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St Petersburg: A Cultural History

Solomon Volkov

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The definitive cultural biography of the “Venice of the North” and its transcendent artistic and spiritual legacy, written by Russian emerge and acclaimed cultural historian, Solomon Volkov.

Long considered to be the mad dream of an imperious autocrat—the "Venice of the North," conceived in a setting of malarial swamps—St. Petersburg was built in 1703 by Peter the Great as Russia's gateway to the West. For almost 300 years this splendid city has survived the most extreme attempts of man and nature to extinguish it, from flood, famine, and disease to civil war, Stalinist purges, and the epic 900-day siege by Hitler's armies. It has even been renamed twice, and became St. Petersburg again only in 1991. Yet not only has it retained its special, almost mystical identity as the schizophrenic soul of modern Russia, but it remains one of the most beautiful and alluring cities in the world. Now Solomon Volkov, a Russian emigre and acclaimed cultural historian, has written the definitive cultural biography of this city and its transcendent artistic and spiritual legacy.

For Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoyevsky, Petersburg was a spectral city that symbolized the near-apocalyptic conflicts of imperial Russia. As the monarchy declined, allowing intellectuals and artists to flourish, Petersburg became a center of avant-garde experiment and flamboyant bohemian challenge to the dominating power of the state, first czarist and then communist. The names of the Russian modern masters who found expression in St. Petersburg still resonate powerfully in every field of art: in music, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and Shostakovich; in literature, Akhmatova, Blok, Mandelstam, Nabokov, and Brodsky; in dance, Diaghilev, Nijinsky, and Balanchine; in theater, Meyerhold; in painting, Chagall and Malevich; and many others, whose works are now part of the permanent fabric of Western civilization. Yet no comprehensive portrait of this thriving distinctive, and highly influential cosmopolitan culture, and the city that inspired it, has previously been attempted.

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