It's This Russian Life. I'm your host, Frank Wyer. Each week on our program, of course, we choose a theme, and bring you different kinds of stories on that theme. Today's entire program is dedicated to the acclaimed Russian writer Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev. If you're acquainted with the canon of classic Russian literature, this name is probably quite familiar to you. However, for the casual contemporary reader, Turgenev’s place as a Russian literary giant may have been overshadowed somewhat by two of his contemporaries: Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoi. While Dostoevsky and Tolstoi unquestionably deserve the fame and respect they have earned, it would be a shame to overlook the contribution of the fascinating and talented Ivan Turgenev.

In the First Act of today’s show, we’ll be sketching the life and background of this truly incredible man..

Act One: So who is this guy?

We’ve done a lot of research on Turgenev’s background, his family, and so on. But then we thought, why not talk to the man himself? We sat down with Turgenev last month and asked him a few questions about his life and work.

Wyer: Thanks so much for being on the show Mr. Turgenev. It’s truly an honor. So first, just tell us a little bit about yourself.

Turgenev: Well, I was born on November 9th, 1818 by your Calendar. I grew up on my mother's estate, Spasskoye, in the Orel Province of Russia. I was the second child, and had two brothers; one older and one younger.

Wyer: And what was your family like?

Turgenev: Very rich, to start with. My father was only a retired colonel, but my mother inherited an estate with five thousand serfs. But they were both quite unhappy. My father was a good-looking man, and so of course he had his mistresses, but my mother, she had the money and she tried to control him. She was the same way with us children too—controlling, that is. She was an educated woman, so she insisted we only speak French at home. I managed to learn Russian from some servants of ours, but all that to say, my mother was very controlling.

Wyer: That’s quite interesting. And your education, where did you go to school?

Turgenev: I had tutors at home in Spasskoye till I was nine, and then I was sent to school in Moscow. I went to University first in Moscow, and then later in Petersberg where my brother lived. I wanted to be a professor. Actually, in Petersberg I got to study under Gogol among others, who you might have heard of. He wrote Dead Souls, and a few other great books, but was teaching history at the time for some reason.
I was somewhat of a rebel at university. In fact, my classmates called me “the American,” because my politics were much more democratic than aristocratic. I read a lot of the Romantics during this time, poets like Byron, so I started writing some poetry myself. Another professor of mine, P. A. Pletnyov, actually published my first poem in 1838.

Frank: And then?

Turgenev: Well I left Petersburg and went to the University of Berlin. On the way I actually experienced a terrible boat accident, which you may have heard of. It was in Berlin that I really started caring about Big Ideas. I hung out with philosopher types like Mikhail Bakunin, and I read the great German thinkers like Goethe and Hegel.

Frank: Turgenev’s fascination with academia was not to last. He left Berlin for Russia in 1841, and took a job with the Ministry of Interior Affairs. During this time, he had an affair with his mother’s seamstress, Avdotya Ivanov, who gave birth to his illegitimate daughter Paulinette. He quit the Ministry after a year and a half, and landed in deep financial trouble after his disappointed mother cut him off from his allowance. He turned to the pen and began writing poetry and stories. It was around this time too that he met Pauline Viardot-Garcia, a woman with whom he had an on-and-off relationship for the rest of his life.

Turgenev: Pauline is a truly remarkable woman. She has quite a fascinating story in her own right. She was born to a family of Spanish Gypsies, but her singing talents caught the world’s attention and she is now the queen of European Opera. Of course, she was married, but her husband was quite an old man and he understands that people have their needs. They’ve actually come to live with me and help me raise my daughter.

Frank: Meanwhile, in 1850, Turgenev published his most popular play, *A Month in the Country*. Like many of his works, this play faced opposition from government censors, though uncharacteristically on the grounds of its morality rather than its politics.

The same year, Turgenev’s mother died, leaving him the owner of vast estates and thousands of serfs. While he held those deemed absolutely necessary to work the land, Turgenev sought to emancipate a number of his serfs, and to improve the conditions of those he retained.

Many of the stories Turgenev wrote during this period dealt with the condition of Russia’s serfs, and the negative light in which he portrayed the institution of serfdom provoked the ire of the tsarist government. An obituary he wrote praising Gogol in 1852 finally landed him in prison and then house arrest for two years. The obituary, in which Turgenev lamented the fact that only in death could Gogol be openly praised, was struck by Petersberg’s censors but had slipped past those in Moscow. While under arrest, he wrote the short story *Mumu*, which was acclaimed for its poignant criticism of tyranny. Also during this time a collection of his stories called *Hunter's Sketches* was published, and its stark depiction of the realities of serfdom had a major influence on Russian public
opinion. For our American listeners, some scholars have compared its influence to that of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

When he returned to Petersberg in 1854, his literary career took off. The death of Tsar Nicholas I in 1855 and the ascension of Alexander II to the throne relaxed, to some extent, the strict government censorship regime. He published his first novel, *Rudin* in 1856, followed by *Nest of Gentlemen* in 1859, *On the Eve* in 1860, and *Fathers and Sons* (or, more accurately, Fathers and Children, in 1862. Though it is now considered a masterpiece, the latter of these novels, which portrayed intergenerational conflict between liberal parents and their radical children, provoked harsh criticism from members of both groups. Criticized from all sides, and at odds with his former friends like Leo Tolstoi and Ivan Goncharov, Turgenev left Russia for Germany.

**Turgenev:** No one liked *Fathers and Children*. The radicals thought I was parodying them. The conservatives thought I was praising the radicals. So we moved to Baden-Baden, in Germany, Pauline’s family and I. But I kept on writing. My next book, *Smoke*, made them still angrier, especially the conservatives and the Slavophiles. Dostoevsky even called me a slanderer of the motherland. I find this criticism incredibly unfair though. Yes, the novel satirizes the conservatives, but it satirizes anyone who thinks he can “save” Russia but knows nothing of what that means practically.

A few years later we left Germany for England because of the Franco-Prussian war, and after a short time there, we moved on to France.

**Frank:** Why France?

**Turgenev:** In France I have found a community who truly understands me: Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola…Here I feel free to write what I truly think. I’ve written some stories, and even published another novel in 1877, called *Virgin Soil*. It’s my longest novel to date, and like *Fathers and Children* it addresses the clash of generations. My audience here in Europe loved my new book, but once again the Russians criticized me.

**Frank:** Will you ever return to Russia?

**Turgenev:** Of course. In fact, I have visited twice in the past few years, first because of my brother’s death in 1879, and then for the celebrations at the Pushkin memorial in 1880. They may criticize my views, but my countrymen no longer attack me as they did before. My old friends, and even some of my enemies welcomed me back.

**Frank:** Are you still writing at this point?

**Turgenev:** Absolutely. I fully intend to write until my very last breath. Lately I’ve returned to poetry, which, as I mentioned, is how I began my career as a writer. This poetry though, is in prose, which I think better suits my talents.
Frank: Since this interview, Turgenev has sadly passed on. As early as 1876 he had begun to feel the onset of illness, and he died of spinal cancer on September 3, 1883. A great ceremony occurred in Paris when his body was shipped back to Russia, and his burial in St. Petersburg was a day of national mourning. Even today, he is venerated in Russia, where there are plans to hold a national celebration in 2018 to mark the 200th anniversary of his birth.

Material for this portion of today’s program was taken from the following biographical resources: *Encyclopedia of Russian History; Authors and Artists for Young Adults; Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire; Encyclopedia of World Biography.*

You’re listening to *This Russian Life,* I’m your host, Frank Wyer. Stay with us for Act II of the program.