



# Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia

*By Orlando Figes*



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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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## **Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia By Orlando Figes Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Even if one takes nothing else away from this elegant, tightly focused survey of Russian culture, it's impossible to forget the telling little anecdotes that University of London history professor Figes (*A People's Tragedy*) relates about Russia's artists, writers, musicians, intellectuals and courtiers as he traces the cultural movements of the last three centuries. He shares Ilya Repin's recollection of how peasants reacted to his friend Leo Tolstoy's fumbling attempts to join them in manual labor ("Never in my life have I seen a clearer expression of irony on a simple peasant's face"), as well as the three sentences Shostakovich shyly exchanged with his idol, Stravinsky, when the latter returned to the Soviet Union after 50 years of exile ("`What do you think of Puccini?' `I can't stand him,' Stravinsky replied. `Oh, and neither can I, neither can I'"). Full of resounding moments like these, Figes's book focuses on the ideas that have preoccupied Russian artists in the modern era: Just what is "Russianness," and does the quality come from its peasants or its nobility, from Europe or from Asia? He examines canonical works of art and literature as well as the lives of their creators: Tolstoy, Tchaikovsky, Chagall, Stanislavsky, Eisenstein and many others. Figes also shows how the fine arts have been influenced by the Orthodox liturgy, peasant songs and crafts, and myriad social and economic factors from Russian noblemen's unusual attachments to their peasant nannies to the 19th-century growth of vodka production. The book's thematically organized chapters are devoted to subjects like the cultural influence of Moscow or the legacy of the Mongol invasion, and with each chapter Figes moves toward the 1917 revolution and the Soviet era, deftly integrating strands of political and social history into his narrative. This is a treat for Russophiles and a unique introduction to Russian history.

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From Library Journal

Figes (history, Univ. of London; *A People's Tragedy*) describes the twists and turns of Russian history through cultural and artistic events from the founding of Rus in the 12th century through the Soviet era. He uses Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as a centerpiece of art imitating life. The title of Figes's book comes from the scene in which Natasha Rostov and her brother Nikolai are invited by their "uncle" to a rustic cabin to listen to him play Russian folk music on his guitar. Natasha instinctively begins a folk dance that is prompted by "unknown feelings in her heart." Tolstoy would have us believe that "Russia may be held together by unseen threads of native sensibilities," writes Figes. Nowhere is the clash between the European culture of the upper class and the Russian culture of the peasantry more evident. "The complex interactions between these two worlds had a crucial influence on the national consciousness and on all the arts of the 19th century." This interaction is a major feature of this book, which traces the formation of a culture. The writing style is distinctly nonacademic, making for a very enjoyable read. Recommended for academic and public libraries.

Harry Willems, Southeast Kansas Lib. Syst., Iola

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From [Booklist](#)

The author of *A People's Tragedy* (1997) takes on the massive task of giving historical perspective to Russian culture and is--for the most part--successful. He manages fairly well to balance hundreds of great names, from Pushkin to Nabokov, with those that are less known to the general public, although he gives short shrift to early twentieth-century Silver Age writers like Blok and Bely. The Futurists, with the exception of Mayakovsky, are barely mentioned. Against this history-by-personality Figes contrasts European St. Petersburg and Russian Moscow. Large sections treat the cultural influences of the peasantry, the Mongols, and the Orthodox Church. The chapter on the Soviet period is elegiac (to put it mildly), and there's a wistfulness to the chapter on Russian emigre culture in Berlin and Paris. However, other than

mentioning film director Andrei Tarkovsky, Figes doesn't seem to care much about Russian culture of the past 40 years. Perhaps a second volume is forthcoming that will document the history of Russian culture into the twenty-first century. *Frank Caso*

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## **Users Review**

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As people who live in the particular modest era should be up-date about what going on or data even knowledge to make these individuals keep up with the era that is always change and move forward. Some of you maybe will update themselves by looking at books. It is a good choice for yourself but the problems coming to an individual is you don't know which you should start with. This *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* is our recommendation to make you keep up with the world. Why, since this book serves what you want and wish in this era.

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