

St Petersburg was always meant to be everything that Moscow was not. Established in 1703, it was Russia's "window on Europe", its "Northern Aurora", "Northern Venice" and "Northern Amsterdam". Openness to the West was combined with a distinct vision of urban space. With its grid-like structure and main avenues centripetally focused on the Admiralty, St Petersburg suggested a modern antithesis to Moscow, famous for its crooked medieval streets and circular layout. The city's emphasis on rational planning and logical structure seemed to offer a blueprint for building a society organized around predictable rules and carefully calculated goals. But attempts to translate urban planning into social engineering rarely work, and the mathematical precision of St Petersburg's landscape did little to prevent the city from becoming the birthplace of social upheavals and gaining a reputation for its alternative, at times even subversive, urban culture.

During the Soviet period, the city was renamed and routinely described in official language as "the cradle of three revolutions". This image was intended to mute rather than revive the sources of social and artistic radicalism. Indeed, Leningrad's historical penchant for political and cultural experimentation, together with its allegedly anti-Moscow prejudices, brought it serious trouble in the era of the planned society. Between the 1930s and 1950s, Leningrad's elite was subjected to several cycles of vicious ideological campaigns, of which the attack against Anna Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko in 1946 was, perhaps, the most famous. The two writers survived but could not publish much until after Stalin's death. The political elite was less fortunate. During the so-called Leningrad Affair of 1949–52, more than 200 leading politicians were killed for allegedly conducting "anti-party activity". By the time of perestroika, the city's reputation as the nation's cultural capital was more aspirational than real. In an article of 1988, the country's main intellectual newspaper, *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, aptly captured the faded lustre of the "second" capital: "Northern Venice" no longer, Leningrad was described as "a grand city with the destiny of the countryside".

In *St Petersburg: Shadows of the past*, Catriona Kelly tells the story of the city's least glamorous but also least traumatic period. Tracing the life of Soviet Leningrad from the 1950s to the 1980s and the post-Soviet transformation of St Petersburg after 1990, Kelly explores the city dwellers' persistent inclination to view their present through the lens of the past. The main problem, as Kelly shows, is that this past is not entirely user-friendly. "Extreme beauty is unsettling and difficult to live with", she writes in her preface, setting the tone for the volume. Her book is a remarkable attempt to show how this difficulty has been managed, avoided, or repressed.

During the Second World War, Leningrad – with its population of 2.5 million – was besieged for 872 days by the Nazis. The exact number who died from starvation, cold and bombing is still disputed, varying anywhere between 650,000 and 1.2 million. What we do know for sure is that between 1959 and 1979, the city absorbed an influx of 1.5 million migrants from villages and small towns. These newcomers, gripped with "a sense of alienation" from a culture they did not inherit, significantly changed the city's cultural context. In

Country city

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their perception, the city was habitually divided into the museum-like downtown "Petersburg" with Dostoevsky, white nights and Silver Age art, and the culturally negligible outskirts of "Leningrad" with their smelly staircases and piles of rubbish.

There is another important dimension to the unsettling fate of St Petersburg's beauty under the Soviets. Katerina Clark, in her inspiring *Petersburg: Crucible of cultural revolution* (1995), showed how the creative energy of utopian thinking that motivated avant-garde circles in the 1920s had dissipated entirely by the early 1930s. Kelly's study provides an excellent sequel to this exploration of the emergence and exhaustion of the utopian desire in the most utopian Russian city. It helps us understand why Leningrad memorialized the Russian Revolution by picking an immobile and gutted warship, rather than, say, by erecting Vladimir Tatlin's dynamic Tower. Revolution had come to a standstill.

late socialism and its aftermath in one of the biggest cities in Europe.

The concentration on the everyday emerged as an outcome of a palpable process of self-withdrawal. One example cited by Kelly is especially telling. Originally built as the nation's key naval outpost, Leningrad actually maintained a rather distant relation with the Baltic Sea, establishing itself instead as a river-city, "marine yet not-marine". Larger possibilities were abandoned in favour of graspable projects. Grand narratives were scaled down. Against this background, it is hard not to read the observations of the conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky as a commentary on the life of the city in general. Explaining the main distinctive feature of the "Leningrad sound", Mravinsky insisted on the importance of "inner temperament", defending the art of discovering in music "feelings that are carefully preserved from the coarse gaze, the careless touch".

