WAR CRIME AND AUTHOR PUNISHMENT:
HOW THE INVASION OF UKRAINE AFFECTED U.S. READERSHIP
OF RUSSIAN LITERARY CLASSICS

By

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CREATIVE COMMONS

AUTHOR´S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, **Olle Rehnfeldt**, candidate for the Bachelor of Science degree in Data Science and Society (specialization in Sociology and Data Science) declare herewith that the present titled "War Crime and Author Punishment: How the Invasion of Ukraine Affected U.S. Readership of Russian Literary Classics" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how international conflict affects the consumption of canonical cultural goods, focusing on whether Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led to changes in U.S. readership of classical Russian literature. By analysing sales data from Amazon.com and user-generated reviews on Goodreads for six major Russian literary works, the study employs a multi-method causal inference approach including Event Time Design (ETD), Welch's t-tests, Synthetic Control Methods (SCM), and Interrupted Time Series (ITS) regressions to test the impact of the invasion. A corpus of French classics serves as the control group for constructing counterfactual sales trajectories via SCM.

The findings reveal no clear or uniform pattern of negative consumption. While *War and Peace* shows a consistent decline in both sales and average ratings, *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* present mixed results—registering increased sales but slightly declining review scores. Other works remain largely unaffected. These outcomes could suggest that while some sensitivity to geopolitical events may exist, entrenched consumer preferences and the perceived quality of canonical literature largely shield these works from broader cultural backlash.

This study contributes to the literature by expanding the methodological toolbox for studying cultural consumption under international conflict and by testing theoretical claims about negative effect resilience and path dependence in the domain of highbrow literature. It illustrates that classical works may exhibit substantial stability against external shocks, even when originating from politically stigmatised nations.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to Yann Kull. The most brilliant student in the DSS 25' cohort and an inspiring, kind and good friend. Yann was unable to finish his degree due to developing the chronic post-viral conditions Myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) and has been confined to his bed since 2023. When writing this, there is no known cure for ME, in hope of changing this and bringing attention to the subject, I share the following links:

- [Donation portal for people suffering of ME in Austria](#)
- [Donation for ME research](#)
- [Documentary on ME](#)

Any contribution and raised awareness to this subject is highly appreciated.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BSR – Amazon Best Sales Rank

ETD – Event Time Design

SCM – Synthetic Control Method

ITS – Interrupted Time Series

RSMPE – Root Squared Mean Predicted Error

Shakespeare was banned from the German stage, Mozart and Wagner from the French and English concert halls, German professors declared that Dante had been Germanic, the French that Beethoven had been a Belgian. Intellectual culture was requisitioned without scruple from the enemy countries like grain and ore. It was not enough that thousands of peace-loving citizens were killing each other daily at the front. In the hinterland there was mutual berating and slandering of the great dead of the enemy countries, who had been slumbering in their graves for centuries.

— Stefan Zweig, The World of Yesterday (1942)

INTRODUCTION

It is often assumed that increased trade between countries fosters peace. Yet, recurring military and diplomatic confrontations in the present global system show that economic interdependence does not necessarily prevent conflict. Modern conflicts increasingly spill over into areas beyond direct military engagement, affecting public opinion, consumer behaviour, and cultural exchange. In this context, international conflict can serve as a lens for examining how macro-political tensions affect micro-level consumption, particularly of goods that are culturally significant.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, severely worsened U.S.–Russia relations. Apart from formal sanctions and political reactions, this event prompted hundreds of U.S. companies to curtail operations in Russia (Sonnenfed and Tian 2022). Russian cultural figures and institutions were excluded from international cultural events (Sergatskova 2023), and a broader discourse emerged about whether cultural engagement with Russia should continue, even in cases where the works or artists predate the current political regime (Platt 2022). This situation raises the question to what extent consumption of classical Russian art is affected by contemporary international conflicts.

This thesis examines whether the Russian invasion influenced American readership of classical Russian literature. Specifically, it investigates if and how consumption patterns—measured through Amazon book sales and Goodreads user reviews—shifted following the invasion. The focus is on identifying whether political sentiment translates into consumer hesitation, even when the goods in question are not overtly political and hold a stable, high-cultural status. While the broader idea that conflict can affect trade is well established, this study focuses on a relatively narrow cultural domain where the effects are less predictable.

Research on political consumerism has shown that public sentiment can influence consumption of foreign cultural goods (Ren, Zong, and Zhan 2024). However, much of the previous scholarship has focused on visible, brand-based products or contemporary culture. This thesis considers a slightly different case: literary works that have been canonised over centuries and are typically consumed by readers with stable preferences. It aims to understand whether such goods are similarly subject to political influence. The study draws on Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and Stiegler and Becker's work on path-dependency, to understand consumer preferences for cultural goods (Bourdieu 1979; Stigler and Becker 1977)

To explore this question, two types of data are used. First, sales information is collected through the Amazon Best Seller Rank (BSR) for six classic Russian literary works. These are *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina, Crime and Punishment*, *Demons*, *The Idiot,* and *Dead Souls*. Second, user sentiment is assessed using review data from Goodreads, focusing on reviews written in English to approximate a primarily U.S.-based audience. To provide context for changes in Russian book sales, comparable French literary works are used as synthetic controls. These serve as a counterfactual that indicates whether any changes observed in Russian book sales or reviews might be linked to the geopolitical context.

The analysis applies several quantitative methods to identify changes in sales and ratings. An Event Time Design (ETD) is used to track any changes in consumption following the invasion date. Welch's t-tests assesses the statistical significance of differences in pre- and post-invasion periods. The Synthetic Control Method (SCM) creates a counterfactual for each Russian title using multiple French books, offering a comparison between expected and actual trends. Goodreads review data is analysed using Interrupted Time Series (ITS) regressions to detect both abrupt and gradual shifts in ratings.

The findings are mixed. *War and Peace* showed a small but consistent drop in both sales and average ratings, and *Crime and Punishment* showed increased sales despite slightly more negative reviews. However, most of the books analysed showed no noticeable difference. This suggests that while political sentiment may influence certain purchasing or rating behaviours, the broader pattern does not support the idea of a negative effect on readership of canonical Russian literature. These findings indicate that canonical literature may be relatively stable in the face of political disruption, possibly due to the entrenched nature of reader preferences and the perceived quality of these works.

The thesis proceeds as follows. The chapter below presents a review of relevant literature and theories, covering political consumerism, cultural capital, and the effects of international conflict on trade. The methodology chapter outlines the methodology in detail. The Data Summary chapter presents the steps of data preprocessing. The results chapter summarises the findings from each analytical method. The discussion chapter interprets these findings in relation to the existing literature and offers some possible interpretations along with limitations. The final chapter concludes the study, reflecting on its contributions and limitations, and suggests areas for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical framework is structured around five core themes. It begins by examining the social characteristics of cultural goods consumers, followed by an exploration of the internal and external microeconomic factors that influence their purchasing decisions. The review then turns to external mechanisms related to international conflict that may lead consumers to abstain from certain goods. Building on this, it categorises the typologies of consumer boycotts, distinguishing between their various forms and motivations. Finally, it highlights the most relevant empirical studies in the field, identifies existing gaps in the literature, and explains how this thesis seeks to address those gaps.

