

9-2013

Modernity, Melancholy, Memory, and Filth: New Perspectives on Russian and Soviet Cities

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Recommended Citation

Kirschenbaum, L. A. (2013). Modernity, Melancholy, Memory, and Filth: New Perspectives on Russian and Soviet Cities. *Journal of Urban History*, 39(5), 997-1002. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0096144213479328>

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Modernity, Melancholy, Memory, and Filth: New Perspectives on Russian and Soviet Cities

Journal of Urban History

XX(X) 1–6

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Katerina Clark (2011). *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. viii + 420 pp., halftones, notes, index, \$35.00 (cloth).

Donald Filtzer (2010). *The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia: Health, Hygiene, and Living Standards, 1943-1953*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xxx + 379 pp., figures, maps, tables, bibliography, index, \$116.00 (cloth).

Helena Goscilo and Stephen M. Norris, eds. (2008). *Preserving Petersburg: History, Memory, and Nostalgia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. xxi + 234 pp., photographs, notes, contributors, index, \$22.95 (paper), \$60.00 (cloth).

Mark Steinberg (2011). *Petersburg Fin de Siècle*. New Haven: Yale University Press. xi + 399 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography, index, \$45.00 (cloth).

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DOI: 10.1177/0096144213479328

In his reflections on “walking in the city,” Michel de Certeau contrasts two perspectives on New York City: the view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center and the view from the street. From the 110th floor, he is able, “like a god,” to read the city as “a text that lies before one’s eyes.” On the bustling street, by contrast, he finds that the intertwining paths of those “walking, wandering, or ‘window shopping’” “elude legibility.” On the streets, “the ordinary practitioners of the city”—walkers—transform the orderly, regular urban places envisioned by planners and builders into swarming, unpredictable spaces.¹ The choice of the World Trade Center as a vantage point adds an unintended layer of complexity and ambiguity to de Certeau’s argument, raising the question of how an unexpected and traumatic rupture of the cityscape affects “ordinary practitioners,” who, navigating the city in general compliance with the rules of the place, also follow their own desires, fears, and memories.

This street perspective offers a tantalizing but tricky agenda for urban historians. The view from above is clearly important, perhaps especially in Russia and the Soviet Union, where successive states intervened explicitly, and often violently, to construct cities in their own images; it is also readily accessible, available to be read in planning and administrative documents and in the grand (or aggrandizing) boulevards, squares, and buildings that materialized rulers’ ambitions and power.² By contrast, the life of the street is often more difficult to locate in the archives. Historians have developed, as the books under review demonstrate, innovative and inventive ways of seeing, hearing, and even smelling the street, of imagining pedestrians’ moods and sensations. All of these very different books offer readers virtual walking tours—a circumstance that suggested de Certeau’s reflections as an appropriate starting point for this review. Highlighting sites as diverse as cafés, cinemas, destroyed churches, refurbished palaces, outhouses, and cesspits, these strolls through fin-de-siècle Petersburg, Stalinist Moscow, postwar industrial cities, and

post-Soviet Petersburg open new perspectives on the limits of authoritarian states' power to control the street.

The dust jacket of Mark Steinberg's *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* features a photograph (also reproduced on p. 57) of a male worker wearing a visored cap, long coat, and high boots, strolling on a wide sidewalk, perhaps along the capital's central boulevard, Nevskii Prospect, engrossed in a newspaper. That the walking worker reads a newspaper is critical. Steinberg argues that the press not only reported the "disorderly spectacle" (82) of life in Petersburg, but was also part of it, indeed helped to create it. Thus, the image encapsulates both the method and themes of this remarkable book, which draws on a broad and sensitive reading of the Petersburg press in the years between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 to trace how a wide range of Petersburgers mapped and navigated their city—how they imagined and interpreted the anxieties, dangers, pleasures, illusions, and miseries of modern urban life.

Petersburg, as Steinberg emphasizes at the outset, "was never only a physical city" (10). The city owed its existence to Peter I who in 1703, in an act that has been variously mythologized as one of modernizing zeal, hubris, or ruthless vision, decreed the foundation of a new imperial city in the westernmost reaches of his empire, on the remote and inhospitable site where the Neva River empties into the Gulf of Finland. A vast literary tradition—the so-called Petersburg theme or text—grew up around the city and its contradictions. In the famous phrase of the poet Alexander Pushkin, Peter "cut a window through to Europe" (2). Or, in the equally famous phrase of the historian Nikolai Karamzin, he built a city on the "tears and corpses" (20) of the forced laborers who died constructing it. A glittering city of broad boulevards and neoclassical facades, and by the late nineteenth century, dirty, dark, dangerous industrial slums, Petersburg at once symbolized and embodied the promises and nightmares of modernity.

