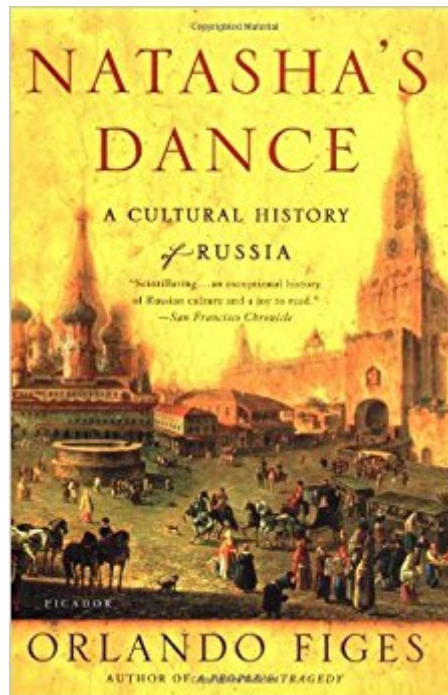




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Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History Of Russia



Synopsis

Beginning in the eighteenth century with the building of St. Petersburg and culminating with the Soviet regime, Figes examines how writers, artists, and musicians grappled with the idea of Russia itself--its character, spiritual essence, and destiny. Skillfully interweaving the great works--by Dostoevsky, Stravinsky, and Chagall--with folk embroidery, peasant songs, religious icons, and all the customs of daily life, Figes reveals the spirit of "Russianness" as rich and uplifting, complex and contradictory--and more lasting than any Russian ruler or state.

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Customer Reviews

I usually like to give my reviews catchy little titles. I was going to call this one "Fabulous Figes". I finally decided it was more important to just come right out and say this is the best book I read this year. Of course, if we were in January or February, that statement wouldn't mean too much! (Kind of like movie reviews that come out early in the year..."Best Darn Romantic Comedy I've Seen...So Far!) Since we're in December, and considering I've read about 70 books this year, that makes the statement a little more impressive. Okay, so now I've got to "put my money where my mouth is" and tell you what makes "Natasha's Dance" so good. First, the book is beautifully written. It is lyrical, poignant, funny, thoughtful, etc. Like all good popular historians, Mr. Figes has a novelist's flair. Second, the book is wonderfully structured. The author decided to give each chapter a particular theme. So, despite the daunting task Mr. Figes has assigned himself (a cultural history of Russia!), the book doesn't ramble. It has a tight focus. On the other hand, there are enough themes covered that you don't feel anything relevant has been left out. Some of the themes that are covered: how

Russian culture was influenced by both Asia and Western Europe; peasant life- the reality vs. how the urban intellectuals imagined it to be; Moscow vs. St. Petersburg (i.e.- their competition with each other, and changing fortunes as cultural centers); the search for the Russian soul- the religious beliefs of some of the famous Russian authors (Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, etc.); the distortion and manipulation of culture by the Bolsheviks; and, finally, the effect that emigration from "Mother Russia" had on various cultural figures- such as Prokofiev, Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Gorky and Nabokov.

I disagree with the reviewer who finds this not quite "heavyweight" enough. It is not an academic book - and thank God for that - but a superb introduction to the history and the culture of Russia. Figs starts with a wonderful account of the building of St Petersburg in the 1700s, and goes on to discuss the meaning of Europe to Russian culture in the eighteenth century. Europe caused a split in the Russian national identity - and much of Russian culture in the nineteenth century was concerned with how to reconcile the two almost contradictory halves of the Russian character: the native Russian (or Muscovite) and the European (or Petrine). The next chapter takes up the story of 1812, when Russia's writers and artist first began to think about the ways of developing a distinctively "Russian style" in contrast to the West. This is when the Slavophiles were born. There are lots of fascinating details here - on the Russian customs of child-rearing, on interior design and Russian fashions. The next three chapters explore various facets of Russian culture in the nineteenth century: the Moscow tradition; the romantic fascination with the Russian peasants (which Figs explores as a search for nationhood); and the influence of the Orthodox tradition on Russian literature and art. Then there is a speculative chapter on the cultural influence of the Asiatic steppe/ For me, this was the most original and the most interesting chapter in the book (Rachel Polonsky, in her hatchet-job review in the TLS doesn't even mention it).

Although Figs takes the title from Natasha's dance in "War and Peace," he could have just as easily used Chichikov from "Dead Souls" as his vehicle, as he takes the reader along on a wild ride through Russia's rich cultural history. Figs explores his chapters thematically, exploring a compelling set of Russian ideas that revolve around the East-West duality that is so apparent in the works of great Russian artists, writers and musicians. Figs seems to be more at home when exploring the themes found in the great classical compositions, providing wonderful character sketches of composers such as Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky. He also takes on virtually all of the major Russian novels of the past two centuries, starting with "Eugene Onegin," noting the

inspirations and the thoughts that pervaded these works. He notes that it was Pushkin who gave Russia a literary voice, which it would never forsake, as each writer that succeeded him built on the language he had to a large part invented. Ultimately, we get Nabokov's thoughts on the subject as Figes covers the emigres in the concluding chapter. Nabokov imagined himself as a latter-day Pushkin, devoting a considerable amount of time to a translation and analysis of Pushkin's great literary work, before embarking on his own major works. Figes captures the mood and energy of the time, the tumultuous reign of the Tsars, their Tatar origins, their identification with Byzantine, the Decembrist revolt and the Bolshevik Revolution. He casts a light on some of the major figures of the time, such as Volkhonsky who defied the Tsar and was sentenced to Siberia. Rather than submit to the elements, Volkhonsky rose to become a people's hero, greatly inspiring the works of Pushkin and Tolstoy.

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