Social Characteristics of Cultural Goods Consumers

The link between social characteristics and cultural goods has been widely studied, mainly through the relation between education, class, and position in the social strata. In this field Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979) is a seminal work, linking cultural preferences to the internalised tastes attained from education and one's social class. His framework suggests that cultural consumption is not merely a matter of individual preference, but a reflection of one's position within the social hierarchy, suggesting that consumers of cultural goods tend to cluster into homogenous groups. This is further crystalised in the context of American society, in the work of Morris B. Holbrook (1995), showing that tastes for different types of cultural goods are often correlated. For example, someone who enjoys classical music is also more likely to enjoy jazz. Classical literature, in particular, has been shown to occupy a privileged position within the hierarchy of cultural goods. Bourdieu identifies literary appreciation—especially of canonical works—as one of the clearest expressions of "legitimate" cultural capital, most strongly cultivated through formal education. In this framework, the consumption of classic works

serves not merely as an aesthetic function but operates as a marker of distinction, separating the culturally "competent" from others. The consumption of canonical literary works can thus be said to belong not only to a particular social stratum, but also to carry a symbolic importance. This implies that the public perception of the authors could influence how their works are perceived. Furthermore, the consumers of these works can be expected to belong to particular social groups, distinguished by their higher education.

Economic Characteristics of Cultural Goods Consumers

The microeconomic literature establishes internal and external mechanisms that influence consumers to buy a cultural good. Lagios and Méon (2024b) propose that the initial condition for a book to be bought by a consumer is for the consumer to be aware of the book's existence, meaning that even negative reviews can increase the sales of a book. This factor also narrows the consumer base for classical literature, as such works are rarely promoted in the same way as contemporary titles and, echoing Bourdieu (1979), suggests that awareness of these books depends on education or references in other cultural outlets. Furthermore, Lagios and Meón argue that a person's perceived value of a book must exceed the price they pay for it, since books are *experience goods* whose values cannot be known before consumption. This introduces information asymmetries, making external cues such as reviews, bestseller lists, and media attention especially important in shaping consumer expectations and reducing uncertainty. These informational signals act as heuristics, influencing both perceived value and the likelihood of purchase. The more that Russia or Russian literature is in discussed, consumer awareness of Russian literature may increase, leading to increased sales. Alternatively, negative press about Russia and Russian works could also decrease perceived value and lead to decreased sales.

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Building on the work of Stigler and Becker (1977), economists have conceptualized the consumption of cultural goods, including books, as path dependent. Consumers accumulate "consumption capital" through repeated exposure, which enhances the utility derived from future consumption. In this model, reading preferences are not fixed, but rather learned and cultivated over time. Cultural goods that may initially be difficult or unappealing—such as classical literature—can become more enjoyable as the reader develops familiarity, competence, and appreciation. Ren, Zong, and Zhan (2024) similarly describe cultural consumption as path dependent, noting that consumers tend to remain loyal to specific genres or styles once their preferences have formed. These mechanisms can counteract negative externalities and may lead consumers of Russian classics to remain loyal to their authors, despite more negative association with Russia at large.

Previous Research on Boycotts, Trade Disruption, and Cultural Consumption in Conflict

On a broader macroeconomic level, numerous studies have shown that international conflicts—even in the absence of direct military confrontation—disrupt trade flows and reduce cross-border consumption, as political tensions spill over into commercial relations and consumer behaviour (Glick and Taylor 2010; Anderton and Carter 2001; Keshk, Pollins, and Reuveny 2004). Davis and Meunier (2011) suggest that highly path-dependent consumers may be less responsive to geopolitical tensions due to sunk costs and habitual preferences in the context of globalisation. However, Li and Liu (2019) argue that social stigmatisation can nonetheless override such inertia by imposing reputational costs on consumption.

Looking at the scholarship specifically on boycotts, the typology of consumer boycotts can be divided into *direct boycotts*, where consumers target a specific product or company in response

to its actions, and *surrogate boycotts*, where consumers abstain from purchasing goods from companies associated with a broader target, such as a country (Friedman 1999). Though distinct, it is important to remark that direct and surrogate boycotts share similar mechanisms and behaviours among consumers. In line with this topology, boycotts of Russian goods can be classified as being part of a surrogate boycott, where the country that the company originates from is the main target. The negative perception attributed to Russia in line with these boycotts could act as a negative mechanism on sales and ratings of Russian works.

Several studies have further explored the underlying mechanisms that drive direct and surrogate consumer boycotts. Tyran and Engelmann (2005) emphasise that boycotts are often expressive rather than instrumental, motivated more by a desire to punish perceived unfairness than to bring about economic change. They state that boycotts face a collective action problem, struggling with convincing individual consumers to participate, but point out that coordination mechanisms—such as public calls or visible protests—can enhance participation. Similarly, Weiss et al. (2023) also highlight the role of social stigma in sustaining boycotts, particularly when the targeted good is highly visible and symbolically loaded, such as foreign-branded cars during geopolitical tensions. Social pressure and peer effects amplify boycott behaviour, especially in contexts where moral or national identity is at stake. The perceived utility of the good is thus diminished not by any change in its inherent qualities, but by the social stigma the consumer anticipates from publicly displaying or using it. Due to the highlighted social nature of the Russian classical works, they could be impacted by this, as displaying or owning these works could carry increased social stigma. Michaels and Zhi (2010) suggest that shifts in elite sentiment—particularly among managers and high-income individuals—can shape purchasing decisions independently of formal sanctions, indicating that politically salient changes in public opinion may also influence the consumption of the good. Russian books might be particularly

affected by this as reviewers and distributors are influential to the perceived utility of the book (Lagios and Méon 2024a).

Previous studies on surrogate boycotts following international conflicts suggest that visible goods are more prone to decreases in sales. The reaction of the Chinese consumer base to the 2012 Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands dispute is one such example (Li and Liu 2019). In the aftermath of Japan's nationalisation of the disputed islands, Japanese exports of visible consumer goods to China, such as automobiles and cameras, experienced declines lasting up to 12 months, while exports of raw materials and intermediate goods remained unaffected. Another investigation into the Chinese car market following the same event found that the market share of Japanese cars dropped by 16% in four major cities, with 75% of the decline driven by consumer switching to Chinese or non-Japanese brands (Sun et al. 2021). The sales impact varied geographically, being most pronounced in Nanjing, a city with strong historical grievances against Japan, and weakest in Beijing, where public protests were discouraged. Although these effects were acute, they appear to have been temporary, with boycotts concentrated in the months immediately following the dispute. These works theorise that this is due to the path dependency of the consumers, which serves as parallel to the consumers of Russian literature and and raise the question of whether their path-dependency could mitigate negative external pressures. It also suggests that effects might be more prominent in the early period immediately following the invasion of Ukraine.

The question of how cemented tastes affect boycotts is also raised by Chavis and Leslie (2009) in their investigation into the call to boycott French wines following the deterioration of diplomatic relationships between France and the U.S after the Iraq war in 2003. They find that mid-priced wines were less affected by the boycott. Theorising that substitution costs remain low in the lower price segments, due to less refined tastes, and because higher-cost wines are

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predominantly used for gifts and thus also have lower specificities. Mid-priced wines are speculated to be bought for own consumption and due to path dependency, the substitution costs for consumers are higher, reducing impact of negative external mechanisms.

