



Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia

Orlando Figes

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History on a grand scale-an enchanting masterpiece that explores the making of one of the world's most vibrant civilizations

A People's Tragedy, wrote Eric Hobsbawm, did "more to help us understand the Russian Revolution than any other book I know." Now, in *Natasha's Dance*, internationally renowned historian Orlando Figes does the same for Russian culture, summoning the myriad elements that formed a nation and held it together.

Beginning in the eighteenth century with the building of St. Petersburg-a "window on the West"-and culminating with the challenges posed to Russian identity by the Soviet regime, Figes examines how writers, artists, and musicians grappled with the idea of Russia itself-its character, spiritual essence, and destiny. He skillfully interweaves the great works-by Dostoevsky, Stravinsky, and Chagall-with folk embroidery, peasant songs, religious icons, and all the customs of daily life, from food and drink to bathing habits to beliefs about the spirit world. Figes's characters range high and low: the revered Tolstoy, who left his deathbed to search for the Kingdom of God, as well as the serf girl Praskovya, who became Russian opera's first superstar and shocked society by becoming her owner's wife.

Like the European-schooled countess Natasha performing an impromptu folk dance in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the spirit of "Russianness" is revealed by Figes as rich and uplifting, complex and contradictory-a powerful force that unified a vast country and proved more lasting than any Russian ruler or state.

Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia Details

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From Reader Review Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia for online ebook

Pieter says

Hoewel hier en daar wel wat historische foutjes te vinden zijn, geeft het boek een goed overzicht van de culturele evolutie, of beter gezegd de culturele rode draad van Rusland. Er is aandacht voor het Europese Sint-Petersburg versus het Euraziatische Moskou, de rol van orthodoxie en de oud-gelovigen in het Russische denken, de strijd tussen het classicistische versus aandacht voor het lokale boerenleven, de impact van Napoleon en Sovjet-Unie op de Russische cultuur. Hoe divers de culturele uitingen en hoe tegenstrijdig soms de politiek-ideologische opvattingen, uit alles blijkt bij artiesten een culturele stam (die Euraziatische ideologen als Dugin uitvoerig beschrijven) en een diepgewortelde liefde voor Moedertje Rusland. In het laatste hoofdstuk toont de auteur ook aan dat zelfs de vele emigranten na 1917 hun Russische cultuur bleven koesteren en bewaren. Zij die daarna nog hun geboorteland onder sovjet-juk bezochten, werden overvallen door een gevoel van heimwee. Cultuur is en blijkt allesbehalve oppervlakkig.

Alberto says

Una maravilla. Todo lo que diga es poco.

John Carter McKnight says

A cultural history of Russia that's immensely readable and absolutely exhaustively referenced: it's a goldmine of primary sources. The structure is thematic, ratcheting forward and back across topics in a way that actually reinforces nicely the broad structure of Russian history by returning to key places and times from different perspectives.

Natasha's Dance is hefty, at some 580 pages, but some of the most fluid and engaging nonfiction I've read. Figes' style is conversational but never shallow, incisive but never pedantic. I'm definitely looking forward to reading more of his work, especially as several people have told me his history of the Russian Revolution is a new classic and one of the very best on the subject.

The only bone I'd pick is that Figes stops around 1962: I'd have been very interested in his account continuing into the great age of satire and rise of pop music in the late Soviet years.

Ffiamma says

tentativo di spiegazione dell'anima/cultura russa- attraverso la storia, la letteratura, la religione, la musica, il cinema. orlando figes scrive in modo chiaro e accattivante, magari senza dire nulla di davvero nuovo o illuminante- ma in ogni caso ho molto amato questo libro (per l'argomento che tratta, perché in fondo non fa male sentirsi ripetere certe cose, per un ripasso generale sulla cultura)

rosshalde says

Nata?an?n dans? ismini Tolstoy'un "**Sava? ve Bar??**" isimli eserindeki Nata?a karakterinin bir soylu olmas?na ra?men bir köy müzi?i e?li?indeki dans?ndan al?yor. Yazar burada karakterin farklı ö?retilelerle büyütülmü? olmas?na ra?men içindeki Rus ruhunu her daim korumas?ndan etkilenecek bu tarih kitab?na bu ismi vermi?.

Kitap 8 ana bölümden olu?an bir kültürel tarih incelemesi. Salt bilgi içerikli oldu?u için bir kurgu romandan beklenen ak?c?l?k bu eserden beklenmemeli ancak muadillerine göre kolay okunu?unun bu kitab? popüler yapt???n? dü?ünüyorum. Dedi?im gibi salt bilgi içerikli olmas?ndan dolayı? kitap hakk?ndaki dü?üncelerimi bölümler halinde spoiler korkusu olmadan vermek istiyorum, bütününe yorum yapmak zor çünkü bölümden bölüme yazar?n tutumunun de?i?ti?ini fark ettim. Bu dengesizlik ve yer yer tarafl? anlat?m yüzünden de 5 yerine 4 y?ld?z verdim.

1.Bölüm: Avrupal? Rusya

Bölüm esas olarak Petro'nun Petersburg ?ehrini in?a edi?i ile ba?l?yor denilebilir. Petro'nun Avrupa tak?nt?s?na oldukça ayrınt?l? olarak yer veren yazar okuyuculara bu tak?nt?n?n derecesini daha iyi anlayabilece?i ?ekilde tarif ediyor;

"Yeni ba?kentteki her ?ey Ruslar? daha Avrupal? bir ya?am tarz? benimsemeye zorlam???t?. Petro soylular?na nerede ya?ayacaklar?n?, evlerini nas?l in?a edeceklerini, ?ehir içinde nas?l dola?acaklar?n?,kilisede nerede duracaklar?n?, ne kadar hizmetçilerinin olaca???n?, balolarda nas?l yemek yiyeceklerini, nas?l giyinip saçlar?n? nas?l kestireceklerini, sarayda kendilerini nas?l ta??yacaklar?n? ve kibar bir toplumda nas?l sohbet edeceklerini söyledi. Bask? alt?ndaki ?ehirde hiçbir ?ey ?ansa b?rak?lmam???t?. Bu saplant?l? düzenleme St. Petersburg'a dü?manca ve bunalt?c? bir ?ehir imaj?n? vermi?ti"

Petro'nun ba?latt??? bu ak?m Petersburg'daki aristokrat kesimin özümsemesiyle birlikte bence oldukça ilginç boyutlara varm??. ?eremetevo gibi yüzy?llarca varl???n? devam ettirmi? Rus klanlar? üzerinden somut örneklerle konuyu daha aç?klay?c? bir ?ekilde aktarm?? yazar.

