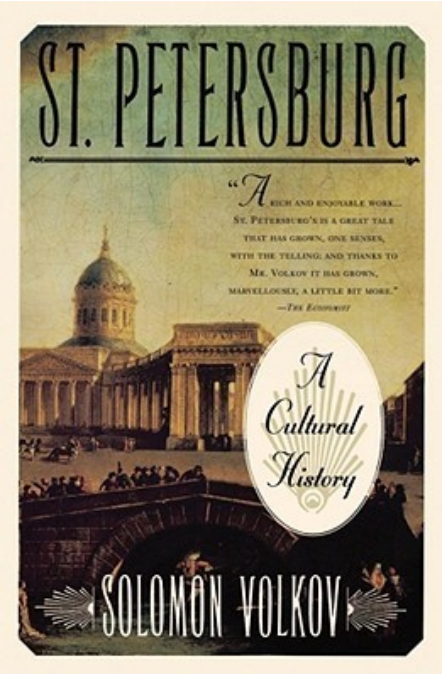

St. Petersburg: A Cultural History

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The city of St. Petersburg became the center of liberal opposition to the dominating power of the state, whether czarist or communist. Acclaimed Russian historian and emigre Volkov writes the definitive "cultural biography" of that famed city, sharply detailing the well-known figures of the arts whose works are now part of the permanent fabric of Western high culture. Photos.

St. Petersburg: A Cultural History Details

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From Reader Review St. Petersburg: A Cultural History for online ebook

Rob Shurmer says

The city tends to get lost especially in Volkov's gossipy biographical sketch of Anna Akhmatova and the bitchy world of the pre-war symbolists.

Bill says

So much that was great in applied art, in dance and ballet, in music composition, in art and art appreciation came from St. Petersburg (and I don't mean Florida...). The author is a native and knows his subject well. This is a city that will never let go of culture, no matter what it may cost it in other things, a trait worth emulating.

Laura Edwards says

I went back and forth about giving the book 3 or 4 stars. Ideally, 3 and a half. The parts about people or genres which interested me were fascinating, but other parts seemed to drag on a bit long. Also, Volkov has a tendency to jump around in time and the chronology of events became somewhat confusing at times. For example, in one paragraph he might have Shostakovich writing a symphony in the '40s and in the following paragraph he is a young man ten to twenty years earlier.

Overall, interesting and offers an array of Russian writers, artists and musicians for the reader to check out. Also, very respectful and informative concerning Anna Akhmatova and anyone who gives the poet her due is worthy of an extra star.

Ally Kumari says

A thoroughly researched panopticon of great artistic personages that created the Petersburg mythos and how they did it. Very well written and with a personal touch, only at times a bit too exhausting with detail.

J.M. Hushour says

The first time I went to St Petersburg, I found myself one night huddled against the low and dark wall of an attic, with about 30-4o other people, watching an actor, in full-on period costume read out loud and act out loud the scene from "Crime and Punishment" when Raskolnikov, agonizing and determined all at once, sets out to kill the old lady. At the end, he quietly walked out, down the stairs and out into the street, where the audience was directed to follow. He vanished around the corner. We all stood there, stunned. Should we have stopped him?

It was then that I pretty much decided Pete was the best city on the planet. For a reader or fan of any art, it's one of the most wonderful places to drown in culturally. Volkov's book is a thickly detailed history of that culture.
From the beginnings up to Gergiev assuming conductorship of the Kirov in the 90s, he digs deep, discussing all the various arts and their various schools and various individuals, their relation to the tsarist, then Soviet governments and basically introducing you to a lot of outstanding literature, poetry, painting, and music that you've probably never heard of. My favored period of literature is 20th century Russian literature and even I discovered authors I've never heard of.
More, Volkov paints a wide canvas of how the city itself was perceived by artists: Gogol and Dostoevsky's dark and forbidding and wonderful nightmare city; the crushed post-Revolution city; the martyr city under siege; the rebellious city...
The only part where the book falls flat is the sections on ballet, which are taken to ridiculous lengths, but I'm not a fan, so, there.
All around a wonderful history of art and a city.