One of the few studies that specifically investigates the effect of international conflict on cultural goods consumption is Ren, Zong, and Zhan's *Trade war, national sentiment and consumption substitution of cultural products: evidence from China's film market* (2024) which examines how the U.S.–China trade war, started in 2018, influenced the Chinese film market. They find that the attendance rate for American films dropped by 19.1% compared to domestic films. This indicates a clear substitution effect in response to political conflict. However, the effect varied by context: substitution was less pronounced during holidays, when viewing decisions are more tied to film quality, and also weaker in economically developed cities, where consumers showed greater loyalty to foreign films. Moreover, "high quality" films were excluded from the research, indicating that their inherent utility outweighed the effects of animosity. These patterns suggest that while national sentiment can shape short-term consumption choices, longer-term preferences — influenced by prior exposure and cultural capital, assumed to be higher in the economically developed cities — continue to play a stabilizing role, to the extent that highly praised works might be less susceptible to influence.

Theoretical Implications of Conflict for Path-Dependent Cultural Markets

Overall, the previous scholarship suggests that the impact of international conflict on consumption of goods, including in the context of boycotts, are dependent on a complex interplay between visibility and the degree of consumer attachment to the good in question. While goods that are both nationally salient and publicly visible are often targeted in boycotts,

long-standing habits and culturally cultivated preferences can counteract these effects, especially when consumption involves high levels of path dependence. Cultural goods, and literature in particular, have a unique position within this framework, with their reputation being shaped in the social sphere while also relying on individual characteristics to generate utility. This dual character makes Russian classics an interesting ground for investigation as to which mechanism is dominant: the path-dependency preferences of the consumers or the negative impact created by international conflict and general calls to boycott the country.

By investigating these competing mechanisms, this thesis aims to bridge the gap in scholarship regarding the effects of international conflict on the consumers of cultural goods. The question of whether these mechanisms cancel each other out has been raised in regards to mid-priced wine (Chavis and Leslie 2009) and film (Ren, Zong, and Zhan 2024). By analysing the U.S. readership on classical Russian literature, this research tries to answer whether international conflict affects these highly canonical cultural goods. The results of this investigation can give insights into how canonical works in other disciplines are impacted and, more generally, on how international conflict affects other non-cultural, path-dependent consumer behaviours.

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND & HYPOTHESES

The sharp increase in negative sentiment towards Russia serves as the first external shock to be investigated for its potential influence on consumer behaviour. Given the established correlation between higher education and appreciation for canonical literature in sociological research, it is likely that consumers of these works are college-educated Americans. This group is more likely to vote in elections overall (Kim 2023), and when they do, they tend to vote for the Democrats, with women making up a greater share of these voters (Doherty and Kiley 2020), based on data collected before the 2024 election. The voters who identified as Democrats also displayed stronger animosity towards Russia in March 2022 following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with 72% viewing Russia as an enemy, compared to 69% of Republican-identifying voters (Wike et al. 2024). This marks an increase from 43% of Democrat-identifying voters in January 2022, before the invasion, and 39% of Republican-identifying voters. Hence, even if the readers do not belong to the speculated majority group, most Americans demonstrated a sharp increase in animosity towards Russia following the invasion. This increase in animosity is tested as a potential factor negatively influencing sales and ratings of classical works.

Furthermore, public discourse calling for a boycott of Russian cultural goods—and debates over how extensive such boycotts should be—are theorised to amplify the negative impact of rising anti-Russian sentiment. Following the full-scale invasion on February 24th, 2022, there were widespread calls to boycott Russian culture in the U.S., particularly targeting contemporary artists who failed to publicly distance themselves from the invasion and art with imperialist undertones. Notable examples include the cancellation of performances by Russian conductor Valery Gergiev at Carnegie Hall (Hernández 2022), the exclusion of Russian films

from film festivals (Cleveland 2022), and the removal of Russian compositions from concert programmes (Dixon Evans 2022). These actions were supported by Ukrainian officials, including the Minister of Culture (Higgins 2022). In parallel, major U.S. media outlets published opinion pieces debating whether it was appropriate to suspend engagement with Russian classics (Platt 2022). These articles reflected a range of perspectives, both in favour of and against such measures. While there were no explicit campaigns to boycott classical Russian books specifically, the broader climate suggests growing cultural hostility toward works of Russian origin. This cultural atmosphere, combined with heightened public disapproval of Russia, indicates a potential for informal or symbolic boycotts of Russian literature. When viewed alongside existing research on the role of social stigma in driving cultural boycotts, the visibility of books as cultural goods, and findings that consumption can decline even in the absence of formal boycott calls, this environment provides a plausible basis for expecting reduced demand for Russian literature in the aftermath of the invasion.

As outlined in the theoretical framework section, certain characteristics of consumers—and of high-quality cultural goods more broadly—might mitigate these effects. On the other hand, previous scholarship also suggests that these reductions in demand may be short-lived or not noticeable due to the path-dependent and sticky tastes of cultural consumers, particularly regarding goods perceived as high-quality.

The methodology section uses France as a counterfactual, as Americans' positive perception of the country has remained stable following the invasion of Ukraine. A survey on how Americans viewed France in February 2023 revealed that 83% have a "very" or "most favourable" view of France, compared to only 9% who held a favourable view of Russia at the time (Brenan 2023). Moreover, perceptions of France reportedly remained stable between February 2022 and February 2023. France stands out as the most favoured non-English-speaking country among

Americans, maintaining its positive image even after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Furthermore, like Russian literature, French works are typically read in translation, reducing potential confounding factors such as inclusion in school curricula—an issue more prominent for English or Irish literature However, some confounding factors—such as the more consistently negative perception of Russia compared to France historically—could still influence sales. These attitudinal trends are nonetheless accounted for, as the SCM analysis anchors on pre-invasion data and treats the post-invasion rise in negative perception of Russia as the exogenous shock.

Hypotheses

Taken together, these insights motivate one primary hypothesis regarding the potential effects of the 2022 invasion on the consumption of classical Russian literature, along with two explanatory hypotheses contingent on the outcome of H1.These are:

H1: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has had a measurable effect on the consumption of classical Russian literature in the U.S., observable through changes in sales rankings and user ratings.

H2a: If such a shift is observable, it is likely driven by increased anti-Russian sentiment among highly educated consumers and public debate over the cultural legitimacy of engaging with Russian works.

H2b: If no shift is observed, this can be explained by the path-dependent nature of canonical cultural consumption, in which symbolic value and entrenched preferences render classical works resilient to external political events.

METHODOLOGY

To assess the causal impact of the Russian invasion on the consumption of Russian classical literature in the U.S. market, this study employs a multi-method quantitative approach grounded in established econometric literature. ETD is used as an initial exploratory framework, leveraging the exogenous shock of the invasion date to visualise temporal trends in book sales—a technique widely applied in economic impact assessments t identify structural breaks over time (Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan 1993). To test for statistically significant shifts in mean outcomes before and after the intervention, a Welch's t-test is applied. This test is particularly suitable for comparing groups with unequal variances and sample sizes (Welch 1947). For causal inference, SCM is used to construct a data-driven counterfactual by combining untreated units weighted by their similarity to the treated unit during the pre-intervention period (Abadie, Diamond, and Hainmueller 2011). Lastly, to investigate shifts in review sentiment, ITS is employed to model both level changes and trend alterations around a defined intervention point (Lopez Bernal, Cummins, and Gasparrini 2016). Collectively, these methods offer a robust framework for isolating the potential effects of geopolitical conflict on path-dependent cultural consumption.