Avrupa'ya hayran olma durumu ?eklen ve manen kendini de?i?tirerek Avrupal? olma ve bunu Avrupal?lara kabul ettirme seviyesine gelmi? bu dönemde. Ancak Avrupa'n?n Ruslar? benimsememesi de ayrı? ?ekilde hayal k?r?kl???na u?ratm?? Ruslar?. Yazar bu durumu k?saca;

"Ruslar Avrupa içerisinde bir a?a??l?k kompleksi ya??yorlar" diyerek özetlemi?. Kendini kabul ettiremeyen Ruslar?n sald?rgan ve milliyetçi bir tutuma geçmesinde k?r?lma noktas? bu san?r?m. *"Rusya e?er Avrupa'n?n bir parças? olamayacaksa o zaman farklı olmaktan daha fazla gurur duymal?yd?"* düstüroyla içinde **Karamzin** ve **Pu?kin** gibi önemli isimlerin de oldu?u bir yeni bir ak?m olumu?.

2.Bölüm: 1812 Çocuklar?

Bu bölüm asl?nda çok daha ilgi çekici bir ak?mla alakalı oldukça bilgilendirici oldu?u için kitap içerisindeki en sevdi?im bölüm oldu diyebilirim. **Dekabristler** olarak bilinen ve Avrupa etkisine kar?? Rus halk?n?n özünün köylü erdemlerinden olu?tu?unu savunan ve anayasay? de?i?tirmek için çaba veren ayd?n ve subaylar?n giri?imleri ayrınt?l? bir ?ekilde anlat?l?yor. Dekabrist önderlerden en ilgi çekicisi **Volkonski**

olabilir. **Tolstoy**'un akrabası olan Volkonski Tolstoy'un "Sava? ve Bar?" eserindeki Bolkonski karakteri için ilham kayna?ı olmuştur. Hatta Sava? ve Bar? eseri aslında Volkonski'yi anlatan bir eser olacak Tolstoy sonradan fikrini değiştirmiştir.

Napolyon'un Rus seferi ile Fransız hayranları'nın hat safhada olduğu Rusya'da doğa?al olarak insanların de?işmesine rağmen hala Fransız hayranları'nın barındırması Rusya'yı Moskova –ulusalcılar- Petersburg-batıcılar- gibi bir ikilemde bırakmıştır. Ancak bu masum bir ulusalcı?ıktan çok farklı seviyesine varmıştır maalesef. Dekabristlerden en önemli?lerinden biri olarak bilinen Volkonski bile “*Gürcüler, Finlandiyalılar ve Ukraynalılar Ruslaştırmalı? yalnızca “a?a?lık” olarak tabir edilen Yahudiler ülkeden sürülmeli ve yok edilmeli*” gibi bir anlayışa sahipti. Dekabristlerin giri?imi başarısız olmasına rağmen kültürel açıdan etkisi dalga dalga yayıldı? diye düşünüyorum. **Gogol** gibi halka inen, Fransızca yerine günlük Rusça kullanılan eserlerin yazılmaya başlanması, Puşkin'in Yevgeni Onegin'de yaptığı? gibi Fransız hayran? Rus soyluların eleştirilmeye başlanması ile 18. yy'da Fransız etkisinde kalan ve neredeyse hiç Rusça eser verilmeyen bir dönemi kapatmıştır diyebiliriz. Yazar bu bölümleri eserlerden parçalar ile inceleyerek daha ayrıntılı bir şekilde yansıtmıştır.

3.Bölüm: Moskova! Moskova!

Bu bölüm Rusların **Altın Orda Devleti** hakimiyeti altından kurtulup bunu mitleştirdikleri şehir olan Moskova'ya övgüler şeklinde daha çok. Petersburg'a kıyasla daha dindar, daha tutucu ancak daha Rus olan bir şehir Moskova. Gogol bunu şu şekilde yansıtmıştır;

"Petersburg titiz, dakik bir insan, mükemmel bir Alman, her şeye hesaplı? şekilde bakan biridir. Bir parti vermeden önce hesapları?na bakacaktır. Moskova bir rus soylusudur, eğer iyi vakit geçirecekse, sonunda yere yığı?lana kadar gider ve cebinde ne kadar olduğu konusunda endişe etmez. Moskova yar? ölçüleri sevmez... Petersburg, Moskova'nın acayipli?i ve zevksizli?i ile dalga geçer. Moskova rusça konuşmay? bilmedi?i için Petersburg'u kınar... Rusya'nın Moskova'ya ihtiyacı vardı?, Petersburg'un ise Rusya'ya."

Bizans'ın yıkılışıyla kendilerini 3. Roma olarak tanımlayan Hristiyanlık dünyasının kurtarıcısı ilan eden Rusların daha çok dini yönü ile ilgili kıssamlar mevcut bu bölümde. Bununla birlikte aydın kesimin köylülere, sade halka yönelmesi ve eserlerinde bunları konu edilmesi üzerinde durulmuştur. Klasik müzik severler için ilginç ayrıntılar mevcut ancak ben daha çok diğer alandaki etkileriyle ilgilendim. Resimde, edebiyatta gerçekçiliğe dönüşün başladığı? 1850- 1890 arasında yoğun olarak anlatıldığı? bölümde en çok dikkatimi çeken şeylerden birisi: **Moskova sanat tiyatrosunda örenci ve fakirler için ayrılan ucuz koltukların zenginlerin koltuklarıyla ön sıralarda bir arada olmasıydı?.** Darı? 2000li yılların medeniyetlerinin başına diyorum.

