Country city

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ST PETERSBURG
Shadows of the past
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T Petersburg was always meant to be
everything that Moscow was not. Estab-
lished in 1703, it was Russia’s “window
on Europe”, its “Northern Aurora”, “Northern
Venice” and “Northern Amsterdam”. Open-
ness to the West was combined with a distinct
vision of urban space. With its grid-like struc-
ture 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 predicta-
ble 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 radical-
ism. Indeed, Leningrad’s historical penchant
for political and cultural experimentation,
together with its allegiance to Moscow’s judg-
es, brought it serious trouble in the era of
politics. Katerina Clark, in her inspiring
Petersburg: Crucible of cultural revolution
(1995), showed how the creative energy of
uptopian thinking that motivated avant-garde
circles in the 1920s had dissipated entirely by
the early 1930s. Kelly’s study offers 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 immo-
bile and gutted warship, rather than, say, by
erecting Vladimir Tatlin’s dynamic Tower.
Revolution had come to a standstill.

In St Petersburg: Shadows of the past, Catri-
ona 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 trans-
formation of St Petersburg after 1990, Kelly
explores the city dwellers’ persistent inclina-
tion to view their present through the lens of
the past. The main problem, as Kelly shows,
is that this is not entirely user-friendly.

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 possibil-
ities 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 tempera-
ment”, 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
ticket and the convoluted rules of kitchen
use in communal apartments. She describes
practices of fitching (little hot-water bottles
are ideal for stealing perfume from a cosmetics
store) and the drinking of Soviet rozlivakh, 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 trans-
formation that everyday life underwent during
the short period. Today’s walking does not
busting Nevsky Prospect – St Petersburg’s
Fifth Avenue or Ku’dam – 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 gives hand in
hand with the second major strategy of remem-
bering: 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. Tikhomirov, who defined it as “a
network of stories, stereotypes, plat-
topes, structures and stylistic conven-
tions 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 depres-
sive. 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.

The 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 Kat-
erl; 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. Russians
named their church after Mravinsky’s (Mra-
gel), 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.

But in leaving the stories of literary and
actual interlocutors in a seamless text, Kelly
renders the border between “the imaginary
city (of literature and art, viewed panorami-
cally) and the lived city of (my) humdrum
everyday experience, viewed microsco-
cally” 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 sur-
vice by ignoring imminent reality and to
still, 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, Kelly shows that they could
excel in hiding their tears from public view.