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BACKGROUND

HISTORY

On a warm August afternoon in 1782, a large crowd gathered along the Neva River's south embankment. On a balcony above, Empress Catherine appeared and dedicated to St Petersburg its newest monument: the Bronze Horseman, a soaring likeness of the city's founder, Peter the Great, commanding a half-wild steed. Immortalised in the words of Pushkin, 'Behold the image sit and ride, upon his brazen horse astride.'

CITY BY THE SEA

Precocious Prince

For three centuries, Moscow hosted Russia's ruler tsars. The onion-domed capital of the Ivans was shrouded in mystery and intrigue. The precocious Peter never fitted in.

Born in 1672, Peter was the son of Tsar Alexey I and his second wife Natalya Narishkina. He was one of 16 siblings. His spindly frame grew to be an imposing 2m tall and he suffered from a twitchy form of epilepsy. He loved ditching the claustrophobic Kremlin and traipsing through the countryside with his chums, staging mock military manoeuvres and sailing into make-believe naval battles. When his mother arranged a marriage for him to secure the family's aristocratic connections, the teenager reluctantly consented. But a few years later he sent his first wife to a nunnery and took up with a Lithuanian peasant girl, Catherine I, whom he adored and married.

Peter was also exceptional for his insatiable curiosity about the outside world. He spent long hours in the city quarter for foreign merchants, who regaled the young prince with tales of the wonders of the new modern age. Once on the throne, he became the first tsar to venture beyond the border. Travelling in disguise, Peter and a raucous Russian entourage crisscrossed the continent, meeting with monarchs, dining with dignitaries and carousing with commoners. He recruited admirals, academics and artisans to apply their skill in his service. Peter was more than ever convinced that Russians were still living in a dark age. He vowed to replace superstition with science, backwardness with progress, East with West.

Peter abruptly ended his European expedition when news came of a Kremlin coup. His claim to the throne was illegitimate, some whispered. After his father died, the families of the two tsarinas clashed over the royal legacy: the Miloslavsky clan claimed lineage back to Ivan and represented the best of old Muscovy, while the upstart Narishkins were of recent Tatar and distant Scottish bloodlines. When he was only 10 years old, Peter watched in horror as his uncle was murdered by a Moscow mob, stirred by family rivalry. Eventually, a joint settlement was reached by which the boy shared the throne with his dim-witted half-brother, while his ambitious older stepsister acted as regent. In 1689, at the age of 17, Peter was ready: he consigned his sister to a nunnery and declared himself as tsar. Old Muscovy's resentment of this act prompted the coup, which now brought Peter back from Europe.

Enough was enough. Peter began to impose his strong will on Russia. He vengefully punished the plotters, sending more than 1000 to their death and instilling fear in many thousands. He humiliated and subdued the old elite, forcing aristocrat elders to shave their beards and wear Western clothes. He subordinated the Orthodox Church to earthly political authority, and banished Old Believers who cursed him as the Antichrist. He upended the established social order, forbidding arranged marriages and promoting the humble to high rank. He even changed the date of New Year's Day – from September to January. By now, the undisputed tsar had grown to despise the old capital, and was ready to start afresh.

ESSENTIAL READING

Here's your syllabus for St Petersburg History 101.

- *Sunlight at Midnight* (D Bruce Lincoln) Focusing on the colourful characters of the imperial period and the dramatic events leading up to the revolution, this definitive history is at once highly readable and academically rigorous.
- *Peter the Great: A Biography* (Lindsey Hughes) Never pulling punches in her detailed retelling of his less-than-laudable personal life and his often barbaric childishness, Hughes manages to present both the genius and failings of Peter I.
- *Pushkin's Buttons* (Serena Vitale) A fascinating account of the duel that killed the national bard.
- *Nicholas and Alexandra* (Robert Massey) Part love story and part political thriller, Massey's historical account gives the nitty-gritty on the royal family, Rasputin and the resulting revolution.
- *Ten Days That Shook the World* (John Reed) This classic eyewitness account of the Russian Revolution by American journalist John Reed makes for a fascinating read.
- *Hope Against Hope* (Nadezhda Mandelstam) The wife of poet Osip Mandelstam wrote this memoir about their lives as dissidents in Stalinist Russia. The title is a play on words, as *nadezhda* means 'hope' in Russian.
- *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (Harrison Salisbury) This forensic reconstruction is not for those with a passing interest in the blockade, but for those who want to vicariously suffer through the darkest hours of St Petersburg.

Great Northern War

Peter was anxious to turn Russia Westward, and he saw the Baltic Sea as the channel for change. The problem was that Sweden already dominated the region. It had been more than 400 years since Russia's medieval hero prince, Alexander Nevsky, had defeated the Swedes near the site of Peter's expanding ambition. The territory, however, had long ago passed out of Russian influence. In 1700 Peter put his new army to the test against the powerful Swedish Empire, and the Great Northern War was on. For the next 20 years northern Europe's modernising autocrats, Charles II and Peter, fought for supremacy over the eastern Baltic.

To Peter's dismay, his troops were badly beaten in their first engagement at the Battle of Narva in Estonia, by a smaller, more adept Swedish force. But Russia found allies in Poland, Saxony and Denmark, who diverted Charles' attention. Peter used the opportunity to revamp his army and launch his navy. He established a small Baltic foothold on the tiny Isle of Hares (Zayachy Island) at the mouth of the Neva River, and used it as a base to rout a nearby Swedish garrison. This primitive outpost fort would become Peter's northern capital.