4.Bölüm: Köylü Evlili?i

Serfliğin kaldırılması ve halka inilmesi gereklili?inin örenciler tarafından benimsendi?i bir dönemi anlatıyor bu bölüm. Hakların anlatmak, onlarla birlikte yaşamak için bir çok aydın ve örenci halka gitmi? ama giri?imleri hüsrana sonuçlanmıştır. Çernişevski'nin "**nasıl yapmalı?**"sının henüz yazıldığı? yıllarda bundan etkilenen aydın ve örenciler köylüler tarafından “ biz çar olmadan nasıl yaşamız” sözleriyle karşılanıp imparatorluk görevlilerine ispiyonlanmaya başlanması biraz trajik-komik. Ayn? şekilde Köylüleri mitleştiren aydınlar aslında onları hiç de düşündükleri gibi olmadıkları?, bir yüce erdem kayna?ı değil sıradan insanlar oldukları? ke?fetmesi de bu döneme denk diğer ve gerçek Rus köylüsü hakkında somut fikirler edinmeye başlarlar. Bu bölümde Rusların kadınlarla ilgili birkaç atasözü gözüme takıldı? ve belirtmek istedim;

"ya?l? kad?n? ne kadar döversen çorba o kadar lezzetli olur."

"kar?na baltan?n sap?yla vur, e?il ve nefes al?yor mu bak. e?er al?yorsa, o zaman hasta taklidi yap?yor ve daha fazlas?n? istiyordur"

"kar?n? kürk mantoymu? gibi döv, o zaman daha az ses ç?kar"

"bir e? iki kere güzel olur: eve getirildi?i zaman (gelin olarak) ve mezara ta??nd??? zaman"

Böyle bir anlay???n yayg?n oldu?u dönemde **Gorki**, 1891 y?l?nda zinadan suçlu bulunduktan sonra ç?r?lç?plak soyulup kocas? ve di?er köylüler taraf?ndan k?rbaçlanan bir kad?n lehine araya girmek isteyince bir grup köylü taraf?ndan kendinden geçene kadar dövülmü?tür.

Sadece köylüler için de?il asiller içinde kar?s?n? dövmek kanunen tan?nm?? bir hak oldu?u için bu dönemle ilgili bu tarz ?eylere rastlamak pek ilginç de?ilmi? ama ben ?a??rm??tm.

5.Bölüm: Rus Ruhunu Aray??

Bu bölüm Ruslar'?n Ortodokslu?a geçi? hikayesinin ayr?nt?l? bir ?ekilde anlat?ld??? bir bölüm olmu?. Ortodokslu?un eserlere ve günlük hayata i?leyi?i Tolstoy ve Dostoyevski'nin eserlerinden verilen parçalarla, ve Tarkovski'nin Andrey Rublev filminden sahnelerle incelenmi?. Gereksiz uzat?lm?? bir bölüm. Ruslar'?n Ortodokslukla ba??n?n olu?mas? ile ilgili ?u anekdot zaten bölümün geri kalan?n?n de?erini gözümde dü?ürdü diyebilirim.

"Kievan Rus'un 10. yydaki pagan prensi Vladimir, Gerçek ?nanç'? bulmalar? için temsilcilerini çe?itli ülkelere göndermi?ti. ?lk önce Volga'daki Müslüman Bulgarlara gitmi?ler, ama onlar?n dininde ne?e ve erdem bulamam??lard?. Roma ve Almanya'ya gitmi? ama kiliselerinin çok basit oldu?unu dü?ünmü?lerdi. Ama Bizans'a geldiklerinde temsilciler ?öyle bir rapor vermi?lerdi: " Cennettemiydik, dünyada m? bilemedik., çünkü dünyanın hiçbir yerinde böyle bir ihti?am ve güzellik yoktur."

Ben hiçbir toplumun bir dine geçi?inin bu kadar sakin ve planl? oldu?unu dü?ünmedi?im için bu noktada yazar?n güvenilirli?ine dair inanc?m k?r?ld?. Özellikle Ruslar'?n Ortodoksluk hikayelerine dair okuma yapmay? planl?yorum. Ancak ?u an içim d???m Rus oldu?u için bunu daha ileri bir tarihe att?m.

6.Bölüm: Cengiz Han'?n Varisleri

Gerçekten çok fantastik bir bölüm. Burada Ruslar'?n kafas?n?n ne kadar kar???k oldu?unu görebilirsiniz. ??in tuhaf taraf? bu bölümde anlat?lanlar?n izlerini bir süredir tan?d???n?z Ruslar'?n zihinlerinde de görebilirsiniz. Do?u'ya kar?? inan?lmaz bir nefret, bat?l? olma çabası ancak bat? taraf?ndan kabul edilmeyince biz do?ulu muhte?em vah?i barbar kabile **?skitlerin** soyundan geliyoruz gibi demeçler verip, Kafkas kültür ö?elerini kendilerininmi? gibi Avrupa'ya tan?t?p, Sibirya'y? "**Bizim Hindistan**" diye yüksek sesle söyleyebilecek derecede kendilerini kaybetmeleri nas?l tan?mlan?r bilemiyorum. **Tatar** kelimesini farkl? formlara sokup "**i?renç, korkunç**" gibi bir manada kullanmalar? ve Avrupa'dan tokat yiyince ço?u Rus ayd?n?n?(**Anna Ahmatova** ve **Lermontov**'da dahil) " ben asl?nda tatar?m, benim köklerim tatar korkun bizden triplerine girmeleri mi dersiniz" Yani bu bölümün okunmas? laz?m ya ba?ka bir ?ey demiyorum. Avrasya bozk?r?ndaki Müslüman kavimlerle s?rf Rusla?t?rmak ve buralar? sahiplenmek için evlilik politikası? gütmeleri de ayr? bir fantezi ürünü bence. **Dostoyevski** bile Do?u'ya bak?? aç?s?n? ?u ?ekilde dile getirmi?;

“Avrupa’da asalak ve köleydik ama Asya’da efendi olaca??z” **Blok**’un ?iirlerinde ise kendilerini kabul etmeyen Avrupa’ya kar?? Asyal? kart?n? nas?l oynad?klar?n? çok net bir ?ekilde görebilirsiniz;

"Sizler milyonlars?n?z, bizler halk y???n?
Ve halk y???n? ve halk y???n?
Gelin sava??n! Evet biz ?skitleriz,
Evet, Asyal?, çekik gözlü, h?rsl? kavim."

Bunun gibi bir sürü örnek var bu bölümde. Art?k okurken güler misiniz a?lar m?s?n?z bu karakter bölünmesine bilemiyorum.