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smokeandsong says

There are a few points where it started rambling (especially the sections on composers, which I know far too little about), but in general the book was very well-paced, beautiful, educational, and at times deeply haunting. Reading about the history of the arts is a fantastic way to approach dramatic historical events, and to get a real feel for a city.

Audrey Kadis says

I'm going to St Petersburg and this book gave me terrific background.

Katrina Sark says

p.xv – The Petersburg mythos, according to a modern scholar, “reflects the quintessence of life on the edge, over the abyss, on the brink of death.”

p.4 – “If you have a trough, the pigs will come.” (Pushkin in a letter to a friend about his wife)
The Bronze Horseman, subtitles by the author “A Petersburg Tale,” is set during the flood of 1824, one of the worst of many that has regularly befallen the city.

p.9-10 – First Peter started to fantasize about a place like Amsterdam: clean, neat, easily observable and therefore controllable, on the water, with rows of trees reflected in the city’s canals. The Peter’s vision grew much grander: His city would soar like an eagle: it would be a fortress, a port, an enormous wharf, a model for all Russia, and at the same time a shop-window on the West.

p.10 – The first house in Petersburg – for Peter himself, two rooms and a storeroom that doubled as bedroom – was built of fir logs by the tsar with the help of soldiers in three days, in May 1703.

p.11 – The Amsterdam model was soon abandoned. Peter was now going after no less than a northern Paris

or Rome. Instead of naturally developing on high ground, Petersburg was begun on lowland, below sea level – a risky and fateful decision, resulting in much danger for its future inhabitants. The tsar plotted the city with a ruler in hand as a system of islands, canals, and broad, straight prospects (from the Latin pro-specto, to look into the distance), so that it would present a clear geometrical pattern. The main prospect, the nearly three-mile-long Nevsky Prospect, was built in 1715.
To realize all these constantly changing plans, tens of thousands of workers from all over the country were herded to the Neva delta. It was a motley crew – peasants, soldiers, convicts, captured Swedes and Tartars. There was no housing, no food, no tools for them; they transported excavated dirt in their clothing. Drenched by pouring rains, attached by swarms of mosquitos, the wretches pounded wooden pilings into the swampy ground.

p.12 – Declared the new capital of Russia in 1717, it had over forty thousand residents by 1725, towards the end of Peter's reign – an eighth of the country's urban population.

p.14 – The grim "underground" mythology about Petersburg persisted in spite of the official imperial mythology, which was sparkling and optimistic.
p.17 – Under Catherine, twenty-four miles of the Neva's banks were "dressed in granite" (Pushkin) from Finland. These severe monumental walls with their numerous stairs leading down to the water became as important a symbol of Petersburg as the stone bridges that spanned the Neva and the city's canals at the same time.
p.18 – Catherine began assembling the collection was to transform the Hermitage into one of the great art museums of the world. At Paris auctions she bought paintings by Raphael, Titian, Rubens, and Rembrandt.
p.28 – In December 1828 nineteen-year-old Nikolai Gogol came to this disciplined, haughty, cold city from the bright, gentle, warm Ukraine. As with most young men, even those with talent, these dreams proved somewhat difficult to realize.
At this time the population of St. Petersburg was rapidly approaching half-million.
p.27 – On the stage of the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre Vassili Karatygin, a six-foot giant with a roaring baritone and majestic gestures, stunned audiences with his Hamlet. Like all authors in Russia, Shakespeare was subjected to strict censorship. Nicholas personally made sure that no political allusions or even curse words as gentle as "devil take it" were spoken on stage.
p.28 – Gogol began to set his sights in a great Petersburg career including an attempt to join the imperial theatre as an actor. A calamity. Then he tried to become a painter, then a bureaucrat, and finally, a teacher. Gogol thought he was ascending the ladder of success and wealth, but he was stuck every time on the bottom rung. Petersburg persistently refused to recognize him; and Gogol, in turn, came to hate Petersburg. The city would remain forever alien to him: inviting but hostile, a world he could never conquer. And when Gogol began writing, the grotesque and alienated image of Petersburg quickly became the center of his prose. Gogol's first Petersburg novellas appeared in 1835 – Nevsky Prospect, Diary of a Madman, and Portrait; then came The Nose in 1836, and in 1842 the most famous work, The Overcoat. Gogol, and through him all later imagery of Petersburg, was heavily influenced by E.T. A. Hoffmann; even a hundred years later, in her Poem Without a Hero, Akhmatova curses the "Petersburg devils" and calls them "midnight Hoffmanniana."
p.30 – Gogol juxtaposed the brilliant balls and posh receptions that were beyond his reach to his own obsessive vision of the capital. In revenge, he built a monster Petersburg inhabited by caricatures, a mirage Petersburg, and finally, a deserted, ghostly Petersburg. Balzac wrote about Paris this way and Dickens about London. But Gogol's mystical Petersburg is much more the fruit of his fevered imagination, far removed from the reality of the city.
p.31 – Gogol was the first (1837) to publish an extended literary comparison of the old and new capitals – Moscow and St. Petersburg – starting a long line of such essays, right up to Yevgeny Zamyatin's Moscow-Petersburg (1933). In the popular consciousness Moscow symbolized everything national, truly Russian, and familiar. Moscow was a city whose roots went back to religious tradition, making it the rightful heir of