By the time Charles tried to retake the territory, Peter commanded a formidable fighting force. Russia's first naval victory came at the Battle of Hanko, where a galley fleet overwhelmed a Swedish squadron and secured Russian control over the Neva and access to the Gulf. His

1672

Peter Alexeyevich Romanov is born in Moscow to Alexey Mikhailovich and his second wife Natalya Narishkina. He grows up to be known as Peter the Great.

1703

On 27 May Peter the Great establishes the Peter & Paul Fortress on Zayachy Island, thus founding the new city of Sankt Pieter Burkh, Russia's 'window to the West'.

1712–14

At the behest of Peter I, government institutions begin to move from Moscow, and St Petersburg assumes the administrative and ceremonial role as the Russian capital.

1725

Thirteen years after St Petersburg was declared the new capital, its population has grown to 40,000 and as much as 90% of all foreign trade passes through its port.

1728

After the death of Peter I and two years of rule by his wife, his grandson Peter II returns the Russian capital back to Moscow.

1732

Empress Anna reverses the decision of Peter II and moves the capital to St Petersburg, presiding over the recommencement of the city's construction and development.

military chief and boyhood friend, Alexander Menshikov, ripped off a string of impressive battlefield victories, further extending Russian presence on the Baltic coast and causing his Scandinavian foe to flee. Like the last sardine at a smorgasbord, the Swedish empire expired. The Great Northern War shifted the balance of power in the Baltic to the advantage of Peter's Russia. Hostilities were officially concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Nystad, in 1721, which formally ceded Sweden's extensive eastern possessions to Russia, including its new capital city, St Petersburg.

Peter's Paradise

Peter did not wait for the war to end before he started building. The wooden palisade encampment on Hares' Isle became the red-brick Peter & Paul Fortress (p113). In June 1703 Peter gave the site a name – Sankt Pieter Burkh, in his favourite Dutch tongue and after his patron saint, who stands guard before the gates to paradise.

There was a reason why until now the area had only attracted a few Finnish fishermen for settlement. It was a swamp. The Neva River runs from nearby Lake Ladoga, Europe's largest, and flows into the Gulf of Finland through a low-lying delta of marshy flood-prone islands, more manageable for moose than man. Although it is close to the Arctic Circle, winds and waters from the Atlantic bring moderate and moist weather. This means that winter, during which the delta freezes up, is relatively short: a matter of no small significance to Peter.

Peter's vision for the new capital was grandiose; so was the task ahead. To find enough dry ground for building, swamps were drained out and wetlands were filled in. To protect the land from flooding, seawalls were built up and canals were laid down. A hands-on autocrat, Peter pitched in with the hammering, sawing and joining. Thousands of fortune-seeking foreigners were imported to lend expertise: architects and engineers who designed the city's intricate waterways and craftsmen and masons who chiselled its stone foundations. The hard labour of digging ditches and moving muck was performed by non-voluntary recruits. Peter pressed 30,000 peasant serfs per year into capital construction gangs. Their ranks were supplemented with Russian convict labourers and Swedish prisoners of war. The work regimen was strict and living conditions were stark: more than 100,000 died amid the mucous and mud. But those who survived could earn personal freedom and a small piece of marshland to call their own.

Russia's new city by the sea began to take shape, inspired by Peter's recollections of canal-lined Amsterdam. The locus of power was the military stronghold, the Peter & Paul Fortress. Next, he ordered the chief accompaniments of tsarist authority – a church and a prison. The first tavern was the German-owned Triumphant Osteria of the Four Frigates, where Peter would order his favourite drink – vodka with cayenne pepper. The first stone palace belonged to the former Dutch merchant captain and first commander of Russia's Baltic Fleet, Cornelius Cruys. A more impressive dwelling put up by the territory's first governor-general, Alexander Menshikov, soon adorned the Vasilevsky Island embankment (see p110).

Peter abandoned his wooden cabin for a modest Dutch-style townhouse across the river in the new Summer Garden (see p71). Nearby, on the future site of the Admiralty, a bustling shipyard was assembling his new navy. Impatient to develop a commercial port, Peter offered a generous reward to the first three ships to drop anchor at the new town docks. The presence of so many foreigners gave the crude swampy settlement a more cosmopolitan feel than the poshest parlours of pious Moscow.

In 1712 the tsar officially declared St Petersburg to be the capital. Inspired by the Vatican's crossed keys to paradise, he adopted a city coat of arms that presented crossed anchors topped with an imperial crown. Peter requested the rest of Russia's ruling elite join him, or else. He said Pieter Burkh was the place they ought to be, so they packed up their carriages and moved to the Baltic Sea. The tsar's royal court, the imperial senate and foreign embassies were relocated to damper digs. Fearing Peter's wrath, Moscow's old aristocratic families reluctantly began to arrive. Apprehension turned to appal. To them Peter's paradise was a peaty hell. They were ordered to bring their own stones to the party, with which to build elegant mansions and in which to start behaving like Westerners (see the boxed text, above). It all seemed surreal.