7.Bölüm: Sovyet Merce?inden Rusya

?nan?lmaz derecede tarafl? bir ?ekilde yaz?lm?? bir bölüm. E?er bir tarihçi, kültürel tarih kitab?nda Sovyet Rusya dönemindeki edebi eserleri ve ak?mlar? incelerken Ahmatova gibi sembolist, rejim kar??t? yazarlar?n hayatlar?na en ince ayr?nt?s?na kadar yer verirken **Ehrenburg** gibi yazarlar? sadece “ *Stalin döneminde ölmemeyi becerebilmi? birkaç Yahudi ayd?ndan biri*” ?eklinde geçi?tiriyorsa ben bunda art niyet arar?m. Bütün bunlar?n yan?nda Rus ?iirine katkı?s? aç???ndan göz ard? edilemeyecek kadar de?erli olan **Mayakovski**’nin ya?am?n? müthi? bir inançla çarp?t?p, Stalin kar??t? görüşlerini bütün rejime kar??ym?? gibi gösterme çabası ise Mayakovski ile ilgili ayr?ntılı? bilgi sahibi olmayan okuyucular? yanl?? yönlendirecek seviyede diye dü?ünüyorum. Di?er bütün bölümlerde siyasi olaylar? sadece dönemin sanatsal ak?mlar?n? daha anla??labilir bir biçimde göstermeye yetecek ?ekilde anlat?rken 100 sayfalık bu bölümde neredeyse her iki cümlesinden birisi Stalin rejimi olan bir tarihçinin güvenilirli?i ve tarafsızlı??? tart??maya aç?ktır bence. Sovyet dönemi edebiyat? ve sanatsal ak?mlar? ile ilgili bilgi edinmek isteyenler ba?ka bir kitap bulmal? ama Ahmatova’n?n biyografisini veya Stalin kar??t? bir eser okumak istiyorsanız bu bölüm i?inizi görebilir.

8.Bölüm: Yurtd???ndaki Rusya

Özellikle Sovyet döneminde yurtd???na gitmi? Rus sanatç?lar? anlatm?? yazar bu bölümde. Rejim kar??t? bu yazarlar? savunay?m derken **Thomas Mann** gibi yazarlara rejime destek verdi?i için inceden dokundurmay?m anlay??? ise oldukça s?rt?yor. Bölümde **Nabokov** ve ?air **Tsvetaeva**’n?n hayat? üzerinde a???r? derecede fazla durulmu?. Çok fazla kayda de?er bir bölüm oldu?unu dü?ünmüyorum. **Gorki** ile ilgili bölümleri ilgi çekiciydi ancak ilk bölümlerdeki tarafsız ve bilgilendirici anlay?? bu bölümlerde kendisini göstermedi maalesef.

Jessica says

I read excerpts of this for a couple of my classes in college - it was nice to finally read this book in its entirety. Overall I enjoyed it, although I would only recommend it to people who already have at least a basic knowledge of Russian history. As the author himself explains, this is a cultural history, not a chronological or comprehensive history, so knowledge of the broader historical context is necessary to really enjoy this book.

My favorite chapter was the one on St. Petersburg - Figes perfectly captured the essence and significance of that city. This book does focus mostly on "high" culture (i.e. literature, opera/ballet, art, etc.) and I would have liked to have seen more of an exploration of the culture of everyday Russian people rather than the nobility, intelligentsia, etc. His selection of specific figures for more detailed analysis felt a little arbitrary at times. I also wish he would have more thoroughly explored the Thaw period in his Soviet chapter (he really only focuses on the Soviet period through WWII which felt incomplete).

Katya says

Figes has gathered a lot of cultural information and organized it into one book, which is very helpful if you want to get a general review of Russia's culture without referring to multiple sources. Some threads that go through the entire book and tie the narrative together, such as the history of the Fountain House in St. Petersburg, almost give you an impression that you are reading fiction. However, some of the information that Figes offers is incorrect. For example, when talking about Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," he calls Sonia Marmeladova Raskol'nikov's lover, which is incorrect and misleading. He ascribes to Dobroliubov the authorship of the term "Oblomovism," when it was Goncharov who coined the term and used it in his novel "Oblomov" first, and Dobroliubov's article "What is 'Oblomovism'?" came out later. He states that in Bulgakov's novel "The Heart of a Dog" a dog's organs were transplanted into a human being, when it was the other way around, hence the sense of disappointment implied in the title of the novel. The origins of the word "bistro" in French are also given incorrectly. I wonder what else I missed. In other words, this is an interesting book, reads easily despite its volume, but it left me disappointed, because in the end I felt I couldn't trust the author.

Bettie? says

Opening: **On a misty spring morning in 1703 a dozen Russian horsemen rode across the bleak and barren marshlands where the Neva river runs into the Baltic Sea. They were looking for a site to build a fort against the Swedes, then at war with Russia, and the owners of these long abandoned swamps.**

Even though the author is a sock puppet*, I still need to read this book.

*<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/bo...>

2015 Reboot as I didn't bookmark where I was up to the last time this was picked up.

Fantastic, and my TBR pile has swollen with the literary references.

The Bronze Horseman by Pushkin is here

Full film: October: Ten Days That Shook the World - Sergei M. Eisenstein

Stravinsky Ballet Petrushka

Rebecka says

I've been reading this book on and off for years, often re-reading the same passages since if you study just about anything related to Russia, you can use this book in a paper. It's an awesome book, and it should be obligatory reading in any Russian class. I love the way in which it is written, which shows immense skill and planning on behalf of Figes. Authors or composers are not just presented in the manner birth-life-death, but interwoven in a specific time frame. Each chapter jumps back and forth between a number of highly important characters, placing them in their cultural and historical setting with great insight.

This is the kind of book you can read just for fun. It's very easy to read, the language is not particularly academic or heavy, and there are no boring parts. It is, however, quite long ;)

Mike says

As a schoolboy I wrote to Orlando Figes as part of the project to write my graduation paper. It was 1998 and the questions I asked did not make much sense, but ask I did before getting on with writing my piece. I had read the recently published 'A People's Tragedy' and Figes could do no wrong in my eyes.

Orlando Figes is an interesting writer, and one who should take a lot of credit for his part in steering mass-published Russian history away from the cover-all texts of a decade ago (including the aforementioned 'Tragedy'). *Natasha's Dance*, which has been followed by his more recent work, *The Whisperers*, veers away from the 1861-1953 period on which so much has been written and opens up new lines of investigation to the amateur reader.