By the beginning of the twentieth century and particularly, Steinberg argues, after the Revolution of 1905, the vibrant (but still censored) Petersburg press gave voice to a "rising sense of moral panic" (132), at least among the "urban writers" who contributed to it. The individuals that Steinberg identifies as "urban writers" were predominately male but otherwise quite diverse—authors both well known and obscure, who "ran the gamut from monarchists to socialists and from religious to secular" (7). Steinberg lumps them together as "urban writers" because "they wrote *about* and *in* the public spaces of the city" (emphasis in original, 7). In a series of elegant thematic chapters, he traces their shared concerns, vocabularies, images, and conclusions. Drawing on the darkest images of both the Petersburg myth and the broader European discourse (with which Russians were well acquainted) that characterized "modern time" as "fractured, drifting, and sick" (4), these urban writers represented and participated in a public sphere that they themselves described as disordered, diseased, decadent, uncertain, anguished, disenchanting—to provide only a partial list. Theirs was a critique of modernity grounded in stories of the modern city: endless reports of pickpockets, shoplifters, and swindlers of all sorts who hid behind masks of respectability; evidence of apparent "epidemics" of suicides, random violence, hooliganism, and perverse sexuality; their own sense of "modern melancholy," of "killing time" at the cinema or the tavern, laughing ironically at the edge of the abyss.

Steinberg attributes the dark and darkening mood in part to the political disillusionment and disappointment that gripped urban writers as, by 1907, repression shattered revolutionary hopes. But he emphasizes that those experiencing the sickness and melancholy of the times diagnosed it in more existential terms as a symptom of modernity, "a sign that society itself was dying" (119). Russians, Steinberg notes, were hardly alone in making such a diagnosis; however, in Russia "these worries were more widespread in society, more public, and ultimately more pessimistic" (158) than in the West. The cause of this deeper gloom, he posits, was not Russian political or economic backwardness, but rather "the opposite. . . . Russians, especially in St. Petersburg, felt modernity's crisis with particular intensity and clarity" (159). While tsarist

repression generated political opponents, Steinberg's close-up view of Petersburg's streets suggests that it was less widespread faith in the power of science, reason, and the proletariat to transform the world than "despairing evaluations of contemporary society" (270) that accounts for the demise of the imperial state.

Katerina Clark's *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, shifts the scene to the Soviet capital some fourteen years after the Revolution, and traces Bolshevik efforts to transform Moscow into the embodiment of rational, optimistic modernity. Reworking Filofei of Pskov's sixteenth-century claim, popularized in the nineteenth century, that Moscow was the "third Rome," the spiritual and imperial successor to Rome and Constantinople, Clark labels Soviet Moscow the "fourth Rome," arguing that the Bolsheviks sought to make the city the world capital of a transnational socialist culture, a "beacon to guide Europe out of the capitalist and fascist darkness" (25). Clark's wide-ranging study—she examines architecture, literature, theater, film, journalism, photography, painting, and sculpture—effectively complicates the "standard account" of the Stalinist 1930s which emphasizes "a turn to Great Russian nationalism . . . by pointing to a simultaneous, if more precariously flourishing, internationalism" (7). She loosely structures her analysis around four "cosmopolitan patriots"—the writers Mikhail Kol'tsov, I'lia Erenburg, and Sergei Tret'iakov and the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein—who actively proselytized "for the cult of Moscow" (34) but nonetheless "saw themselves as part of a pan-European intellectual space" (31). Focusing on the "evolution" of Soviet cosmopolitanism, Clark identifies a transition from the neoclassicism that dominated the first half of the 1930s, and was "exemplified in the attempt to rebuild Moscow as a classical city" (218), to the romanticism of the second half of the decade, in which poetry, painting, opera, drama, and film eclipsed architecture in cultural importance.

The city of Moscow functions in this larger argument more as symbol than space—an emphatically "planned city," designed to rival any world capital. Clark thus begins her tour of Stalinist Moscow not with street life but with street names. The 1935 plan for a "new Moscow" envisioned a broader, straighter Gor'kii Street (the former and current Tverskaia Street renamed in 1932 in honor of the author Maxim Gor'kii) flanked by grand buildings. Gor'kii Street was to intersect a new (never constructed) Il'ich [Lenin] Avenue (Allei Il'icha), where "ideology, architecture (or urban design), and literature all came together in one place" (81). (Clark also underscores the symbolic resonance of the intersection of Gor'kii Street and Marx Prospect; however, Okhotnyi Riad was renamed Marx Prospect only in 1961, during the post-Stalin thaw.)³ As the focal point of Il'ich Avenue, the plan called for a gigantic Palace of Soviets topped by a colossal statue of Vladimir Lenin—built on the ruins of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Such plans, as Clark notes, were "utopian," and often unrealized. But she is less interested in the "possibility of slippage between text and interpretation" (28) than in the text itself. Indeed the inattentive reader might miss the fact that, although the church was demolished, the Palace itself "never got far beyond its foundations" (91).