STONED IN ST PETE

Peter envisioned a splendid imperial capital, shimmering in polished marble and granite. Unfortunately, the site he chose to build on was more muddy than rocky. The dreamer tsar was undaunted. He ordered Russia's governors to start loading up wagons with bricks and stones, and send them immediately to St Petersburg. Building in stone outside the capital was forbidden. He decreed a stone tax, by which all new arrivals to the city were obliged to bring with them a fixed amount of stone before they could enter. Every ship that entered the port also was required to pay a stone tariff (not so unusual for a guy who previously issued a tax on beards). St Petersburg's rocky revenue laws remained in effect for six decades.

When Peter died of gangrene in 1725, at the age of 52, some thought they might get the chance to quit his quixotic quagmire, but they were wrong. The wilful spirit of Peter the Great continued to possess the city and bedevil its inhabitants. Within less than a hundred years of its improbable inception, a new magnificent capital would stand on the edge of Europe.

IMPERIAL CAPITAL

Peter's Heirs

By the end of the 18th century St Petersburg would take its place among Europe's grand cities. But in the years immediately following Peter's death, the fate of the Baltic bastion was still uncertain.

While Peter's plans for his imperial capital were clear, those for his personal legacy were murky. His eldest son and heir apparent, Alexey, was estranged from his father early on, suspected of plotting against him later, and tortured to death in the Peter & Paul Fortress finally. The evidence was flimsy. On his death bed, Peter tried to dictate a last will, but could not name an heir before his galloping ghost departed into the grey mist. His wife Catherine I assumed the throne for the next two years, with Peter's pal Menshikov acting as de-facto tsar. When she died, the reaction started.

The Petersburg-Moscow power struggle was on. The aristocracy's Old Muscovite faction seized the opportunity to influence the succession. Without his protector, the mighty Menshikov was stripped of all titles and property, and sent packing into Siberian exile. Peter's 11-year-old grandson, Peter II, was chosen as an unlikely heir. Delivering to his enabling patrons, the pliable Peter II returned the capital to Moscow. The city's population fell by a half; its public works came to rest. When Peter II eventually got up the nerve to order Petersburgers to go back, he was ignored by the disdainful nobles. But this reversal of urban fortune proved short-lived.

The Romanovs were a delicate dynasty and the teen tsar soon succumbed to smallpox. Moscow's princely power-brokers now entrusted the throne to another supposed weakling, Duchess

1741–61
Empress Elizabeth fulfils her father's goal of a grand European capital, commissioning the construction of countless sumptuous buildings and creating a glittering court.

1757
Empress Elizabeth oversees the establishment of the Imperial Academy of Arts by Count Ivan Shuvalov, her Minister of Education and sometimes lover, who some called the 'Maecenas of the Russian Enlightenment'.

1754–62
Chief architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli constructs the rococo Winter Palace on the embankment of the Neva River as the primary residence of the royal family. Empress Elizabeth dies three months before the Winter Palace is completed.

1762
Seventeen years after their marriage, a coup against Peter III brings to the throne his wife Catherine II (Catherine the Great), ushering in the era of Russian Enlightenment.

1764
Catherine the Great begins purchasing paintings from European collectors and putting them on display in her 'hermitage', thus forming the foundations for the collection that will later become the State Hermitage Museum.

1768–74
Victories in the Russo-Turkish War expand Russian control in southern Ukraine. To commemorate the decisive Battle of Chesme, Catherine commissions the Chesme Church in Southern St Petersburg and the Chesme Column at Tsarskoe Selo.

ICE QUEEN

In 1737 Empress Anna gave promising young Russian architect Peter Eropkin a cool commission. Anna was in a celebratory mood after a victorious conclusion to the Russo-Turkish War. It was a royal ritual to build something spectacular after military triumphs, but usually in stone and mortar. Anna wanted her victory palace to be carved in ice.

Eropkin stacked blocks of ice, cut from the river, to make the frosty mansion. The interior was 15m by 6m and the ornamental roof turrets topped 30m tall. The inside featured ice furniture and an ice throne, while outside was an ice garden with icicle trees and a life-size ice elephant sculpture. The entrance was guarded by ice cannons, which supposedly were capable of firing – you guessed it – ice balls.

Anna was delighted by Eropkin's creation. She could not resist using it to amuse her court and abuse a count. She demanded that Prince Golitsyn, who had incurred her displeasure, should marry a rather rotund Kalmyk girl at the ice palace. A carnival-like wedding followed, and the couple was forced to spend the night and consummate the marriage on an ice bed. Anna's frozen inspiration was a big hit with city residents that season, but eventually the fun melted away.

In recent years the city has revived the tradition of building ice palaces to wile away winter nights. Under Hermitage direction, a replica of Anna's ice palace was built in 2006 on Palace Sq.

Anna Ivanovna, Peter the Great's niece. But Anna was no pushover – she was the first in a line of tough women rulers. In 1732 Anna declared St Petersburg to be the capital once more, and bade everyone back to the Baltic. Making the offer more enticing, she recommenced glamorous capital construction projects. Wary of scheming Russian elites, she recruited talented German state administrators. Still, the city recovered slowly. A big fire in 1737 left entire neighbourhoods in charred ruins. Even Anna spent much time ruling from Moscow. St Petersburg remained only half built, its dynamism diminished.

Not until the reign of Peter's second-oldest daughter, the Empress Elizabeth (r 1741–62), did the city's imperial appetite return in full. Elizabeth created one of the most dazzling courts in Europe. She loved the pomp as much as the power. Her 20-year reign was a nonstop aristocratic cabaret. The Empress was a bit eccentric, enjoying a hedonistic lifestyle that revolved around hunting, drinking and dancing. She loved most to host elaborate masquerade balls, at which she performed countless costume changes, apparently preferring to end the night in drag. Bawdy though she was, Elizabeth also got the Russian elite hooked on high culture. The court was graced by poets, artists and philosophers. Journalism and theatre gained popularity, and an Academy of Arts was founded. While her resplendent splurges may have left imperial coffers empty, Elizabeth made her father's majestic dream a reality.