Event Time Design on Sales Data

Firstly, to investigate whether the sales of classical Russian books translated into English changed following the invasion, Best Sellers Rank (BSR) data from Amazon.com is analysed for one year before and one year after the invasion. The books themselves are selected by looking at the highest selling Russian classical works published by either Penguin Classics or Vintage, both of which are owned by Penguin Random House. Because BSR values become more volatile at lower rankings—where small changes in sales can produce large jumps—only

books that consistently fall within the 0–200,000 range between February 2021 and February 2023 are included. The six works that fulfil these conditions and fall in the category of classical Russian literature are: *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy; *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *Demons* by Fyodor Dostoevsky; and *Dead Souls* by Nikolai Gogol. Although Gogol is often included in the Russian literary canon—reflected, for instance, in how Amazon.com classifies him—he was of Ukrainian origin and wrote in Russian. His inclusion also serves as a control to explore whether an author of Ukrainian origin may have been affected differently in terms of sales pattern.

To reduce volatility in the data, the monthly average of each book is calculated between the 23rd and the 22nd of every month, to avoid pre-invasion data leakage into the post-invasion data after the invasion date on the 24th of February 2022. As an initial analysis, ETD is employed to explore whether the onset of the Russian invasion corresponds with any notable shifts in book consumption patterns.

The invasion date, denoted as t_0, serves as an exogenous shock, enabling a visual and descriptive comparison of outcome trajectories before and after the event. Formally, changes in the outcome variable Y_t –book sales rank– are examined over time relative to the intervention point:

$$Y_t = \alpha + \sum_{k \neq 0} \delta_k D_k + \varepsilon_t$$

where D_k is a set of time-relative dummy variables ($D_{-2}, D_0, D_{+1}, \dots$) indicating months before and after the intervention. The omitted category D_{-1}, representing the month immediately before the invasion, serves as the baseline in terms of sales. The coefficients δ_k capture the deviation from baseline at each time point. This flexible framework allows for an initial identification of dynamic treatment effects across the post-event timeline. Additionally,

a Welch's t-test is conducted as a robustness check to assess whether the mean of average daily values differs significantly between the 12-month periods before and after the invasion. This is done on the untreated daily data to avoid introducing artefacts from smoothing or transformations that could distort the underlying variance structure.

Synthetic Control Method

As numerous factors can influence the sales of cultural products—such as seasonal sales patterns highlighted by Ren, Zong, and Zhan (2024)– this thesis employs the SCM to control for external influences. By constructing a counterfactual from a set of classical French works and comparing their expected sales trajectory to the actual performance of translated Russian literature, the method helps mitigate potential seasonal fluctuations and other large-scale market shifts during the observed period. French works are selected using the same criteria as the Russian titles. These include works categorised as classical French literature on Amazon.com and are: *The Fall*, *The Stranger*, and *The Plague* by Albert Camus; *Nausea* by Jean-Paul Sartre; *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo; *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust; and *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne.

To construct the synthetic sales trajectory using SCM, we define a set of books as a pool of $J + 1$ units, where the Russian book of interest is indexed as $j = 1$ and the remaining units constitute the French control group. For each book, the monthly average BSR is observed across two periods: the pre-invasion period $T = 0$ and the post-invasion period $T = 1$, t together forming a 24-month observation window: $T = T_0 + T_1$. To construct the French control group, we calculate a weighted average where the weights W = (w₁ … w_{j+1}) range between 0 and 1 $(0 \leq w_j \leq 1, j = 2, ..., J)$ and sum to 1 $(w_2 + \cdots + w_{j+1} = 1)$. To construct the synthetic control, we choose the weights $W = (w_2, ..., w_{J+1})$ such that the weighted combination of

French books closely approximates the trajectory of the treated Russian book in the pre-invasion period. This is done by minimising the discrepancy between the pre-treatment rolling average BSR of the Russian book, denoted X_1, and that of the control group, denoted $X_0 W$. The weights are chosen to minimize the following expression:

$$\min_{W}(X_1 - X_0 W)' V (X_1 - X_0 W)$$

where V is a diagonal matrix that assigns relative importance to different time points. These weights are determined by using the *cvxpy* package in Python to solve the convex optimisation problem. After the weights W^* are determined, the synthetic control is constructed as a weighted combination of the outcomes of the control group books, where each control book contributes proportionally according to its assigned weight. This means that the synthetic BSR for a given month is calculated as $\sum_{j=2}^{J+1} w_j Y_{jt}$, where each w_j represents the contribution of control book j to the overall synthetic estimate based on its similarity to the treated unit in the pre-intervention period. The effect of the invasion at time t is then calculated as the difference between the observed BSR of the Russian book Y_{1t} and this weighted synthetic outcome:

$$\widehat{\tau_t} = Y_{1t} - \sum_{j=2}^{J+1} w_j Y_{jt}$$

This estimated treatment effect reflects the deviation from the expected trajectory based on the synthetic, created by comparable French books, and serves as an indicator of whether the invasion impacted the book's relative popularity.

This setup allows for direct comparison between the observed outcome of the treated unit and the counterfactual outcome estimated by the synthetic control. At any given time point $t \geq T_0$,

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we can compare the actual BSR of the Russian book Y_{1t} to the predicted BSR of the synthetic control, $\sum_{j=2}^{J+1} w_j Y_{jt}$. The resulting gap:

$$\hat{\tau_t} = Y_{1t} - \sum_{j=2}^{J+1} w_j Y_{jt}$$

captures the estimated effect of the invasion at that particular month. Visualising this gap over time offers an intuitive illustration of how the treated book's trajectory diverges from the expected trend in the absence of the Russian invasion. To evaluate the fit of the synthetic control during the pre-invasion period, the Root Mean Squared Prediction Error (RMSPE) is calculated. This metric quantifies the average deviation between the synthetic counterfactual and actual book sales before and after the invasion. Furthermore, the ratio between the post-invasion fit and the pre-invasion fit is calculated as:

$$\phi = \frac{\text{RMSPE}_{\text{post}}}{\text{RMSPE}_{\text{pre}}}$$

Where:

- $\phi \gg 1$ suggests a substantial increase in prediction error after the intervention, indicating a potential treatment effect.
- $\phi \approx 1$ implies that the model's fit remained stable across both periods, suggesting no significant treatment effect.
- $\phi < 1$ indicates a better fit in the post-treatment period, which may reflect overfitting or random variation rather than a meaningful treatment effect.

Interrupted Time Series on Ratings Data

The second part of the quantitative analysis draws on Goodreads reviews—an online, predominantly American, book reviewing platform. Users write reviews and rate books on a discrete number from 1-5. They can also leave a written review without a rating. Reviews without ratings are excluded from the analysis, as they can be either positive or negative. For instance, one user used the review section to document their reading process for *War and Peace* before submitting a final review. Moreover, to match the review data with the American sales data, only reviews written in English are included. While this does not guarantee that reviewers are American, it narrows the dataset accordingly.

