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**Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia.*
New York: Picador, 2003.**

Reviewed by Mariana Tepfenhart

Orlando Figes is the author of many best-selling books and a professor of history at the University of London. He is also a contributor to such major newspapers as The New York Times and The Washington Post.

Natasha's Dance received outstanding reviews from some of the most important newspapers and literary personalities of the United States and Great Britain. "A sweeping cultural survey of Russia ... thought provoking" (The Economist), "A big bold interpretative cultural history" (Foreign Affairs), "Stunning and ambitious" (The Atlantic Monthly), "Staggering" (Los Angeles Times), "Captivating" (The Washington Post) "Breathtaking" (Independent on Sunday), and "Awesome" (The Times). And the list goes on and on. It is difficult to find new words to express admiration for this book.

The title of the book was inspired by a famous scene in Tolstoy's masterpiece, *War and Peace*. Natasha Rostov, an aristocrat from the elite society of St Petersburg, visits her uncle who lives in a wooden cabin in the forest. There she is treated to Russian specialties and folk music. When the music performed by the serfs of her uncle starts, Natasha instinctively starts to dance, although she was totally unfamiliar with this style. Tolstoy's idea was that there is a national consciousness that surpasses class differences and unites a people. Like Tolstoy, Figes is interested in presenting the inner life of the nation as it is perceived not only through monuments of art, but also in customs, beliefs, religion, myths, habits that were passed down from generation to generation.

Figes divided his book into eight chapters that cover the time period from Peter the Great to Brezhnev. Each one of them focuses on a specific theme. The author is not so much interested in following the exact chronology as in rendering the main trends of a period. To achieve this, he uses different individual lives as memories that would define a certain period.

The first chapter, European Russia, deals with St. Petersburg, Peter's "paradise." The new capital of the empire was built with specific instructions from the tsar regarding the style, the construction materials and even the colors. It was intended to be "a negation of medieval Muscovy," a city rooted in spiritual traditions of Eastern Orthodoxy, dark and backward. St. Petersburg was very European, vast, with bold colors. In terms of scale and grandeur, St. Petersburg's magnificent waterfront has few equals. The canals and rivers are like mirrors, reflecting facades of the palaces.

The city offers a fusion of architectural styles but the author focuses on The Fountain House, the palace of Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetev, one of the richest men in the world.

The palace was decorated with European wall paper, sculptures, and paintings and had a library with over 20,000 books. It was not only a residence but a cultural center of the city where concerts and plays were performed on a regular basis.

Peter's reforms generated a huge debate regarding the identity of the Russians. Do they belong to the West or to the East? Peter was revered and eulogized by the liberals who envisaged him as a champion of light against darkness. The Westernizers, as they were known, considered Peter a hero who took the country from a backward stage to a modern era in a record time. For the educated Russians the West was their ideal, the source of inspiration. Russia should develop in the context of the Western civilization, not in opposition to it.

The Slavophiles considered that Peter destroyed the true principle and way of life of the Russian people. One of the Slavophiles, Alexander Herzen, a nineteenth century writer and philosopher, said that Petersburg is an artificial copy of the West, and that it "differs from all other European towns by being like them all" (Figes, 9). The West was corrupt and false. Gogol stated that Paris had "only a surface glitter that canceled an abyss of fraud and greed" (Figes, 65). For the Slavophiles, the Russian future lay in the return to native principle, in overcoming the dying West.

The year 1812 marked a turning point in the cultural trends of Russia. It is the year when Tsar Alexander I defeated Napoleon, after a long and devastating war. But disenchantment with the French culture started earlier, during the reign of Catherine the Great. Although she considered herself an enlightened monarch and was in contact with the most important philosophers of the time, the bloodshed of the French Revolution turned her against the French and their Enlightenment.

Alexander I, Catherine's grandson, was also educated in the spirit of the Enlightenment, but he also changed when he saw the consequences of the French Revolution and, later, the imperialistic policy of Napoleon Bonaparte. The year 1812 brought a patriotic climate. The use of French was frowned upon. Fashion, house decorations, entertainment, cuisine, music, literature and art had to be Russian. There was a conscious effort to assert Russianness. It was the beginning of a quest for Russian nationhood.