The texture of the everyday determined the limits of expectations, and the avoidance of bold gestures and expansive statements in public was compensated for by a "passionate attachment to unconsidered historical trifles". In fact, *St Petersburg: Shadows of the past* could be read as an encyclopedia of "homely things" that helped people navigate their life in the city during the past six decades. Equally, Kelly is careful to emphasize that "mundane

"stormy love affair" with Soviet reality, Kelly explores the intricacies of the public transport etiquette and the convoluted rules of kitchen use in communal apartments. She describes practices of filching (little hot-water bottles are ideal for stealing perfume from a cosmetics factory) and analyses the drinking rituals of the Soviet *razlivukhi*, or "winebars" ("don't sniff [the liquid] – you'll puke," advised a graduate of the system"). What is truly staggering in Kelly's story, though, is the scale of the transformation that everyday life went through during such a short period. Today, walking down bustling Nevsky Prospect – St Petersburg's Fifth Avenue or Ku'damm – it is impossible to believe that as recently as the mid-1960s city officials considered removing all the shops from the street in order to turn it into a cultural reserve. No less striking is the fact that in 2010 the number of McDonalds branches in the city was exactly the same as the total number of Leningrad restaurants in 1968 – forty-two.

The encoding of the past through "homely things" and "memory spaces" went hand in hand with the second major strategy of remembering: a particular practice of reading the city through the templates of the so-called Petersburg Text. This concept was introduced in the 1970s by the Leningrad scholar Vladimir N. Toporov, who identified a stable vocabulary of tropes, plot structures and stylistic conventions which writers from Nikolai Gogol to Fyodor Dostoevsky to Andrey Bely used to represent St Petersburg. Deeply immersed in the shadowy side of the past, the Petersburg Text emphasized the doomed and the depressive. It also offered an aesthetic – rather than purely ideological – filter for perceiving daily life. Real-life events, relations and people had to have "a 'literary' resonance", as Kelly defines it.

Such resonance emerges from the way Kelly organizes her own material. The chapter on shopping introduces its main theme by quoting from a novella of 1977 by Nina Katerli; the chapter on food similarly begins with lyrical reminiscences from Valery Popov's essay "Vanishing Petersburg". These literary parallels are by no means superfluous; they add texture and historical depth to the real-life stories. They also suggest the remarkable degree to which daily life has been saturated with references to high culture. Austrians named chocolate's after Mozart (*Mozartkugeln*), but, as Kelly reminds us, the Soviet chocolates Queen of Spades – named after Alexander Pushkin's short story and Pyotr Tchaikovsky's opera – took this gastronomic obsession with art one step further.

By interweaving the stories of literary and actual interlocutors in a seamless text, Kelly renders the border between "the imaginary city (of literature and art, viewed panoramically) and the lived city (of 'my' humdrum everyday experience, viewed microscopically)" even more unstable than it already is in Russian reality. Then again, so much of the city's history has been created precisely through its inhabitants' powerful ability to survive by ignoring imminent reality and to advance by disregarding existing conditions. "If Moscow, proverbially, does not believe in tears, Leningrad-Petersburg has never been inclined to notice them", Catriona Kelly observes. Her illuminating book shows how the city taught people not to notice. But more importantly, it tells us about those who learned to excel in hiding their tears from public view.



"Prescience, St Petersburg" (2004) by Pamela Scott Wilkie

Kelly presents two main strategies through which inhabitants of Leningrad-St Petersburg have dealt with the alienating beauty and the disappearance of the utopian future. One of them has prioritized the tangible texture of daily life – the "memory spaces" of an informal kind", as Kelly calls them – while the other focused on written versions of the city's history. Meticulously researched (footnotes alone occupy eighty-seven pages), her book combines interviews, literary and cinematic sources, ethnographic observations, and archival materials. By immersing ourselves in the minute detail of everyday life, we have the chance to imagine how it felt to live through

memory" about "nice viscose things from the GDR" or drinking binges on Railwaymen's Day neither substitute for nor excuse the history of political oppression. Rather, it has provided a meaningful interface through which people have recorded their encounters with the city's institutions and structures.

Kelly begins with the city's main train stations and ends with its central cemeteries. In between, she introduces the reader to a wide variety of Leningrad-Petersburg life. Ethnographic detail ("Leningrad shchi" is your basic Russian cabbage soup plus mushrooms) is interspersed with useful advice. In pursuit of a comprehensive analysis of the citizens'