Natasha's Dance is a richly interwoven and interestingly ordered work that charts the cultural development of Russia down the ages. Russian literature, theatre and art in general are well known outside Eastern Europe, but the underlying foundation from which this creativity has sprung is not. Figes does a good job of pushing less conspicuous cultural trends to the fore, examining their more recent development in a clearly written and engaging way.

My only real criticism of *Natasha's Dance* is that the scope of the book is too ambitious. Figes has done a great job of writing about Russian culture since Russia became Russia in the post-Mongol world, but that leaves the reader wondering where the origins of these cultural, artistic and attitudinal movements lie. There certainly has been be a boundary for a study as broad as this to make sense and stay focused, and the boundary from which Figes works is a sensible one, but it leaves important questions unanswered and the reader (or, more precisely, me) wanting a prequel to *Natasha's Dance*. How did what is now Russia look culturally before the Mongol invasions? How did Mongol occupation affect local culture, and did that local culture affect Mongol traditions and art?

The subject that Figes addresses cannot fully be appreciated in isolation, which is where I was left by *Natasha's Dance*. Perhaps I am being a little hard on Figes given that within his defined scope ND is extremely good, but then perhaps I have felt isolated since I waited all those weeks and months for some guidance on my graduation paper all those moons ago.

Anya Nielsen says

Orlando Figes is a Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London and has written 8 books about Russia. *Natasha's Dance* is a seminal work of over 700 pages with maps and notes and further reading. History is a statement of facts, that is those that have not been suppressed in the archives. Writing history is uncomplicated but writing about the culture of Russia without being Russian is infinitely more difficult.

Figes facts are impressive but I felt a certain underlying antipathy for Russia.

I don't believe Figes understood the significance of Orthodoxy on the lives of ordinary Russian Christians throughout the ages including during Soviet times when so many were martyred for their faith. Russian tradition, food, music, entertainment, literature and the elusive Russian Soul all follow the church calendar, its many feasts and fasts.

Figes website shows extensive first hand research through his interviews with Russian people from minority groups and Russians who lived through the communist era who support the Soviet ideology, but nothing from the Diaspora and pro Tsarist Russians living in exile in Europe, America, Australia, Sth America or Britain.

The Russian language is very rich and has many foreign words especially French words because French was the language of the nobility of the elite. Tsar Peter the Great opened the window to the West flooding Russia with European ideas, architecture, music, art and European languages. Figes says the Russian language was lacking which is why it became peppered with French, German, English words. He says Russia was backward and lacking in most respects. If that is true then how can there be a legacy of world acclaimed literature, art, music, dance, and architecture? The roots of this can be seen in the ancient Golden Ring towns where the most beautiful churches and monasteries with amazing frescos and iconography date back to 10th and 11th century.

In the last section of *Natasha's Dance* - 'Russians Abroad' on p538 he says the émigrés in Berlin, Paris and New York 'created their own mythical versions of the good Russian life before 1917'. Figes says they began to go to Easter midnight Masses and 'now as exiles clung to native customs and beliefs'. Catholics have Mass Orthodox have Liturgy. Ask why did the Tsars build beautiful cathedrals in the 1800s in Jerusalem (and hostel for pilgrims), Paris, Cannes, Nice, Florence, Baden-Baden, Dresden, and other cities in Europe if church going Russians were not already travelling and living for long periods in these cities?

Russians living in exile expected this to be a temporary condition believing communism would soon fall and they would return home again to *Matushka Rossiya*. Most of them reviled the new regime. Even so some were drawn back to the concept of 'Rodina' the place where ones roots lay where they belonged, where they could hear the music of their native language and see familiar streets and feel the climate and smell the birch forest only then was their Russian Soul at peace. This cultural concept was not explored.

I prefer the writings of Suzanne and Robert Massie they seem to have understood the idea of Russianness. Rodina and the Russian Soul together with the painful and often maligned history that is Russia.

Czarny Pies says

This book is much better than the sum of its parts. For the period from roughly 1760 to 1960 it contains histories of Russian literature, painting, ballet and classical music. There are weaknesses in all four areas but together they make a compelling narrative. According to Figes Russia indeed has a soul at least from the perspective of high art. The great tragedy of the communist political experiment was that it destroyed the

cultural traditions in these areas drove the artists into ignominious graves. Tales of the gulags provoke rage. This elegiac work invokes delightful melancholy.

Just beware: this work was written for me. It might not work as well as for you. I attended my first symphonic performance in 1964. The main item on the program was Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" which Figes analyzes at some depth in this book. Since then my serendipitous voyage as a cultural dilettante has featured many encounters with Russian works. I was a subscriber to the local opera company for a 20 year period during which they staged at least one Russian work per year. Similarly the local ballet company is highly committed to the Russian repertory. Finally, I have own a copy of Sergei Bondarchuk's epic movie version of "War and Peace" which features the stunning dance by Natasha. Like most Goodreads members of my age, I have sampled Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Gorky. Paintings by Chagall and Kandinsky can be found in most major North American art galleries. If over the years, chance has not brought you into touch with Russian works in literature, painting, ballet and opera, "Natasha's Dance" will be extremely tedious in places.

Chris says

Debating between a three and four star rating for this. It wasn't necessarily 'bad' in most regards but it didn't stand out as being exceptional either. There were a couple factual errors but others have pointed those out so I will concede to them. Mostly, I was aggravated with its structure. There were many interesting avenues it mentioned but never really explored. I understand this is just supposed to be an overview of Russian culture and I did learn quite a bit from it but I think I would have been more satisfied with a more general overview at the beginning and then more in depth analysis of the specific topics. I was shocked by how little of Lenin and Stalin actually made it into the book. They certainly weren't left out but neither were they biographed. One thing that did stand out as a rather skilled part of the book was the title and ongoing theme. I've read War and Peace a bit more than I'd like and am very familiar with the Natasha dance scene. Picking that scene as an example of the true 'Russian soul' was very apt. I wasn't necessarily thinking about it when I read W&P but it is a perfect example of how within every Russian, even the upper class, there is a native Russian soul that is a part of all. While this theme wasn't necessarily steady throughout, it was emergent in several areas; especially when reflecting how the Russian expatriates in the 20th century sorely missed their homeland.