To determine whether rating patterns changed significantly following the invasion, an ITS analysis is conducted. The regression is performed on the average rating, smoothed using a three-week moving average. Pre- and post-invasion periods are analysed separately to prevent data leakage and ensure data stability for model estimation.

The rationale of ITS is to model review activity over time and assess whether a statistically significant change occurred following an external intervention—in this case, the Russian invasion of Ukraine. ITS is a quasi-experimental method that estimates both the immediate effect (a level shift) and the long-term effect (a change in trend) of an intervention by comparing observed post-treatment data to a projection of the pre-treatment trend. Formally, the model can be expressed as:

$$Y_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_t + \beta_2 D_t + \beta_3 (T_t \cdot D_t) + \varepsilon_t$$

where:

- Y_t is the outcome variable at time t(e.g., number of reviews),

- T_t is a continuous time variable,

- D_t is a binary indicator equal to 0 before the invasion and 1 after,

- $T_t \cdot D_t$ is the interaction term capturing the change in slope after the intervention,

- ε_t is the error term.

Here, β_1 estimates the baseline trend across the entire period, β_2 captures the instantaneous level change in the outcome variable that occurs at the time of the intervention (i.e., immediately after the invasion), relative to the projected outcome based on the pre-intervention trend., and β_3 captures the change in trend over time following the invasion where $D_t = 1$. If either β_2 or β_3 is statistically significant, it provides evidence of a structural shift in review patterns attributable to the invasion. This method is particularly suited for detecting subtle yet meaningful behavioural changes in longitudinal observational data.

DATA SUMMARY

Best Sales Rank Data

This thesis draws on two primary sources of data. The first is the BSR for the selected works. The BSR indicates an item's sales rank relative to other products on Amazon, where a rank of 1 represents the best-selling item in its category—here, books—and higher numbers indicate lower sales. Both recent sales and all-time sales factor into a BSR, though recent sales count more than older sales (Sharma and Liu 2020). The data is extracted using the third-party tool Helium 10, which stores historical Amazon BSR values for items with sufficiently high sales on the platform. It allows users to download these data as CSV files, where each entry corresponds to a specific BSR snapshot.

Helium 10 saves BSR values multiple times per day, which can result in considerable fluctuations. This volatility is more pronounced for books with lower (i.e., better) BSRs, where small changes in sales—either of the book itself or competing titles—can cause significant shifts in rank. The data was collected from Amazon.com, the U.S. version of the site, although users from other countries may also use the platform to order books. This introduces a limitation, as it does not guarantee that only U.S.-based users are represented. However, given the existence of country-specific Amazon sites—especially in other English-speaking countries such as Canada (Amazon.ca), the U.K. (Amazon.co.uk), and Australia (Amazon.com.au)—it is likely that the majority of traffic to Amazon.com originates from the U.S. As described in the Methodology section, BSR values are averaged monthly, using data from the 23rd of one month to the 22nd of the next, in order to avoid data leakage around the treatment date.

Goodreads Data

The second data source is Goodreads reviews, extracted using the online API tool APIfy.com—a paid subscription service that allows users to scrape data from various websites. Here, reviews were scraped for the six Russian books identified through the Amazon.com sales rankings. The data is further filtered to include only English-language reviews, using the Python package *langdetect* to assign language labels to each entry. While this does not ensure that all reviews are from American users, Goodreads is known to have a large American user base, with 40% of the website's traffic coming from the U.S. (Walsh and Antoniak 2021). The lack of strictly American reviews constitutes a limitation, as the corresponding sales data is asummed to primarily reflects U.S. market activity. However, while both datasets may include contributions from users outside the United States, the analysis assumes that the majority of activity—particularly on Amazon.com and the English-language segment of Goodreads—is attributable to U.S.-based users. As such, the observed patterns are interpreted as broadly reflective of consumer behaviour within the U.S. market.
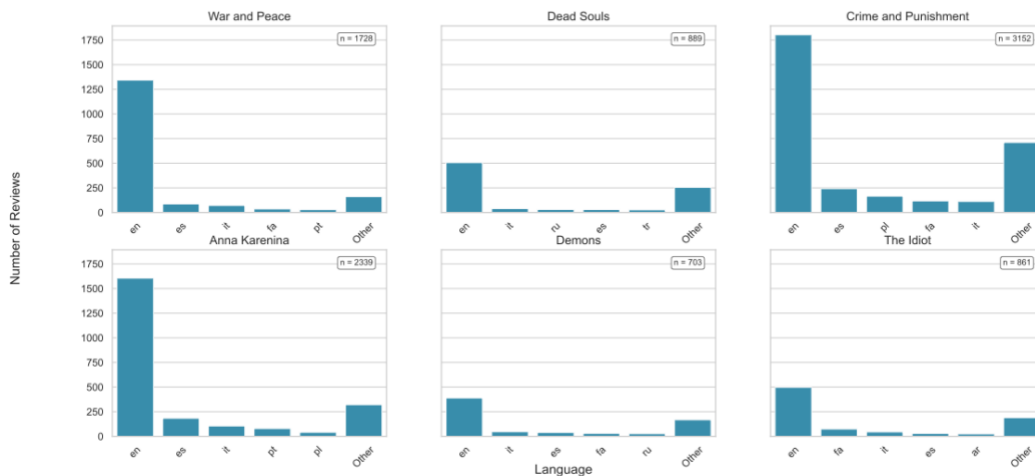

Figure 1: Language Counts per Book

As shown in Figure 1, the majority of reviews for all books are written in English, with all other languages not in the top four grouped into the "Other" category. The sample size reflects the number of English-language reviews per book. *Crime and Punishment* has the largest number (1,803 reviews), while *Demons* has the smallest (390 reviews).
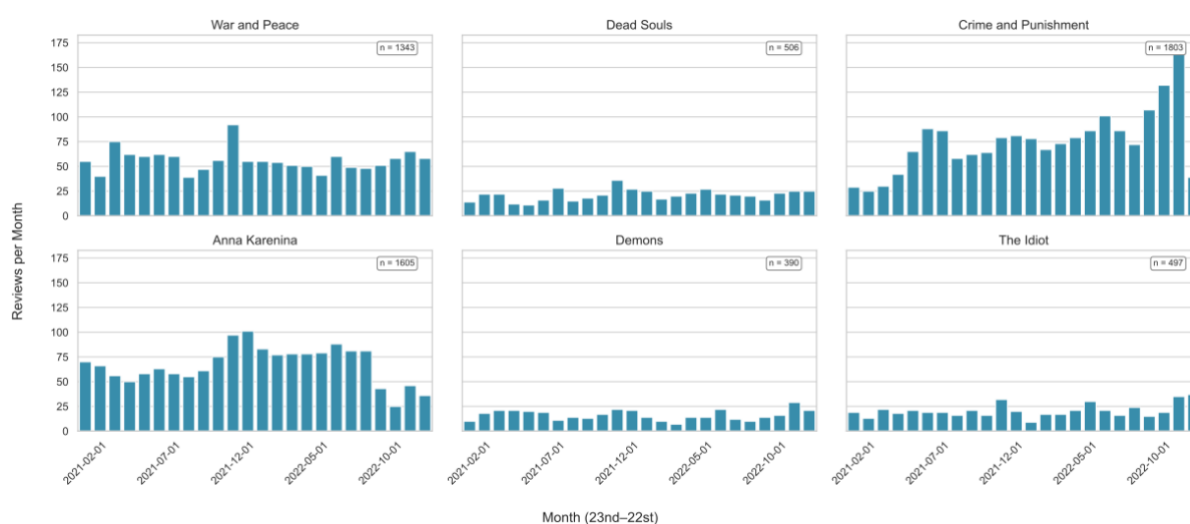

Figure 2: Monthly Review Count per Book

To control that each book had an equal distribution of English written reviews across all months, the count from each month is plotted in Figure 2. Overall, the distribution remains consistent over time, apart from *Crime and Punishment*, which shows a notable spike in reviews in January 2023.