Constantinople, and thus the Third Rome, as the Orthodox monks of the sixteenth century taught. Peter the Great subordinated the church to the state. Petersburg was planned and built as a secular city. Moscow's silhouette was determined by the "forty times forty" churches and their belfries. Petersburg's silhouette is made of dominating spires.
p.37 – Gogol's Overcoat, the quintessential Petersburg parable of a clerk, had been published only two years earlier. "We all came out of The Overcoat," Dostoyevsky is alleged to have said. But the beginning writer, borrowing much from Gogol, had rejected his cruel irony. His hero [in Poor Folk] is no grotesque marionette but a living, suffering, thinking man, described with warmth and lyric grace. He loves and is loved, but that love ends tragically, for there can be no happiness in a city where there is "wet granite underfoot, around you tall buildings, black, and sooty; fog underfoot, fog around your head."
p.41 – Sent to Siberia to the Omsk Fortress, which served as prison, [for his involvement in the Petrashevsky circle in in 1849] Dostoyevsky spent four years in heavy shackles, day and night. He didn't take up a pen for almost ten years.
p.42 – During the reign of Nicholas and under his personal supervision, the majestic ensembles of the Palace and Senate Squares, the magnificent S. Isaac's Cathedral, and other impressive architectural complexes like the famous Teatralnaya and Mikailovskaya Streets were built.
The majority of these projects were executed by Nicholas' favorite architect, Carlo Rossi, born in St. Petersburg to an Italian ballerina.
p.43 – Rossi, in planning the construction of the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre, proposed covering the enormous hall with a special system of metal girders – a risky idea for those items. Nicholas doubted their strength and ordered construction stopped. His vanity stung, Rossi wrote the tsar a letter stating that should anything happen to his roof, he should be immediately hanged on one of the theatre's trusses, as an example to other architects. Such arguments always worked with Nicholas, and he allowed the building to be completed. Performances continue to this day in the theatre, one of the city's most beautiful. Nothing has gone wrong with the roof yet.

p.44 – On February 19, 1861 Alexander II emancipated the serfs. The historic and far-reaching decision to repeal serfdom was taken against the advice of most of Alexander's entourage.
Waves of serfs invaded the capital to earn a living. In 1858, with a population of almost half a million, Petersburg was the fourth-largest city in Europe after London, Paris, and Constantinople. In 1862, Petersburg had 532,000 residents, and in 1869, according to the first major census, 667,000. Factories and plants were mushrooming outside the city and the capital's new residents settled there. Drinking, brawling, crime, and prostitution flourished in these neighborhoods. Taverns and brothels popped up all over the city.