Chiara Pagliochini says

« L'odore della terra russa è diverso, e queste sono cose che non si possono dimenticare... Un uomo ha un solo luogo di nascita, una sola patria, un solo paese – può avere un solo paese – e il luogo di nascita è il fattore più importante della sua vita. [...] Non ho lasciato la Russia di mia volontà, anche se c'era molto che non mi piaceva nella mia Russia e nella Russia in genere. Ma il diritto di criticare la Russia è mio, perché la Russia è mia e perché io l'amo, e non concedo questo diritto a nessuno straniero. » (Igor' Fëdorovi? Stravinskij)

Nella sua trattazione della cultura russa, Figes parte dall'idea secondo cui « una cultura è più di una tradizione. Non può certo essere contenuta in una biblioteca, come gli "otto volumi sottili" che gli esuli mettevano nel loro bagaglio. È qualcosa di viscerale, di emotivo, di istintivo, è una sensibilità che foggia una persona e la lega a un popolo e a un luogo ». Sulla base di questa premessa, egli intende dimostrare l'esistenza di « un temperamento russo, un insieme di costumi e di credenze innate » che sarebbero il filo

rosso della storia e della mentalità di questo popolo.

Una premessa che è stata variamente messa in discussione e che gli ha persino attirato la definizione di libro “*kitsch*”.

Tuttavia per chi, come me, si avvicina alla cultura russa per la prima volta, “*La Danza di Nataša*” rappresenta uno straordinario viaggio alla scoperta di costumi, storie e vicende umane di un popolo che non possiamo esimerci dal vedere come altro, irrimediabilmente fisso in un mito, in una sua esoticità.

Intrigante, divertente, scritto magnificamente, ricco di aneddoti interessanti e commoventi, questo saggio, che si legge come un romanzo, è stato un compagno di viaggio impagabile. Il coinvolgimento che suscita per la materia trattata a tale da spingere a un sempre maggiore approfondimento delle proprie conoscenze.

Per questo motivo e per il genuino piacere della sua lettura, mi sento di attribuirgli il massimo dei voti.

Heidi says

An engaging history of modern Russia told through its history of the arts, from the founding of the "dream city" of St. Petersburg in 1703 through to the Soviet era: music, architecture, theater, painting, poetry, novels... all interlaced with political, ethnic, and economic history, even religious history, although I was disappointed how little Judaism was mentioned. Complete with maps and color plates. It meanders a bit sometimes, from artist to artist, but I liked getting a broad, cultural picture of a country I know little about, and which is becoming so very prominent again on the world stage. Although, honestly, I picked this up after watching the BBC's "War and Peace" miniseries and feeling hungry for more history, less so because of recent news stories!

Susan says

I'm tempted to say that this is a great book because like Russian art it has a soul, but that sounds presumptuous since I've not an expert on any Russian art and I've never been to Russia. But I've been a fan of Russian literature--especially the great novels of the 19th century, and of Russian music and particularly of the Russian ballet and its offshoots in the West.

The book starts with an episode from War and Peace in which Natasha and her brother visit an retired army officer (their uncle) who lives in a cabin on the edge of the estate. During the visit Natasha unconsciously begins dancing to a peasant melody. The point is that she has the "soul of the Russian people" in her heart and even though she's the daughter of an aristocratic count she "understands" the culture of the Russian peasants. The book ends with an equally emotional scene: the return of Stravinsky to Russia in 1962 during the Khrushchev thaw. I remember that scene from US television coverage: Stravinsky arriving at the airport and also at a performance of The Rite of Spring at the Marinsky Theatre in what was then Leningrad. Both episodes represent a deep-seated emotional attachment to the land--something that seems to pervade every Russian art and which some of us (like me) find both fantastic and strangely appealing.

The intervening review of Russian literature, painting and other visual arts, architecture, music, opera, ballet, film, even science fiction in the period from the 18th century to the present is discussed, more or less chronologically, but more significantly set in the context of Russian history (including the war with Napoleon, the cultural conflict between Moscow and Petersburg, the influence of the church and of the peasants, the affect of the Mongol invasion as well as Russian's colonization of Asian lands, and finally of

the Soviet period and the influence of Russian émigrés in the west).

The organization was sort of like music: a theme and elaboration, with repetitions so the reader doesn't get lost. I found it confusing at first, but then found I enjoyed it.

Janet says

I found this a great, wide net for Russian culture--I read it before a trip to Russia, and despite Figes continuing to be controversial figure in Russian scholarship, no one ever questioned his thoroughness. A great great introduction to Russian history and culture.

The book was assigned reading for an alumni trip to Russia I took in 2006, and I was SO glad I'd tackled it--though it's a monster, to be sure. Easy reading, and divided thematically rather than chronologically, which prevents it from feeling like a slog. He mixes it up nicely into chapters like "The Peasant Marriage," "In Search of the Russian Soul" and so forth.

By the time I left for Russia, thirty years after having been a student there, I understood all kinds of things about Russian cultural history which enriched my trip 100%--for instance, I knew who the Sheremetevs were (all I'd known was that the poet Akhmatova lived in a wing of their palace in Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad). I understood what was behind the circle of incredible Russian composers and artists who all came up under the encouragement of Russophile critic Vladimir Stasov--Borodin, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Repin, Kramskoi, Vasnetsov, etc. I knew what the cultural significance of the Decemberists was, and how the victory against Napoleon colored everything that followed. Worth its weight. Though it would be cool if it were published into its component 7 smaller books, slipcased,

Jared says

'Natasha's Dance' has provided me a greater understanding of the Russian arts and culture that was previously lacking. I am not so naive as to think that reading a single book provides a perfect insight into what it is to be Russian. Moreover, this book adds depth to the otherwise one-dimensional events that are depicted in history books. I think that this quote (at the end of the book) from the Russian composer Stravinsky says a great deal:

‘The smell of the Russian earth is different, and such things are impossible to forget ... A man has one birthplace, one fatherland, one country –he can have only one country –and the place of his birth is the most important factor in his life. I regret that circumstances separated me from my fatherland, that I did not give birth to my works here and, above to my works here and, above all, that I was not here to help the new Soviet Union create its new music. I did not leave Russia of my own will, even though I disliked much in my Russia and in Russia generally. Yet the right to criticize Russia is mine, because Russia is mine and because I love it, and I do not give any foreigner that right.’