Aristocratic Soul

Peter's determined drive to build a modern state transformed the means and expression of power: military revolution replaced medieval mercenaries; secular law replaced ecclesiastical canon; bureaucratic order replaced personal impulse. St Petersburg now displayed all the features of a seriously imperial capital: stately façade, hierarchical heart and aristocratic soul.

The city's physical appearance reflected the transition. The centre of power moved across the river to the Neva's south bank. Empress Elizabeth's baroque beauty, the Winter Palace (p125), was meant to impress – and how could it not, with more than a quarter of a million exquisitely embellished square feet. She forbade any new building to rise higher than her 1000-room, 2000-windowed, multicolumned mansion. The immense Palace Sq (Dvortsovaya pl; p66) could host as many as 50 parading infantry battalions at once. Across the square was an imposing semicircular structure housing the instruments of statecraft: General Staff, Treasury and Foreign Office. Its august archways led out to a beaming boulevard, the city's central artery, the Nevsky pr. The commanding Admiralty (p67) stretched along nearly 400m of the south embankment, adorned with ancient heroes like conqueror Alexander the Great and sea goddess Isis and topped with a gleaming gold spire. The city's monumental mélange reinforced its imperial pretension, with each ruler adding a personal stylistic touch: Peter's restrained baroque, Elizabeth's reckless rococo, Catherine's refined neoclassicism.

St Petersburg was a city of ranks, literally. The capital's social hierarchy reflected Peter's image of a well-ordered modern state. To minimise the personal influence of the old nobility, Peter created a Table of Ranks, which formally assigned social status on the basis of service to the emperor. The table included 14 stations in the military forces, civil administration and imperial court. In this system, inheritance was no longer an exclusive means to elite status, as resourceful newcomers were rewarded too. Living quarters and salary were determined by rank. Each service had its own colour-coded uniforms, with distinguishing pecking-order plumage. Social manners followed suit: a lowly titular counsellor in a shabby overcoat could easily get a collegiate assessor's nose out of joint by addressing him as 'Your Nobleness' instead of the appropriate 'Your High Nobleness'. Not surprisingly, the old aristocratic families still managed to be well represented in the upper echelon.

Despite Peter's meritocratic meddling, St Petersburg was in essence an aristocratic city. Capital life was infused by blue bloodlines. Although the tsar could upset the balance, for the most part power came by entitlement and property was passed down. Yes, it was possible for the capable and clever to climb the Table of Ranks, but they'd better have a noble patron to give them a boost. The aristocratic elite that once sneered at Peter's vision of a cosmopolitan capital eventually came to wallow in it. They imported tastes and manners from their slightly more sophisticated continental cousins. European fashion and philosophy were conspicuously consumed. So far did it go that St Petersburg's aristocrats preferred to speak French *l'un a l'autre*. Ancestral connections to kings and queens past became a coveted social commodity. Myths about family origin were eagerly propagated, with the ruling Romanovs taking the cup for uncovering their long-lost genetic link to Julius Caesar.

Enlightened Empress – Despotic Dame

In 1745, at the age of 16, Sophie Augusta of Prussia was betrothed to Duke Peter of Holstein: quite a score for her ambitious mother, as Peter was a Romanov and heir to the Imperial Russian throne. Sophie moved to St Petersburg, learned to speak Russian, delighted the court with her coy charm, and took the name Catherine when she converted to Orthodoxy. A nice start for sure, but who would figure that a French-tutored Fräulein from Stettin would one day reach Peter's lofty status and earn the moniker 'Great'.

More than just a court coquette, Catherine possessed keen political instincts and a strong appetite for power, attributes that had adverse effects on the men in her life. Her husband Tsar Peter III, as it turned out, was a bit of a flake and not terribly interested in ruling. In a plot hatched by aristocrat Prince Orlov, Catherine was complicit in a coup that landed her on the throne, lifted her

1773

Emilian Pugachev, a Don Cossack, claims to be the overthrown Peter III and begins a peasant uprising, which must be quelled by brute force. The Pugachev Rebellion curbs the liberal tendencies of Catherine the Great.

1796

Upon the death of Catherine the Great, her son Paul I ascends the throne. One of his first acts as tsar is to decree that women can never again rule Russia.

1799

The birth of poet Alexander Pushkin ushers in the era of Russian Romanticism and the Golden Age of Russian literature. Revered as the national bard, Pushkin's legacy endures to this day.

1800

St Petersburg has grown exponentially in its first century, and its population reaches 220,000. By this time, the city has gained all the glory of a cosmopolitan capital.

1801

Tsar Paul is murdered in his bedroom in the fortress-like Mikhailovsky Castle. The coup places on the throne Alexander I, who vows to continue the reformist policies of his grandmother.