p.46 – Petersburg had two mortal enemies – water and fire – which emptied the city many times. The two most memorable floods were in 1777 and 1824. (The flood of 1924 later joined their number.) The fire of 1862 was remembered longest, for most of the commercial section – Gostiny Dvor, Apraksin Drov, Schukin Dvor, and Tolkuchy Market – burned to the ground during several weeks of May and June of that year.

p.54 – The cult of Petersburg began with poetic odes. The problem of Petersburg was first posed in a narrative poem. The dismantling of Petersburg was also performed by literature. For over one hundred thirty years literature reigned almost unchallenged there. Opera and ballet flourished in imperial Petersburg in the early nineteenth century, but they did not have a substantial impact on the Petersburg mythos. They were exotic flowers that ornamented the grim reality Nicholas' Petersburg but did not confront the "damned questions" the city asked its residents.

p.84 – Both Dostoyevsky and Mussorgsky [composer of Boris Godunov opera] were fascinated by the mystery of the Russian soul and its inexplicable duality. In their works, kindness and cruelty, wisdom and folly, good humor and il can be easily combined in the same person.

p.95-96 – Alexander III greatly increased the subsidy to the imperial theatres. The orchestra of the Russian opera grew to 110 members and the choir to 120. The stagings of both ballet and opera were lavishly produced, with huge sums specifically allocated for costumes and scenery.

p.96 – Every spring Alexander III personally approved the repertoire for the opera and ballet, often making significant changes; he did not miss single dress rehearsal in his theatres. The emperor was involved in all the details of new productions – and not just from whim or pleasure; his motivations were also political. He knew that the imperial theatres – opera, ballet, and drama – were the mirror of the monarchy; the brilliance and opulence of their productions reflected the majesty of his reign. Therefore he correctly viewed the attacks in the liberal press, especially after the repeal in 1882 of the imperial monopoly on theatre productions in Petersburg, as veiled attacks on his regime, noting once that the newspapers pounded his theatres "because they are forbidden to write about so many other things."
Of the Russian composers, Tchaikovsky had long been a favorite of Alexander III. Knowing that, we can understand more easily why the emperor was rather hostile toward the music of the Mighty Five, a seemingly inconsistent position for a Russian nationalist.

p.100 – Both Stravinsky and particularly Balanchine insisted on calling Tchaikovsky a "Petersburg" composer. This was based not only on the facts of his life – Tchaikovsky studied in Petersburg and died there; many of his works were first performed in the capital, which he often visited and where he had many friends – but on such personality traits as nobility, reserve, and sense of moderation, and of course the effective use of the "European" forms in his composition, so consonant with Petersburg's European architecture. But there are even more typically Peterburgian features in Tchaikovsky's work. Music lovers look primarily for emotional agitation in it, enjoying what Laroche called its "refined torment."

p.109 – The production of Prince Igor [opera] was opulent and extremely realistic. The Polovtsian scenes required over two hundred people onstage.

p.111 – In Petersburg young Tchaikovsky graduated from law school with the title titular councilor, then served for over three years in the Ministry of Justice, living the typical life of a young clerk in the capital. His studies at the Petersburg conservatory made Tchaikovsky a real musical professional. But not only that. Introducing him to European principles and forms of organizing musical material, the conservatory training also gave the young composer a sense of belonging to world culture.

p.112 – Becoming the bard of St. Petersburg was more natural and easier for the worldly Tchaikovsky than for any other Russian composer after Glinka. Petersburg was a musical melting pot. Italian tunes were whistled on Nevsky Prospect, and a few steps away one could hear an organ grinder playing a Viennese ländler. The emperor liked French operas, but there was also a tradition at the court, dating back to Empress Elizabeth and Catherine the Great, to invite singers from the Ukraine to Petersburg. Tchaikovsky soaked up the capital's music like a sponge: Italian arias from the stage of the imperial theatre, French ditties and cancans, the solemn marches of military parades, and the sensuous waltzes that had conquered aristocratic Petersburg. The popular, melancholy Petersburg lieder called romansy held a special sway over Tchaikovsky's imagination.