RESULTS

Event Time Design Results

Using ETD as an initial check for a potential invasion effect yields the results shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: ETD Results per Book
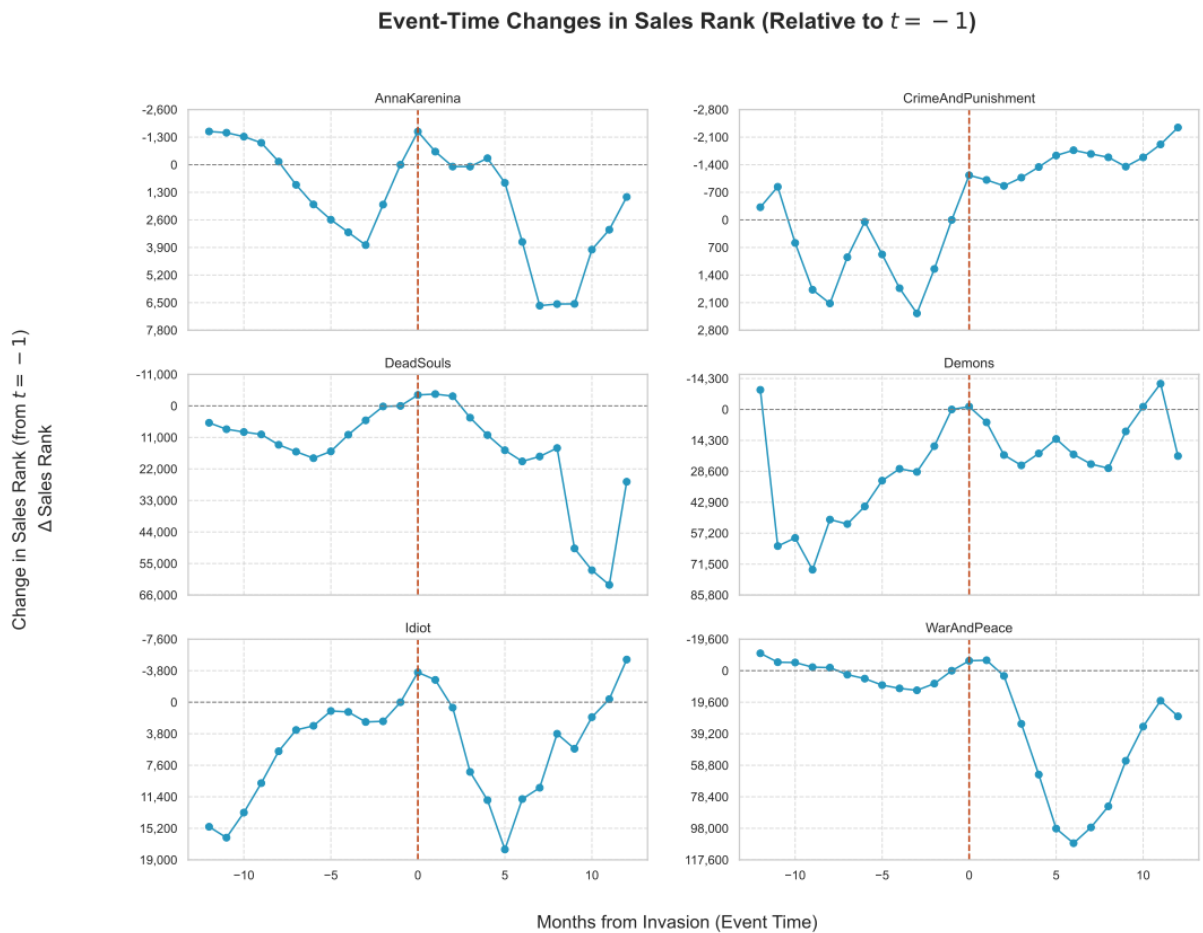
A negative value indicates that the book's BSR improved (i.e., it performed better relative to the baseline set at D_{-1}) while a positive value indicates worse performance. The y-axis has been reversed for visual clarity. The ETD results suggest that *Anna Karenina*, *Dead Souls*, and *War and Peace* performed comparatively worse in the post-invasion period. *Demons* and *The Idiot*

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decrease in sales both before and after the invasion compared to the baseline. *Crime and Punishment* consistently performed better than it did prior to the invasion. Notably, the books that underperformed relative to baseline did so most clearly between five and ten months after the invasion

To control whether changes in BSR are statistically significant, a Welch t-test is performed between the means before and after the invasion, the results are presented in Table 1. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* performed statistically significantly worse. On the other hand, *Crime and Punishment*, *Demons* and *Dead Souls* performed statistically significantly better after the invasion. These results suggest that the invasion did not produce a universal effect on book sales across the full sample.

Table 1: Welsch t-test Results per Book

Book	Mean Pre-Invasion	Mean Post-Invasion	Difference (Post - Pre)	P-value (Rounded to 4 digits)
Anna Karenina	11,062.39	13,012.04	1,949.65 ***	0.0000
Crime and Punishment	4,483.23	2,167.59	-2,315.65 ***	0.0000
Dead Souls	46,670.46	60,569.09	13,898.63 ***	0.0000
Demons	115,130.86	92,601.75	-22,529.11 ***	0.0000
The Idiot	28,926.42	30,181.21	1,254.79	0.1411
War and Peace	38,970.72	88,664.60	49,693.88 ***	0.0000