In contrast to Steinberg, who examines efforts to map and interpret the seething, fractured, dangerous life of Petersburg's streets, Clark highlights the Soviet regime's efforts to turn Moscow into an orderly text, a "lettered city." She goes so far as to argue that "Moscow was remodeled less in the interests of modernization, efficiency, and public health than in order to realize a new conception of the capital as a template for the Soviet cultural order" (95). While propaganda produced for foreign consumption, such as the 1931 photo essay "24 Hours in the Life of a Moscow Worker Family," might highlight sparkling new day care centers, communal laundries, and department stores, Clark suggests that the regime—and perhaps the intellectuals, architects, and writers who "pushed for a more cosmopolitan culture while still committed to the Soviet state" (30)—had little interest in ordinary Muscovites' domestic comforts. Unlike a visiting German architect who lamented the decision to build a "grandiose" metro rather than workers' apartments, Moscow planners, Clark concludes, "best realized" their vision of utopia in the

extravagant, not to say vulgar, marble-sheathed metro stations, which together constituted a sort of “ideal city, except that no one actually lived there” (128).

The impact of Soviet urban planning on those who lived in Soviet cities emerges as a central question of Donald Filtzer’s *The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia*, which picks up chronologically where Clark leaves off, tracing developments in wartime and postwar industrial centers, including Moscow. With Filtzer, we enter a world very different from the privileged realm of Moscow intellectuals or the opulently appointed Moscow metro. He draws on sanitary inspection reports, demographic data, and household budget surveys to chart developments in public sanitation, public health, nutrition, and infant mortality in a dozen “hinterland” industrial regions that, with the partial exception of Moscow province, were spared direct war damage. Five detailed chapters copiously equipped with graphs and tables document changes in both the urban environment—the provision (or more commonly, absence) of sewage systems, clean water, and hygiene facilities (bathhouses and laundries)—and in public health and welfare as reflected in changing diets as well as infant mortality rates. Although, as Filtzer notes at the outset, the sources provide no insight into individual lives, the aggregate picture he provides is fascinating, by turns eye-opening and stomach-turning.

Sanitary conditions, as Filtzer amply documents, varied from city to city; still, his description of postwar Molotov (formerly and currently Perm’) in the Urals, a city that industrialized before and especially during World War II, provides a clear illustration of his assertion that most urban residents lived “almost permanently surrounded by filth” (19). “Most streets and roads,” he notes, “were unpaved and without sidewalks.” Worse, inspectors deemed the city’s thirty-year-old sewage system “totally dilapidated.” Breakdowns occurred frequently, “and it was not uncommon for the city’s central thoroughfare to be flooded with human excrement” (39–40). Well into the late postwar period, most of the Soviet urban population lacked flush toilets, relying on an insufficient number of often poorly maintained outhouses or cesspits; “as late as 1954, there were still streets in the center of Molotov with only two cesspits for every three residential buildings” (50). Because most housing lacked running water—even in privileged Moscow, about a third of the population had no indoor plumbing—maintaining basic hygiene “required a monumental effort”: “People had to haul cold water up in buckets from street pump. Heating water was not easy, since most people still relied on wood-burning stoves and fuel was in short supply. . . . To make matters worse, the country suffered a serious soap shortage, which began to ease only at the very end of the 1940s” (127).

While such conditions resembled those of western European cities forty to eighty years earlier, the Soviet state, Filtzer emphasizes, responded in particularly Stalinist ways. Improved housing, nutrition, sanitation, and water supply came much more slowly than in the West. Filtzer explains the persistence of hazardous conditions into and beyond the mid-1950s as the result of a number of factors: the need to repair extensive war damage, the “Stalinist regime’s near-total disregard for the welfare of its citizens” (35), and most fundamentally, the dysfunctional Stalinist economic system. Filtzer offers the state’s inability to control water pollution as a vivid example of disregard for human welfare compounded by the system’s waste and inefficiency. Guided, much like their capitalist counterparts, by “self-interest,” which in the Soviet context meant doing “whatever you need to do in order to fulfill the plan” (106), factory managers cut corners, falsified reports, and gamed the system—producing defective or poor-quality products, and paying fines rather than spending money to treat sewage or even capture valuable industrial materials before they were discharged into local waterways. Indeed, the plans, machines, and chemicals necessary to reduce water pollution were often impossible to acquire. Such obstacles notwithstanding, the state managed to implement new (and relatively cheap) public health measures—antibiotics, early diagnosis, health education—that, beginning in 1943, significantly reduced urban infant mortality rates. The Soviet state did not, however, reduce the overall misery of

urban life, a circumstance that underscores the limits of both its concern for public welfare and its power to control the urban environment.