p.121 – Many did shed tears when The Queen of Spades was first performed at the Mariinsky Theatre, on December 5, 1890.

p.128 – The Imperial Mariinsky Theatre, still the bastion of the aristocracy, had recently started to attract new patrons, particularly for performances of Tchaikovsky's operas and ballets, especially students and younger professionals. Tickets were impossible to obtain, and when they tried disturbing then by lottery, up

to fifteen thousand people a day were among the hopefuls. A huge young audience was created for Tchaikovsky's music.

p.129 – A decidedly conservative ruler, Alexander III realized nevertheless the importance of rapid economic and industrial development for Russia, and he tried to create the most beneficial conditions for that purpose. The changes came in an avalanche. In Petersburg, giant factories were built and powerful new banks appeared on the scene.
This frantic economic activity, new for Petersburg, created numerous nouveaux riches who wanted to be acknowledged as the true masters of the city. They wanted to feel like generous patrons of the arts and were prepared to spend substantial sums to support national culture.

p.137 – Both Tchaikovsky's and Benois' extraordinary interest in ballet comes as no surprise – after all, it was the most imperial of all the arts. Nicholas I, who perceived a resemblance between the order and symmetry of ballet exercises with that of the military parades he so loved, particularly enjoyed ballet. And we find echos of the cult of parades and military music in both Tchaikovsky and Benois. Tchaikovsky and Benois were also intrigued by ballet's obsession with dolls and the dancers' doll-like aspect, the automatic and predictable movement. This was a frequent themes in E.T.A. Hoffmann, beloved by both. One of Tchaikovsky's most whimsical creations, the Nutcracker ballet, plays with a favorite Hoffmanesque idea of the fine line between human and doll, between a seemingly free individual and a windup mechanism. The idea of an animated doll both attracted and repelled Tchaikovsky. It was, of course, a purely balletic image that was realized brilliantly once again in a joint production of Benois and Stravinsky, the ballet Petrouchka.

p.143 – By 1900 almost a mission and a half inhabitants swelled the city, and the number continued to increase rapidly (in 1917 there would be almost two and a half million; that is the population grew by almost 70 percent in just seventeen years).

p.147 – Petersburg had three operas, a famous ballet company, a lively operetta, and opulent theatres for every taste – from the very respectable, imperially subsidized Alexandrinsky, which tended to stage serious plays, to the frivolous Nevsky Farce, known for its topical parodies of famous contemporaries.
The year 1908 brought forth Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse on the Petersburg stages.

p.149 – Wednesdays and Sundays were ballet days at the Mariinsky. In 1908 Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky starred in the productions of the twenty-eight-year-old Michel Fokine. In one night could be seen two of Fokine's most innovative works, his one-act Egyptian Nights and Chopiniana, a plotless wonder that later became famous in the West under the title Les Sylphides. The court balletomanes sniffed: even ballet, that holy of holies, was being taken over by the nasty modernists! They had to put up with it, for Nijinsky and Pavlova were just wonderful, air and champagne!

p.199 – Anarchy took over Petrograd, but it was just then that the Imperial Alexandrinsky Theatre put on perhaps the most famous production of prerevolutionary Russia – Mikhail Lermontov's drama Masquerade, directed by Meyerhold and designed by Golovin. Everything about this production is legendary. Its endless rehearsals, ongoing for five years under Meyerhold, had turned into a theatrical ritual of sorts. Golovin had made four thousand drawings of costumes, makeup, furniture, and other props, setting a record for the Russian theatre. Masquerade cost three hundred thousand gold rubles, an amazing sum even for the seemingly bottomless royal treasury.

p.255 – It had been beaten into our heads since childhood that Theatre Street is 220 meters long and the height of the buildings equals the widths of the street – 22 meters. In my Leningrad days the conventional wisdom was that walks along Theatre Street (renamed by then to Rossi Street) cultivated the feeling for

refinement and spiritual harmony.