1812–14

Alexander I oversees Russia's victory in the Napoleonic Wars. By war's end, Russian troops occupy Paris and Russia becomes Europe's greatest power. Monuments are strewn about St Petersburg, including the Alexander Column and Narva Gates.

conspiratorial consort to general-in-chief, and left her helpless husband face down at his country estate. She followed Peter I's example of paranoid parenting. Indeed, she made her successor son, Grand Duke Paul, so insecure that when he finally took the throne he built a fortified castle in the middle of the city and locked himself in (see Mikhailovsky Castle, p74). Of course, just because you are paranoid does not mean that people are not out to get you: Paul's reign was cut short when some disgruntled drunken officers strangled him to death with his bedroom curtains.

Catherine, by contrast, prospered. Despite the details of her unsavoury ascension, she reigned for a satisfying 34 years. Catherine presided over a golden age for St Petersburg. Relations between crown and aristocracy were never better. High society strolled through handsome parks, gabbed in smoky salons and waltzed across glittering ballrooms. The city benefited from her literary leanings, acquiring a splendid public library (p75) and the graceful Smolny Institute (p83), for fine-tuning fair maidens. The Russian Empire, meanwhile, expanded to ever greater distances.

Empress Catherine was a charter member of a club of 18th-century monarchs known as the 'enlightened despots' – dictators who could hum Haydn. On the 'enlightened' side, Catherine corresponded with French philosophers, patronised the arts and sciences, promoted public education and introduced the potato to national cuisine. On the 'despotic' side, Catherine connived with fellow enlightened friends to carve up Poland, censored bad news and imprisoned the messengers, tightened serfs' bonds of servitude to their lords, and introduced the potato to national cuisine.

And what of young Catherine's coquettish charms? They matured into full-blown avaricious desires. She may have been conversant in several tongues, but she did not know the word 'moderation' in any of them. When it comes to Russian rulers, Catherine tops the list for most voracious, salacious and bodacious. The Hermitage is one of the world's great art holdings because of her compulsion to collect and obsession to outbid. Her team of French chefs had Catherine looking like a subject in one of her prized Rubens. Nor was she shy about s-e-x. Her ladies-in-waiting were entreated to test the stamina of new palace guards to satisfy their mistress' curiosity. She doted on a succession of rising officers – promoting them to high rank, rewarding them with luxury villas, and banishing them to frontier outposts when her fickle flame burnt out. It was good to be the tsarina.

Contrary to popular myth, Catherine did not die while getting off her horse. She suffered a stroke in the bath, and at age 67 was carried off by the Bronze Horseman through the steamy haze to the other side.

GREAT POWER PETERSBURG

1812 Overture

The downside to becoming a great power in European politics is that you get drawn into European wars. Though, in fairness to the Hanovers and Hapsburgs, the Romanovs were pretty good at picking fights on their own. From the 19th century on, Russia was at war and St Petersburg was transformed.

It was Napoleon who coined the military maxim, 'first we engage, then we will see'. That was probably not the best tactic to take with Russia. Tsar Alexander first clashed with Napoleon after joining an ill-fated anti-French alliance with Austria and Prussia. The resulting Treaty of Tilsit was not so bad for Russia – as long as Alexander cooperated with Napoleon's designs against Britain. Alexander reneged; Napoleon avenged. The Little Corporal targeted Moscow, instead of the more heavily-armed Petersburg. His multinational, 600,000-strong force got there just in time for winter and had little to show for the effort, besides vandalising the Kremlin. Hungry, cold and dispirited, they retreated westward, harried by Marshal Kutuzov's troops. The Grande Armée was ground up: only 20,000 survived. Napoleon was booked for an island vacation, while Russia became the continent's most feared nation.

The War of 1812 was a defining event for Russia, stirring nationalist exaltation and orchestral inspiration. Catherine's favourite grandson, Alexander I, presided over a period of prosperity and self-assuredness in the capital. His army's exploits were immortalised in triumphal designs that recalled imperial Rome: Kazan Cathedral (p73), Alexander Column (p66) and Narva Gates (p147) – shining symbols for a new Russian empire that stretched across half the globe.

More wars and more monuments bedecked the city throughout the 19th century. St Petersburg was a military capital. When Peter I died, one in six residents was a member of the armed forces; a hundred years later the ratio was one in four. It was a city of immense parade grounds, swaggering elite regiments, and epaulette-clad nobility. St Petersburg came to exhibit a patriotic culture that saw the capital as more than just European, the epicentre of a transcendent Russia whose greatness came from within. The Bronze Horseman looked on approvingly.

God Preserve Thy People

War did more than confer Great Power status on Russia: it was also a stimulus for new ideas on political reform and social change. In the 19th century, the clash of ideas spilled out of salons and into its streets.

On a frosty December morning in 1825 more than a thousand soldiers amassed on Senate Sq (now Decembrists' Sq, p101), with the intention of upsetting the royal succession. When Alexander I died unexpectedly without a legitimate heir, the throne was supposed to pass to his liberal-minded brother Constantine, Viceroy of Poland, but he declined, preferring not to complicate his contented life. Instead, the new tsar would be Alexander's youngest brother, Nicholas I, a cranky conservative with a fastidious obsession for barracks-style discipline. The Decembrists revolt was staged by a small cabal of officers, veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, who saw first-hand how people in other countries enjoyed greater freedom and prosperity. They demanded Constantine and a constitution, but instead got exile and execution. The 'people', however, were now part of the discussion.