The officers who accompanied Alexander to Paris realized Russia's backwardness and its lack of basic rights. They wanted a constitutional monarchy. Those officers were disappointed with Tsar Alexander, who gave the French a very liberal constitution, but not the Russians. They formed a revolutionary group that came to be known as Decembrists. The rebellion failed because they lacked strong leadership and had little social backing for their ideas, which shows the febleness of the Russian middle class at that time.

The next chapter focuses on Moscow. After the building of St. Petersburg, the population of this old capital declined and it became more a provincial city. Pushkin compared the city to a faded dowager queen, in purple mourning clothes, obliged to curtsy before a new empress (Figes, 153). But many looked at the city as the embodiment of the spirit of the old Rus. For instance, Mussorgsky found Moscow to be a “realm of fairy tales” for its Russianness (Figes, 175). Moscow was a Russian city while St. Petersburg was a foreign city. The difference between Moscow and St. Petersburg is well defined by Gogol:

Petersburg is an accurate, punctual kind of person, a perfect German and he looks at everything in a calculated way. Before he gives a party he will look into his accounts. Moscow is a Russian nobleman, and if he is going to have a good time, he will go all the way until he drops, and he won't worry about how much he's got in his pockets. Moscow does not like halfway measures.... Petersburg likes to tease Moscow for his awkwardness and lack of taste. Moscow reproaches Petersburg because he does not know to speak Russian... Russia needs Moscow, Petersburg needs Russia. (Figes, 157)

The chapter “The Peasant Marriage” presents life in the country, the patriarchal nature of the peasant family and its impact on the culture. Traditionally, the rights of husband over wife were enforced through the Church, customs and the civil laws. The husband had absolute authority over the family. According to the Digest Laws of 1835 the duty of the wife was to “submit to the will of the husband” and to stay with him under any circumstances (Figes, 251).

Wife beatings were not only common but recommended. The 16th century manual for the household, *Domostroi*, contains rules of how to tame the wife and keep her obedient. There were proverbs, with advice and justifications for violence. For instance:

1. Beat your wife like a fur coat, then there will be less noise (Figes, 252).
2. A wife is nice twice: when she is brought in the house (as a bride) and when she is carried out of it to her grave (Figes, 252).

The same chapter introduces the reader to a new trend in Russia and Europe, the neo-nationalists. The artists of this trend are fascinated with the folk art, primitive and exotic elements. The trend is exemplified by the famous Ballets Russes--The Firebird, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*.

The Rite of Spring, presented in Paris, 1913, was conceived as a re-creation of pagan human sacrifice. The music was composed by Igor Stravinsky, costumes by Nikolai Roerich -- an artist of prehistoric Slavs, and the choreography was created by the world-

renowned ballet dancer, Nijinsky. It was powerful, exotic and shocking. The West had never seen anything like this.

Chapter 5, “In Search of the Russian Soul,” is dedicated to the influence of Christianity in Russia. The Russians formally accepted Christianity from Constantinople around 988. The Byzantine influence was not limited to the Christian church but permeated all aspects of social and cultural life. Some church historians argued that religion retained a superficial hold on the masses who remained heathens in their daily practices and convictions. The author also presents different interpretations of concepts like death, immortality and God, as they were perceived by writers like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekov and others.

The influence of the Mongols in Russian history is the focus of Chapter 6. For over 200 years they ruled Russia. There is no consensus regarding the role of the Mongols in Russian history. Some point to the devastation and the destruction brought by the Mongols. Others proclaimed the fundamental affiliation of Russia with Asia. They emphasized the transforming of Russia from weak and divided to a powerful autocratic state. It was also a reaction against the rejection of the Russians by the West; they were labeled “Asiatic barbarians.” The intelligentsia turned back to the ancient times to stress their Scythian roots and be proud of them. They saw the world of the Scythians as a realm of spiritual beauty which could be a source for the regeneration of the West.

Chapter 7 deals with World War I, the Russian Revolution, World War II and Stalin’s terror. Through the life and work of Anna Akhmatova, the reader is introduced to the events that destroyed an entire civilization, to the harsh conditions under which people lived during the wars and the Bolshevik regime. Unlike others who fled the country, Akhmatova remained and struggled to survive the ordeal. She was a symbol of endurance and human dignity. The fate of those who left the country is the topic of the last chapter. The author traces the lives of some of them, their alienation, their longing for Russia and poverty. The Russia they knew was no longer. They lived with their memories.

Natasha’s Dance is superbly written and documented. The style resembles more a fiction book than a history book, but the reader will derive more information about Russia from this book than from a regular text book.