p.285-86 – But the most important reason was the opinion of Bolshevik Number One: Vladimir Lenin, who considered opera and ballet “a piece of purely big landowning culture.” Trying to save the Mariinsky Theatre from the “present attempt to stifle it,” Lunacharsky appealed to Lenin with a desperate letter, in which, with some exaggeration, he pressed the case for opera and ballet as a necessary and useful entertainment for the proletarian masses: “Literally the entire laboring population of Petrograd treasures the Mariinsky Theatre so much, since it has become an almost exclusively working-class theatre, that its closing will be perceived by the workers as a heavy blow.” The pragmatic Lenin was more impressed by Lunacharsky’s argument that guarding the empty Mariinsky Theatre would cost almost as much as maintaining the acting troupe. As a result, the state subsidy for the Mariinsky Theatre, which had been cut to a minimum, was retained.

p.287 – To the end of his life Balanchine would declaim Chatsky’s final monologue, which in Yuriev’s presentation [at the Alexandrinsky Theatre] had elicited tears from young Georges, as he himself admitted in later years:

I flee, without looking back, I will seek
A place in the world for injured feeling!
My carriage, my carriage!

Those romantic lines practically foretold Balanchine’s future. His emotional reaction to their open melodrama lifts a window into the choreographer’s soul that subsequently was shut forever.

Dale Pobega says

Large chunks recycled from Volkov's "The Magical Chorus" which is a very thorough study of Russian literature. I must say, though, that I have really enjoyed reading the book as background to my first visit to the city. The review below about Volkov "slobbering over Ahkmatova's figurative cock" raised an eyebrow ... drivel!... This is a very good book about St Petersburg, especially if you are familiar with the artists of the period or intend reading, viewing, listening to them before you go or while you are there.

Annm says

I chose this book as part of the research for a historical novel. From the title and description, I expected to find a boring history of esoteric cultural concepts. Instead I found an incredibly well written history of the lives, motive, art, music, poetry and prose of all of modern St. Petersburg / Petrograd / Leningrad and finally back to St. Petersburg. ai learned so much history, and so much about the lives of these people. It's worth a read if you have any interest in Russian history, world history, and how artists of all types live, work, and deal with adversity.

Katti says

A perfect introduction to read when you are visiting St Petersburg!

Tomi says

DNF

Shannon says

I can't get into this book...why? I love St. Petersburg, but this book reads like a scholarly paper. Too bad!

Kerry says

not too good. slobbers all over akhmatova's (figurative) cock while disregarding huge chunks of space, time, & more important people.

Anastasia says

Niente, ho fallito.

Io avevo davvero intenzione di leggere per intero questo libro. La mole mi spaventava, visto che non era una passeggiata, era un saggio storico, ma mi dicevo "ma sì, ma con i miei tempi posso fare tutto!".
Peccato di non aver pensato al fatto che è Novembre, che la scuola mi esaurisce, e che leggere nel tempo libero un trattato di storia di 500 pagine non è esattamente un piacere.
Posso parlare delle misere centodieci pagine che sono riuscita a reggere prima di decidere di lasciar perdere e rimandare a un'altra volta.
Devo dire che la cosa più entusiasmante è stata la copertina. Non era ironico, parlo seriamente. Che meraviglia non è.
Comunque, Vòlkov non è assolutamente pesante, ma ha scelto di trattare il suo argomento in modo..sensato, ma confusionario. Invece che andare in ordine cronologico, divide la storia di San Pietroburgo in capitoli dedicati ad autori, poi a pittori, musicisti e così via.
Non è male come idea, ma non fornisce un'idea chiara della successione degli eventi. Tant'è vero che in treno sono sbottata ed ad alta voce ho detto "Ma Gogol' non muore mai?!".
Da alcune cose per scontate, ad esempio la conoscenza di termini che, a meno che non si è del campo, difficilmente si conosce. E nel trattare dei singoli personaggi salta un po' dall'uno all'altro, senza che il lettore abbia un'idea precisa della vita del tipo di turno.
Però nel complesso mi sembrava molto carino, solo che..no, leggere storia per diletto con almeno due interrogazioni al giorno..chi me lo fa fare?!