DIVIDED LOYALTIES

As with most cultures, the Russian people have numerous competing 'pulls' that attract them in opposite directions. Throughout the book, I noticed numerous poles that attract the Russian people:

* Culture of Europe vs Asiatic culture

- "Yet this sense of being part of Europe also made for divided souls. 'We Russians have two fatherlands: Russia and Europe,' Dostoevsky wrote."

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- "The Russians were uncertain about their place in Europe (they still are), and that ambivalence is a vital key to their cultural history and identity"

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- "'Let us Russians be Russians, not copies of the French"

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- (This is readily apparent in the ever-changing relative importance between St Petersburg - the 'window to the West' - and Moscow). "'Petersburg is our head, Moscow is our heart', went a Russian proverb."

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- "All these findings raised disturbing questions about the identity of the Russians. Were they Europeans or Asians? Were they the subjects of the Tsar or descendants of Genghiz Khan?"

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- "The Mongol occupation left a profound mark on the Russian way of life. As Pushkin wrote to Chaadaev in 1836, it was then that Russia became separated from the West. That history posed a fundamental challenge to the Russians' European self-identification:"

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* Well-to-do vs peasant life (both pride and contempt for peasants)

- "The 'going to the people' was a form of pilgrimage, and the type of person who became involved in it was similar to those who went in search of truth to a monastery. These young missionaries were riddled with the guilt of privilege."

-

- "We are the people's debtors and this debt weighs down our conscience."

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- "The educated classes were called upon to recognize their 'Russianness' and to turn towards the peasants as a cultural mission –educating them as citizens and reuniting Russia on the basis of a national literature and art."

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* Elites vs up-and-coming merchants

- "In Russia, the elites held the merchant class in utmost contempt; to the detriment of societal relations by poisoning a path towards capitalism."

*

* Organized religion vs peasant superstitions/sorcery

- "It is hard to overstress the importance of the fact that Russia received its Christianity from Byzantium and not from the West. It was in the spirit of the Byzantine tradition that the Russian Empire came to see itself as a theocracy, a truly Christian realm where Church and state were united."

-

- "Only a thin coat of Christianity had been painted over his ancient pagan folk culture."

-

* Desired end state vs reality that surrounds you

- (Gogol wrote) "'this is all a dream and it vanishes as soon as one shifts to what it really is in Russia'."

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- "According to Dostoevsky, truth is contained in reason and belief –one cannot be undermined by the other –and all true belief must be maintained in the face of all reason."

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- "In Dostoevsky's view, the ability to continue to believe in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence was a peculiarly Russian gift."

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* Importance of the individual vs collectivism

- "the greatest strength of the Russian people, and the thing that set them apart from the people of the West, was their voluntary surrender of the individual will to collective rituals and forms of life."

-

- (Collectivism even reflected in dance) "'There were no leading parts', Nijinska explained; 'each member would blend through the movement into the whole ... [and] the action of the separate characters would be expressed, not by each one individually, but rather by the action of the whole ensemble.' 150 It was the perfect ideal of the Russian peasantry."

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- "Dostoevsky once maintained that 'this ceaseless longing, which has always been inherent in the Russian people, for a great universal church on earth', was the basis of 'our Russian socialism'."

*

* Progress vs holding onto traditions

- "And he held to the conviction that the Old Believers were the last 'authentic Russians', whose way of life had not yet been disturbed by European ways."

-

- "Moscow's rise was the demise of its own provincial satellites, which spelt ruin for those gentry farmers, like the Ranevskys in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, who depended on these towns as consumers of their grain. They were unprepared for the international market which the railways opened up. Chekhov's play begins and ends with a train journey. The railway was a symbol of modernity: it brought in a new life and destroyed the old."

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* Use of other languages vs native Russian language

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* Desire to remain in Russia during trials vs desire to become emigres

- "In the preface to his memoirs Volkonsky voiced the exile's agony: Motherland! What a complex idea, and how difficult to catch. We love our motherland –who does not? But what is it we love? Something that existed? Or something that will be? We love our country. But where is our country? Is it any more than a patch of land? And if we are separated from that land, and yet in our imagination we can re-create it, can we really say that there is a motherland; and can we really say that there is exile?"

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- "In the 'Little Russias' of Berlin, Paris and New York the émigrés created their own mythic versions of the 'good Russian life' before 1917. They returned to a past that never was –a past, in fact, that had never been as good, or as 'Russian', as that now recalled by the émigrés."

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- "A culture is more than a tradition. It cannot be contained in a library, let alone the 'eight slim volumes' which the exiles packed up in their bags. It is something visceral, emotional, instinctive, a sensibility that shapes the personality and binds that person to a people and a place."

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* Pride in Russia vs self-comparisons to other peoples

- "The literary critic Nadezhdin (who published the First Letter in his journal *Telescope*) himself wrote in 1834: 'We [the Russians] have created nothing. There is no branch of learning in which we can show something of our own. There is not a single person who could stand for Russia in the civilization of the world.'"

-

* Consent of governed vs autocratic rule

- "Karamzin's History was dedicated to the Emperor Alexander –the reigning Tsar from the House of Romanov –and its vision was overtly monarchist. The moral lesson which he drew from the Godunov story –that elected rulers are never any good –was carefully attuned to the politics of Alexander's reign. Boris was a Russian Bonaparte." (Is this the beginning of Russia's possible aversion to democracy?)

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- "The Asiatic character of Russia's despotism became a commonplace of the nineteenth-century democratic intelligentsia and was also later used as an explanation for the Soviet system...The Russian autocratic tradition had many roots, but the Mongol legacy did more than most to fix the basic nature of its politics. The khans demanded, and mercilessly enforced, complete submission to their will from all their subjects, peasants and noblemen alike. Moscow's princes emulated the behaviour of the khans when they ousted them from the Russian lands and succeeded them as Tsars in the sixteenth century...The title 'Tsar' had been used by the last khan of the Golden Horde and for a long time the Russian terms for Tsar and khan were interchangeable. Even Genghiz Khan was rendered Genghiz Tsar."

CUSTOMS/TRADITIONS

* "Going to the banya (bath house) was an old Russian custom...The banya was believed to have special healing powers –it was called the 'people's first doctor' (vodka was the second, raw garlic the third)."

