



Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia

By Orlando Figes

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From the award-winning author of *The Whisperers*, Orlando Figes *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* is a dazzling history of Russia's mighty culture. Orlando Figes' enthralling, richly evocative history has been heralded as a literary masterpiece on Russia, the lives of those who have shaped its culture, and the enduring spirit of a people. 'Wonderfully rich ...magnificent and compelling ...a delight to read' Antony Beevor 'A tour de force by the great storyteller of modern Russian historians ...Figes mobilizes a cast of serf harems, dynasties, politburos, libertines, filmmakers, novelists, composers, poets, tsars and tyrants ...superb, flamboyant and masterful' Simon Sebag-Montefiore, *Financial Times* 'Awe-inspiring ...Natasha's Dance has all the qualities of an epic tragedy' *Mail on Sunday* 'It is so much fun to read that I hesitate to write too much, for fear of spoiling the pleasures and surprises of the book' *Sunday Telegraph* 'Magnificent ...Figes is at his exciting best' *Guardian* 'Breathtaking ...The title of this masterly history comes from *War and Peace*, when the aristocratic heroine, Natasha Rostova, finds herself intuitively picking up the rhythm of a peasant dance ...One of those books that, at times, makes you wonder how you have so far managed to do without it' *Independent on Sunday* 'Thrilling, dizzying ...I would defy any reader not to be captivated' *Literary Review* Orlando Figes is Professor of History at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of *Peasant Russia, Civil War, A People's Tragedy*, *Natasha's Dance*, *The Whisperers* and *Just Send Me Word*. His books have been translated into over twenty languages.

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

- Sales Rank: #4185962 in Books
- Brand: imusti
- Published on: 2003-09-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.80" h x 1.38" w x 5.12" l, 1.10 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 768 pages



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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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