Russia's pathetic performance in another war prompted another reform attempt, this time initiated by the tsar. In the 1850s, better-equipped British and French armies really stuck it to Russia in a fight over the Crimean peninsula. The new emperor Alexander II concluded from the fiasco that Russia had to catch up with the West, or watch its empire unravel. A slew of reform decrees were issued, promoting public education, military reorganisation and economic modernisation. A sensitive sort, Alexander dropped the death penalty and curtailed corporal punishment. The Tsar Liberator abolished serfdom, kind of – his solution that serfs pay their masters redemptive fees in exchange for freedom pleased no one.

By now the 'people' were becoming less abstract. Political movements that claimed to better understand and represent them were sprouting up. On a Sunday morning in March 1881 several young student members of the Peoples' Will radical sect waited nervously by the Griboedov Canal as the tsar's procession passed. Their homemade bombs hardly dented the royal armoured coach, but badly wounded scores of spectators and fatally shredded the reforming monarch when he insisted on leaving his carriage to investigate. On the hallowed site, the magnificent and melancholy Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood (p72) was constructed, its twisting onion domes trying to steady St Petersburg's uncertain present with Russia's enduring past.

1824
St Petersburg experiences the worst flood in its history, when water levels rise more than 4m. At least 500 people are killed, thousands are injured and more than 300 buildings are destroyed.

1825
After the death of Alexander I, reformers assemble on Senate Sq to protest the succession of conservative Nicholas I. The new tsar brutally crushes the so-called Decembrist Revolt, killing hundreds in the process.

1849
Author Fyodor Dostoevsky is arrested and imprisoned for participating in discussions with a liberal intellectual group known as Petrashevsky Circle. He is exiled to Siberia for four years of hard labour.

1851
Upon completion of the construction of Nikolaevsky Station (now Moscow Station), the first trains linking Moscow and St Petersburg begin running, introducing rail travel to Russia.

1853–56
Britain and France side against Russia in the Crimean War, a war that's characterised by inept command and bloody stalemate, until it is finally ended by Alexander II.

1861
The emancipation of the serfs frees up labour to feed the Russian industrial revolution. Workers flood into the capital, leading to overcrowding, poor sanitation, disease epidemics and societal discontent.

THE MAD MONK

Russia's most legendary letch and holy man was Grigory Rasputin, mystic and healer. He was born in 1869 into poverty in a small village east of the Urals. After a dissolute boyhood and a short-lived marriage, he discovered religion. Rasputin preached (and practiced) that the way to divine grace was through sin and redemption: binge drinking and engaging in sexual orgies, and then praying for forgiveness.

St Petersburg's high society was receptive to Rasputin's teachings. Despite his heavy drinking and sexual scandals – or perhaps because of them – he earned the adoration of an army of aristocratic ladies. More notable, Rasputin endeared himself to Emperor Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra. The healer had the power to ease the pain of their son Alexey, who suffered from haemophilia.

The holy man's scandalous behaviour and his influence over the queen invoked the ire of the aristocracy. The powerful Prince Felix Yusupov and the tsar's cousin Grand Duke Dmitry decided that the Siberian peasant must be stopped. On a wintry night in 1916, they invited Rasputin to the sumptuous Yusupov Palace (p102) overlooking the Moyka. They plied the monk with wine and cakes that were laced with potassium cyanide, which seemed to have no effect. In a panic, the perpetrators then shot the priest at close range. Alarmingly, this didn't seem to get the job done either. Rasputin finally drowned when he was tied up in a sheet and dropped into the icy Neva River. He was buried in secret at Pushkin (p219).

Besides mystical powers and lecherous behaviour, Grigory Rasputin is famous for another exceptional attribute: his enormous penis (30cm, if you must know). Legend has it that Rasputin's foes did not stop at murder; apparently, they also castrated him. Yusupov's maid supposedly found Rasputin's oversized organ when cleaning the apartment after the murder.

Which explains the prize artefact at the so-called Museum of Erotica (p87): it is indeed Rasputin's preserved penis. Even in its detached state, the Mad Monk's massive member is still attracting attention.

Great Power competition compelled a state-directed campaign of economic development. St Petersburg was the centre of a robust military-industrial economy, to fight the wars of the modern age. A ring of ugly sooty smokestacks grew up around the still handsome city centre. Tough times in the rural villages and job opportunities in the new factories hastened a human flood into the capital. By the 1880s, the population climbed past a million, with hundreds of thousands cramped into slummy suburban squalor. Public health was befouled, public manner was debased. The gap between high society and the lower depths had long been manageable, but now they kept running into each other. The people had arrived.

God Save the Tsar

'We, workers and inhabitants of the city of St Petersburg, our wives, children, and helpless old parents, have come to you, Sovereign, to seek justice and protection.' So read the petition that a large group of workers intended to present to Tsar Nicholas II on a Sunday in January 1905.

Nicholas II ascended the throne in 1894, when his iron-fisted father, Alexander III, a real autocrat's autocrat, died suddenly. Nicholas was of less steely stuff. Most contemporary accounts agree: he was a good guy and a lousy leader; possessive of his power to decide, except that he could never make up his mind. In 1904 Nicholas followed the foolish advice of a cynical minister, who said that what Russia needed most was a 'small victorious war' to get peoples' minds off their troubles. Unfortunately, the Russo-Japanese War ended in humiliating defeat and the people were more agitated than ever.

By January 1905 the capital was a hotbed of political protest. As many as 100,000 workers were on strike, the city had no electricity and all public facilities were closed. Nicholas and the royals departed for their palace retreat at Tsarskoe Selo (p219). In this charged atmosphere, Father Georgy Gapon, an Orthodox priest who apparently lived a double life as holy man and police agent, organised a peaceful demonstration of workers and their families to protest the difficult conditions. Their petition called for eight-hour work days and better wages, an end to the war and universal suffrage.