*

* "...the archaeologist Veselovsky traced the Russian folk taboos connected with the threshold (such as not to step on it or not to greet a person across it) to the customs and beliefs of the Golden Horde."

RUSSIAN VOCABULARY (MANY WORDS COME FROM OUTSIDE RUSSIA)

- "Many of the most basic Russian words have Tatar origins –loshad (horse), bazar (market), ambar (barn), sunduk (chest) and several hundred more."

- "But Turkic phrases also left their mark on the language of the street –perhaps most notably in those 'davai' verbal riffs which signal the intention of so many daily acts: 'davai poidem' ('Come on, let's go'), 'davai posidim' ('Come on, let's sit down'), and 'davai popem' ('Come on, let's get drunk')."

- "The Mongols had a sophisticated system of administration and taxation, from which the Russian state would develop its own structures, and this is reflected in the Tatar origins of many related Russian words like dengi (money), tamozhna (customs) and kazna (treasury)."

- "In Russian the word for 'red' (krasnyi) is connected with the word for 'beautiful' (krasivyi) –which explains, among many other things, the naming of Red Square."

- "The term 'Siberia' became synonymous in colloquial expressions with penal servitude, wherever it occurred, with savage cruelty (sibirnyi) and a harsh life (sibirshchina)."

- "Moreover, since virtually the whole material culture of society had been imported from the West, there were, as Pushkin commented, no Russian words for basic things: But pantaloons, gilet, and frock –These words are hardly Russian stock."

- "'Cossack' or 'quzzaq' is a Turkic word for horseman."

THINGS THAT I FOUND TO BE FASCINATING

* "At Kuskovo there was a horn band in which, to save time on the training of players, each musician was taught to play just one note. The number of players depended on the number of different notes in a tune; their sole skill lay in playing their note at the appropriate moment."

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* (Interesting that Stanislavsky invented method acting, such as used by Daniel Day Lewis or Heath Ledger. Method acting is a technique of acting in which an actor aspires to complete emotional identification with the part, and often don't break character.)

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* (Tolstoy was caught between the desire to live like (and understand) peasants and his familiarity with life among the elites of Russia.)

- "In many ways he only played at being a 'peasant'. When he went out for a walk or rode his horse he put on peasant garb –he was known throughout the world for his peasant shirt and belt, his trousers and bast shoes –but when he went to Moscow, or dined with friends, he dressed in tailored clothes."

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* "According to the 1835 Digest of Laws, a wife's main duty was to 'submit to the will of her husband' and to reside with him in all circumstances, unless he was exiled to Siberia."

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* "The young bride who arrived in this household was likely to be burdened with the meanest chores, the fetching and the cooking, the washing and the childcare, and generally treated like a serf. She would have to put up with the sexual advances of not just her husband, but his father, too, for the ancient peasant custom of snokhachestvo gave the household elder rights of access to her body in the absence of his son."

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* "Contrary to the popular belief today, the matrioshka has no roots in Russian folk culture at all. It was dreamed up in response to a commission from the Mamontovs to make a Russian version of the Japanese nesting doll."

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* (A certain Christian sect in Russia) "and, most exotic of them all, the 'Self-castrators' (Skoptsy), who believed that salvation came only with the excision of the instruments of sin."

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* (Pushkin died in the exact manner a fortune teller told him he would) "He was struck down by foreboding when a fortune-teller told him that he would be killed by a tall blond man (true, as it turned out), and he was notoriously superstitious about hares (a fact that may have saved his life in 1825 when a hare crossed his path on his estate near Pskov and made him superstitious about travelling to Petersburg to join the Decembrists on Senate Square)."

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* (Pushkin's great-grandfather was from Africa) "an Abyssinian who had been found at the palace of the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul and purchased by the Russian ambassador as a present for Peter the Great. A favourite at Peter's court, Gannibal was sent to study in Paris. He rose to become a major-general under the Empress Elizabeth, who granted him an estate with 1,400 serfs at Mikhailovskoe, near Pskov."

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* (Stick horses of children apparently have roots in sorcery) "It stood for the horse-stick on which the shaman rode to the spirit world in seances...In eastern Europe the hobby horse has a preternatural pedigree which belies its benign status in the Western nursery. The Hungarian taltos, or sorcerer, rode with magic speed on a reed horse –a reed between his legs –which in turn became the model of a peasant toy."

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* "Lev Kuleshov was the first director to use montage in the cinema –long before it was adopted in the West."

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* "The queue for the concert in Stravinsky's honour at the Great Hall of the Philharmonia was a living monument to the role of art in Russia and his own place in that sacred tradition: the queue had begun a year before and had developed as a complex social system, with people taking turns to stand in the line for a large block of seats."

Matthew says

Wonderful survey. I had never contemplated the major point about Russian culture being so influenced by Russia's Asianness, especially as cleaved to by its peasantry over many centuries. I guess Peter the Great wasn't so great after all. With all of his looking to the West, the peasantry won in the end.

Emma says

It has been a tour de force getting through this book, but so wonderful and rewarding. Figes covers everything and everyone; at times my lack of real knowledge of Russian history let me down, but as Natasha's Dance renders clearly, Russian culture is so rich and fascinating that there really was no time to get into the whys and wherefores of the Russian revolution and whatnot. (I think I picked up a fair bit of history peripherally from this book anyway). The book is chronological, starting from Peter the Great's demand for a more 'European' Russia and his construction of St Petersburg, and finishing up with Stravinsky's cathartic return to Russia in 1962. The book gave me so much context for understanding the works I've read already by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and a real taste of those I hadn't, like Gogol, Pasternak and Akhmatova, and made me want to see Petersburg and Moscow, like, rather badly, and read everything Dostoevsky and Nabokov have written. Figes makes this a page-turner; it took me such a long time to read because it was so dense (there's a lot to fit in) and it's pretty freaking long ... but he has a knack for finding the story in everything. I really enjoyed reading about the unique role of the serfs, the influence of Volkonsky and the Decembrists, poor sad old Anna Akhmatova, the humanism of Chekov, and about the post-revolutionary avant-garde - I had never really understood the difference before between that period of innovation and the later repressive control of artists under Stalin before. Anyway, this book will stay with me for a long time.
