that they imply adherence to a hypocritical morality) will be just as much at a loss as the person who looks at the cartoon based on Repin's painting without knowing the original work.
Like its predecessor, *The Russian Context* offers delightful browsing. Such readers may find themselves learning about political administrative units in post-Soviet Russia at one moment, finding out who have been the leading performers of modern popular music at the next, and at a third gaining familiarity with some of the language's most significant literary quotations. At the same time, it more than repays intensive study, and offers an unduplicated collection of valuable information for the serious student of Russian. In either case, whether examined casually or studied intensively, *The Russian Context* will guide each person toward a deeper understanding of the language and the culture.