Helena Goscilo and Stephen M. Norris's collection of essays *Preserving Petersburg* takes us from the themes of modernity and modernization to a post-Soviet (postmodern?) emphasis on nostalgia, memory, and loss. The contributors, historians and literary scholars, explore the wide variety of ways Petersburgers and Leningraders interacted with and constructed the city as museum or myth. Thus, for example, Julie Buckler chronicles how "written and material tributes memorialize aspects of city life," including cemeteries, churches, and bridges "that fell victim" (40) to neglect or catastrophe. Goscilo's contribution, "Unsaintly St. Petersburg?" surveys three centuries of visual representations of the city, assessing how such images both reinforced and challenged the literary Petersburg myth: while works by Mstislav Dobuzhinskii gave visual form to dark fears also expressed in the fin de siècle Petersburg press, Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva's contemporary engravings eschewed the "partisanship that characterized the literature" (76).

Several contributors explore how Petersburgers and Leningraders drew on the city's mythology in order to cope with personal trauma and loss. Zara Torlone argues that for Osip Mandelstam, contributing to the long tradition in Russian poetry of identifying Petersburg with Rome provided "a means of understanding his own city and his own time" (89). Similarly, Vladimir Khazan argues that in émigré poetry, the Petersburg text served the "therapeutic" purpose of "affirming native rights to the appellation of a Russian writer" for those who had left their native land (120). Cynthia Simmons suggests that during the World War II blockade, Leningraders' sense of the city's "special status" as the "most 'civilized' of Russian cities . . . had the power, for some, to reaffirm humanity and transcend the horrors of war" (179).

Norris's contribution, "Strolls Through Postmodern Petersburg," takes us back to the street, as at once a symbol of state power and a site of disorderly spectacle. Following President Vladimir Putin as he led visiting foreign dignitaries on a walking tour of Petersburg during its tercentennial celebration in 2003, Norris describes how presenting "the entire city as a historical museum" (212) required a profound, and therefore necessarily temporary, disruption of life in the city, as authorities shut down the airport, cordoned off sections of the city, closed buildings, and even encouraged locals to leave town. Moreover, the forty billion rubles (approximately US\$1.2 billion) spent to transform the historic center into a "Potemkin village dressed up for its role as a foreign policy instrument" had little impact on neighborhoods just off Nevskii Prospect, the "everyday" city, which "remained dirty and disorganized" (213).

More recently in Moscow, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior—razed on Stalin's orders in 1931 and "resurrected" between 1994 and 2000—has emerged as a contested symbol of the post-Soviet state's power. As I completed this review, three members of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot were found guilty of "hooliganism driven by religious hatred" for staging a performance/anti-Putin political protest at the church.⁴ Reconstructed as "an act of historical restitution for the sins of the Soviet regime against its people and the Orthodox Church," the Cathedral also offered a powerful and, it turned out, dangerous site for challenging the political forces it was meant to legitimize.⁵ In Putin's Russia, where guerrilla punk rockers can be jailed for up to seven years, and protestors can be fined up to 300,000 rubles (about \$9,000) for participating in unauthorized demonstrations, the urban street nonetheless remains unruly.

Notes

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92, 97, 93.
2. See, e.g., James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Albert J. Schmidt, *The Architecture and Planning of Classical Moscow: A Cultural History* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989); Blair A. Ruble, *Leningrad:*

- Shaping a Soviet City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); W. Bruce Lincoln, *Sunlight at Midnight: St. Petersburg and the Rise of Modern Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Karl D. Qualls, *From Ruins to Reconstruction: Urban Identity in Soviet Sevastopol after World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).
3. "Ulitsy Moskvyy," <http://mosopen.ru/streets> (accessed August 19, 2012); Timothy J. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 554.
 4. "Pussy Riot Found Guilty of Hooliganism," *The Guardian*, August 17, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/aug/17/pussy-riot-found-guilty-hooliganism> (accessed August 19, 2012).
 5. Ekaterina V. Haskins, "Russia's Postcommunist Past: The Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the Reimagining of National Identity," *History and Memory* 21, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 27. On the symbolic importance of the Cathedral as a site of protest, see defendant Ekaterina Samutsevich's final statement, <http://www.cogita.ru/dokumenty/ekaterina-samucevich.-poslednee-slovo>; in English, <http://chtodelat.wordpress.com/2012/08/08/yekaterina-samutsevich-closing-statement/> (accessed August 19, 2012).

Author Biography

Lisa A. Kirschenbaum is professor of history at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Her publications include *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (2000) and *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments* (2006).