Singing *God Save the Tsar,* the crowd solemnly approached the Winter Palace, hoping to present its requests to the tsar personally. Inside, the mood was jittery: panicky guardsmen fired on the demonstrators, at first as a warning and then directly into the crowd. More than 1000 people were killed by the gunshots or the trampling that followed. Although Nicholas was not even in the palace at the time, the events of Bloody Sunday shattered the myth of the Father Tsar. The Last Emperor was finally able to restore order by issuing the October Manifesto, which promised a constitutional monarchy and civil rights; in fact, not much really changed.

At the start of WWI, nationalist fervour led St Petersburg to change its name to the more Slavic, less German-sounding Petrograd. A hundred years earlier, war with France had made the Russian Empire a great power, but now yet another European war threatened its very survival. The empire was fraying at the seams as the old aristocratic order limped onward into battle. Only the strength of the Bronze Horseman could hold it all together. But Peter's legacy rested on the shoulders of an imperial inheritor who was both half-hearted reformer and irresolute reactionary: the combination proved revolutionary.

CRADLE OF COMMUNISM

Act One: Down with the Autocracy

In 1917, 23 February began like most days in Petrograd since the outbreak of the war. The men went off to the metalworks and arms factories. The women went out to receive the daily bread ration. And the radical set went out to demonstrate, as it happened to be International Women's Day. Although each left their abode an ordinary individual, by day's end they would meld into the most infamous 'mass' in modern history: the Bronze Horseman's heirs let go of the reigns; the Russian Revolution, a play in three acts, had begun.

After waiting long hours in the winter chill for a little food, the women were told that there would be none. This news coincided with the end of the day shift and a sweaty outpouring from the factory gates. Activist provocateurs joined the fray as the streets swelled with the tired, the hungry, and now the angry. The crowd assumed a political purpose. They marched to the river, intent on crossing to the palace side and expressing their discontent to somebody. But they were met at the bridge by gendarmes and guns.

Similar meetings had occurred already, in July and October, on which occasions the crowd retreated. But now it was February and one did not need a bridge to cross the frozen river. First a brave few, then emboldened small groups, finally a defiant horde of hundreds were traversing the ice-laden Neva toward the Winter Palace.

They congregated in the Palace Sq, demanding bread, peace and an end to autocracy. Inside, contemptuous counts stole glances at the unruly rabble, and waited for them to grow tired and disperse. But they did not go home. Instead, they went around the factories and spread the call

1870
After breaking from the Academy of Arts, a group of upstart artists known as the Peredvizhniki (Wanderers) starts organising travelling exhibitions to widen their audience.

1881
A bomb kills Alexander II as he travels home along the Griboedov Canal. His reactionary son, Alexander III, undoes many of his reforms, but oversees the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.

1890
Queen of Spades, Pyotr Tchaikovsky's opera based on the poem by Alexander Pushkin, premieres at the Mariinsky Theatre, drawing excited crowds and rave reviews.

1896
At the coronation of Nicholas II, a stampede by the massive crowd ends with more than a thousand deaths and almost as many injuries.

1900
By the turn of the 20th century, St Petersburg is Russia's cultural centre, producing masterpieces in music, literature and art. It is also at the centre of political unrest. The population is estimated at 1,440,000.

1902–04
Clashes in the Far East lead to the Russo-Japanese War, with unexpectedly disastrous results for the Russians. The war diverts resources and stirs up dissent in the capital.

for a general strike. By the next day a quarter of a million people were rampaging through the city centre. Overwhelmed local police took cover.

When word reached the tsar, he ordered military troops to restore order. But his troops were no longer hardened veterans: they were long dead at the front. Rather, freshly conscripted peasant youths in uniform were sent to put down the uprising. When commanded to fire on the demonstration, they instead broke rank, dropped their guns and joined the mob. At that moment, the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty and 500-year-old tsarist autocracy came to an end.

Act Two: All Power to the Soviets

Perhaps the least likely political successor to the tsar in February 1917 was the radical socialist Bolshevik Party. The Bolsheviks were on the fringe of the fringe of Russia's political left. Party membership numbered a few thousand, at best. Yet, in less than eight months, the Bolsheviks occupied the Winter Palace, proclaiming Petrograd the capital of a worldwide socialist revolution.

In the days that followed Nicholas' abdication, a Provisional Government was established. It mainly comprised political liberals, representing reform-minded nobles, pragmatic civil servants, and professional and business interests. Simultaneously, a rival political force emerged, the Petrograd Soviet. The Soviet (the Russian word for council) was composed of more populist and radical elements, representing the interests of the workers, peasants, soldiers and sailors. Both political bodies were based at the Tauride Palace (p85).

The Provisional Government saw itself as a temporary instrument, whose main task was to create some form of constitutional democracy. It argued over the details of organising an election and convention, rather than deal with the issues that had caused the revolution – bread and peace. At first, the Soviet deferred to the Provisional Government, but this soon changed.