Synthetic Control Method Results

Using SCM with the French literature as the synthetic yields the results presented in Figure 4, where the actual sales is plotted with the synthetic line, and Figure 5 where only the gap between the synthetic and actual results are plotted. Again, the y-axis has been reversed for clarity in both figures.
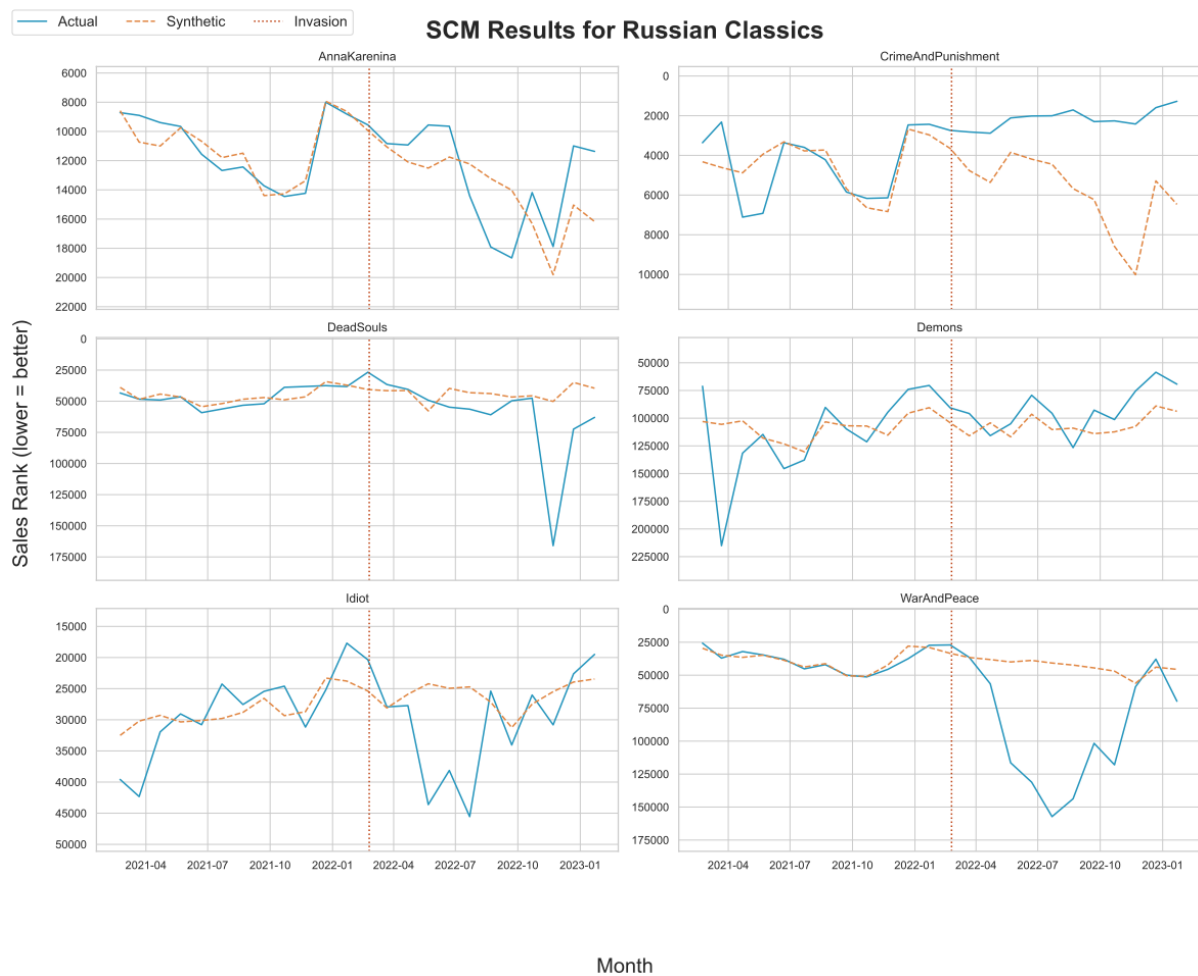

Figure 4: SCM Results per Book

Figure 5: SCM Gap per Book

Comparing the actuals sales to the synthetic counterfactual, we again see varying results for different books. *The Idiot* and *War and Peace* show a relative decline in sales compared to their synthetic counterparts. *Dead Souls* exhibits a similar pattern, though the difference is primarily driven by a sharp sales drop in November 2022 and should be interpreted with caution. *Anna Karenina* and *Demons* oscillate between performing better and worse than the counterfactual while *Crime and Punishment* shows clear signs that sales have increased following the invasion in comparison to the counterfactual. Consistent with the ETD analysis, negative effects tend to emerge five to ten months after the invasion. The RMSPE results on how well the counter factual fits the data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: RMPSE Results per Book

Book	RMSPE Pre	RMSPE Post	RMSPE Ratio
Anna Karenina	868.96	3,168.47	3.65
Crime and Punishment	1,306.66	4,189.25	3.21
Dead Souls	6,246.52	38,332.44	6.14
Demons	35,378.93	20,490.91	0.58
The Idiot	5,069.32	9,753.01	1.92
War and Peace	3,803.79	65,712.86	17.28

The RMSPE ratio indicates that for *Demons*, the synthetic control fits poorly, making the results less reliable. The results for *The Idiot* should also be interpreted with caution, since the number is close to 1. For the remaining books, the results are reasonably robust and suggest a treatment effect, with *War and Peace* showing the most pronounced deviation. Again, *Dead Souls* is highly influenced by the spike in December 2022 and should be interpreted more carefully, as no significant effect is visible except for that month. Overall, no universal negative trend can be observed across all books.

Interrupted Time Series Results

The results for the ITS regression on the Goodreads ratings are presented in Figure 6. The blue dots represent the smoothed weekly average ratings, while the orange line shows the fitted values from the ITS model, which includes both a level shift and a slope change following the

invasion. The dashed red vertical line marks the intervention point: the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The ITS model fits a single time trend with structural breaks in level and slope after the intervention. The statistical significance of the β_1, β_2 and β_3 coefficients are presented in Table 3.

Figure 6: ITS Results per Book

Table 3: ITS Coefficients per Book

Book	β₁ (Time)	β₂ (PostInvasion)	β₃ (TimeAfter)	R²
War and Peace	0.00013	-0.00247	-0.00080 **	0.1841
Dead Souls	-0.00008	0.12232	0.00008	0.0349
Crime and Punishment	0.00151 ***	-0.25261 ***	-0.00142 ***	0.3248
Anna Karenina	-0.00053 *	-0.03019	-0.00021	0.3702
Demons	-0.00064	0.02588	0.00127 *	0.0423
The Idiot	0.00034	-0.27013 *	0.00118	0.1235

The results for β_2 from the ITS regression indicate that both *The Idiot* and *Crime and Punishment* experienced a statistically significant decline in average ratings following the invasion, compared to the previous trend captured in β_1. For β_3 which captures the change in slope after the invasion, both *Crime and Punishment* and *War and Peace* show statistically significant negative trends. In *Crime and Punishment*, this negative trend nearly offsets the positive baseline trend in β_1, and combined with the level drop in β_2, results in an overall decline in average ratings post-invasion.*War and Peace* has a statistically significant decrease in ratings following the invasion as reflected in β_3, although this change is modest with only a -0.0416 decline in ratings across the total 52-week period. Calculated as:

$$52 \cdot -0.0008 = -0.0416$$

The R^2 values reveal that the ITS model accounts for a moderate portion of the variance in ratings for *Crime and Punishment* and *Anna Karenina*, while the explanatory power is considerably weaker for *The Idiot* and *Dead Souls*. For *War and Peace,* the R^2 is modest, meaning that the results should be interpreted cautiously, especially considering the steep drop in ratings at the end of the timeframe. This indicates that the temporal intervention model is more predictive for some books than others, potentially due to differences in review volume or stability in reader sentiment. Overall, it can be concluded that there is no universal observable trend in the rating patterns following the invasion.

DISCUSSION

The results attained from the regression models do not point towards a consistent trend of a decrease in sales, nor a worsening of reviews of Russian literature following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. *War and Peace* exhibits a significant decline in sales, as indicated by both the Welch's t-test and the synthetic control comparison. While this is accompanied by a decrease in ratings, the change is marginal, and the low explanatory power of the ITS model makes it difficult to determine whether the observed drop in ratings reflects a genuine shift in reader sentiment. *The Idiot* and *Crime and Punishment* saw an increase in sales on a statistically significant level, while at the same time trending towards lower ratings.

Based on these results, Hypothesis H1—predicting a measurable decline in both sales and ratings of classical Russian literature in response to anti-Russian sentiment and cultural debate—can be rejected. Furthermore, the explanatory hypothesis *H2a* can also be rejected, since no observable change was identified in sales or ratings. This suggests that neither the deterioration in public sentiment towards Russia nor the associated cultural debate had a measurable negative effect on readership. Meanwhile, *H2b* cannot be rejected, meaning that the path-dependency of cultural good consumers could explain why classical Russian literature did not show an observable decline in BSR or Goodreads ratings.

These findings suggest that consumers' path-dependence in cultural goods consumption may buffer against broader negative trade trends triggered by international conflict or boycott campaigns. The case of consumers of classical literature, who are theorised in this research to be highly educated and more prone to unfavourable views of Russia, exhibits no clear sign of a reduction in their purchasing and rating of classical Russian works. This supports the hypothesis theorised by Chavis and Leslie (2009) that when customers tastes are deeply cemented, they

are less affected by a worsening of perception of that country. Moreover, it supports the theory proposed by (Ren, Zong, and Zhan 2024) that cultural goods perceived as high quality are more resilient to negative shifts in public sentiment.

Limitations of this study include the small number of books analysed, the inability to isolate individual consumer behaviour, and the absence of demographic data from the platforms used. Due to the volatility of the BSR of less popular books the selection of books was narrowed down to six popular titles. While the six selected works represent some of the most highly regarded pieces of Russian literature, incorporating a larger number of titles and more accurate sales data could yield deeper insights. Such an approach may further illuminate the degree of consumer loyalty, or 'stickiness', to specific titles, particularly when assessed through a more robust counterfactual constructed from an expanded dataset. It remains possible that lesser-known Russian works experienced declines in sales not captured in this sample. Moreover, this research sets out to theorize on how the *individual* consumer changes their behaviour following international conflict. While no aggregate change in behaviour is observed, individual-level data could help assess whether consumers substituted away from Russian works in favour of other options. A sustained demand for the books is observed, but not whether this demand comes from people who used to buy Russian literature before the invasion, or it for example could be influx of new consumers, who might care less about the war. Finally, only surface level statistics on the users of both Amazon.com and Goodreads has been found. A more thorough understanding of the age, education and income levels of these users could reveal deeper sociological implications and more extensively theorise about how consumers with certain educational backgrounds and income-levels are affected in their consumption of cultural goods.

Some speculation can be offered regarding the observed variation across specific titles. A title such as *War and Peace*, which is an intricate description of Russia at a time of war and

culminates with Russia emerging victorious in a conflict, could be less appealing to American costumers in a time where Russia is actively engaged in war. *Dead Souls* remaining unaffected could be indicative that a reclaiming of Ukrainian born authors has not been actively promoted or had significant effect on American consumers buying and rating patterns following the invasion. The combination of rising sales and declining ratings for *Crime and Punishment* presents an intriguing case for exploring how increased readership affects review patterns.

CONCLUSION

In lieu of the description of how enemy countries' classical authors were treated during World War I in Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*, it seems that the U.S. public is kinder to "the great dead of the enemy countries, who had been slumbering in their graves for centuries" than European nations at the time. In a world where the great literary works of foreign cultures has become more accessible through better translations and cheaper editions sold, it seems that the impact of international conflict on people's preference for, and interaction with, classical literature is not severe, at least not in the specific case of these Russian works sales and ratings in the U.S. This thesis attributes this resilience to the deep-rooted tastes of consumers, which raise the substitution cost of avoiding these works to a point where negative perceptions of Russia do not significantly influence behaviour. While this thesis does not present definitive proof for this explanation, it lends support to prior scholarship suggesting that goods associated with strong consumer preferences are more insulated from negative externalities than others.

This thesis attempts to open a window towards the study of how canonical culture is impacted by ongoing international conflicts. Further research could focus on how works, from a wider range of disciplines, both contemporary and historical, have been impacted by the on-going conflict between Russia and Ukraine or others, such as the war in Gaza. It would be insightful to attain and understand data from the countries directly affected by conflict, such as Ukraine, that now needs to reinterpret their previous cultural relationship with Russia, to see if the conflict has a significant impact on consumption of cultural works there.

In a cultural climate where the question of whether art can be meaningfully separated from the artist remains widely debated, further research could explore whether consumers similarly distinguish an artist's work from their national origin. Such inquiry would not only shed light

on how these works are received in times of geopolitical tension but also offer insight into implicit aesthetic stances guiding cultural consumption.

APPENDIX

SCM Weights:

Table 4: SCM Weights for Anna Karenina

Donor Book	Weight
Tess of the d'Urbervilles	0.0643
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea	0.1023
Around the World in Eighty Days	0.0075
The Plague	0.1838
Les Misérables	0.0192
Nausea	0.0000
The Stranger	0.5966
The Fall	0.0000
In Search of Lost Time	0.0263

Table 5: SCM Weights for Crime and Punishment

Donor Book	Weight
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea	0.1340
The Plague	0.0000
Around the World in Eighty Days	0.0078
Tess of the d'Urbervilles	0.0120
The Fall	0.0000
Nausea	0.0159
Les Misérables	0.0000
In Search of Lost Time	0.0000
The Stranger	0.8303

Table 6: SCM Weights for Dead Souls

Donor Book	Weight
The Plague	0.0000
Les Misérables	0.1245
Nausea	0.0000
The Fall	0.5477
In Search of Lost Time	0.1997
Tess of the d'Urbervilles	0.1282
The Stranger	0.0000
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea	0.0000
Around the World in Eighty Days	0.0000

Table 7: SCM Weights for Demons

Donor Book	Weight
In Search of Lost Time	0.0293
The Plague	0.0031
The Fall	0.0002
Les Misérables	0.9704
Nausea	0.0027
The Stranger	0.0014
Tess of the d'Urbervilles	0.0004
Around the World in Eighty Days	0.0003
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea	0.0007

Table 8: SCM Weights for The Idiot

Donor Book	Weight
The Fall	0.9555
The Stranger	0.0000
The Plague	0.0000
Nausea	0.0000
Les Misérables	0.0445
Tess of the d'Urbervilles	0.0000
In Search of Lost Time	0.0000
Around the World in Eighty Days	0.0000
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea	0.0000

Table 9: SCM Weights for War and Peace

Donor Book	Weight
Tess of the d'Urbervilles	0.2127
Around the World in Eighty Days	0.0351
The Plague	0.4360
20,000 Leagues Under the Sea	0.1097
Les Misérables	0.1474
Nausea	0.0000
The Stranger	0.0000
In Search of Lost Time	0.0591
The Fall	0.0000

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