On 3 April, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin arrived at the Finland Station (p122) from exile in Switzerland. Lenin's passage across enemy lines had been arranged by German generals, who hoped that he would stir things up at home, and thus distract Russia from their ongoing war. As expected, Lenin upset the political status quo as soon as he arrived. His rabid revolutionary rhetoric polarised Petrograd. In the Soviet, the Bolshevik faction went from cooperative to confrontational. But even his radical pals dismissed Lenin as a stinging gadfly, rather than a serious foe. By summer's end, Lenin had proved them wrong.

The Provisional Government not only refused to withdraw from the war but, at the instigation of the allies, launched a new offensive – prompting mass desertion at the front. Meanwhile, the economic situation continued to deteriorate. The same anarchic anger that fuelled the February Revolution was felt on the streets again. Lenin's Bolsheviks were the only political party in sync with the public mood. September elections in the Petrograd Soviet gave the Bolsheviks a majority.

Lenin had spent his entire adult life waiting for this moment. For 20 years he did little else than read about, write about, and rant about revolution. He enjoyed Beethoven, but avoided listening to his music from concern that the sentiment it evoked would make him lose his revolutionary edge. A successful revolution, Lenin observed, had two preconditions: first, the oppressed classes were politically mobilised and ready to act; and second, the ruling class was internally divided and questioned its will to continue. This politically explosive combination now existed. If the Bolsheviks waited any longer, he feared, the Provisional Government would get its act together and impose a new bourgeois political order, ending his dream of socialist revolution in Russia.

On 25 October the Bolsheviks staged their coup. It was not exactly a secret, yet there was not much resistance. According to Lenin's chief accomplice and coup organiser, Leon Trotsky, 'power was lying in the streets, waiting for someone to pick it up.' Bolshevik Red Guards seized a few buildings and strategic points. The Provisional Government was holed up in the tsar's private dining room in the Winter Palace, protected by a few Cossacks, the Petrograd chapter of the Women's Battalion of Death, and a one-legged commander of a bicycle regiment. Before dessert could be served, their dodgy defences cracked. Mutinous mariners fired a window-shattering salvo from the cruiser *Aurora* (p117).

At the Tauride Palace the Soviet remained in emergency session late into the night, when Lenin finally announced that the Provisional Government had been arrested and the Soviet was now the supreme power in Russia. Half the deputies walked out in disgust. Never one to miss an opportunity, Lenin quickly called a vote to make it official. It passed. Incredibly, the Bolsheviks were now in charge.

CHECK YOUR CALENDAR

For hundreds of years, Russia was out of sync with the West. Until 1700 Russia dated its years from 'creation', which was determined to be approximately 5508 years before the birth of Christ. So at that time the year 1700 was considered the year 7208 in Russia. Peter – Westward-looking as he was – instituted a reform to date the years from the birth of Christ, as they did in Europe.

Things got complicated again in the 18th century, when most of Europe abandoned the Julian calendar in favour of the Gregorian calendar and Russia did not follow suit. By 1917 Russian dates were 13 days out of sync with European dates – which explains how the October Revolution could have taken place on 7 November.

Finally, the all-powerful Soviet regime made the necessary leap. The last day of January 1918 was followed by 14 February 1918, aligning dates from then on with those in the West.

In this book we use dates corresponding to the current Gregorian calendar that is used worldwide. However, even history is not always straightforward, as other accounts may employ the calendars that were the convention at that time. Tell *that* to your history professor.

Act Three: Up with Bolsheviks, Down with Communists

Nobody really believed the Bolsheviks would be around for long. Even Lenin said that, if they could hold on for just 100 days, their coup would be a success by providing future inspiration. It was one thing to occupy a few palaces in Petrograd, but across the empire's far-flung regions Bolshevik-brand radicalism was not so popular. From 1918 to 1921 civil war raged in Russia: between monarchists and socialists, imperialists and nationalists, aristocrats and commoners, believers and atheists. When it was over, somehow Soviet power was still standing. In the final act of the Russian Revolution, the scene shifted from the Petrograd stage. The imperial capital would never be the same.

In December 1917, an armistice was arranged and peace talks began with the Axis Powers. The Bolsheviks demanded a return to prewar imperial borders, but Germany insisted on the liberation of Poland, where its army was squatting. Trotsky defiantly walked out of negotiations, declaring 'neither war, nor peace'. The German high command was a bit confused and not at all amused – hostilities immediately resumed. Lenin had vowed never to abandon the capital, but that was before a German battle fleet cruised into the Gulf of Finland. Exit stage left. In 1918 the Bolsheviks vacated their new pastel digs in Petrograd and relocated behind the ancient red

1905
Hundreds of people are killed when troops fire on peaceful protestors presenting a petition to the tsar. Nicholas II is held responsible for the tragedy, dubbed 'Bloody Sunday'.

1914
Russia enters WWI, simultaneously invading Austrian Galicia and German Prussia with minimal success. St Petersburg changes its name to the less Germanic sounding Petrograd.

1916
After invoking the ire of aristocrats, Grigory Rasputin the 'Mad Monk' is killed. A group of plotters invite him round to Yusupov Palace for cyanide-laced tea, and then drown him in the icy Moyka River.

1917
The February Revolution results in the abdication of Nicholas II, followed by the Bolshevik coup in October. Vladimir Ilych Lenin seizes power and civil war ensues.

1918
Lenin pulls Russia out of WWI and moves the capital to Moscow. Civil war continues throughout the country, and Petrograd enters a period of political and cultural decline.

1920
The ongoing civil war and the change of capital take their toll in St Petersburg. The population falls to 722,000, one-third of the prerevolutionary figure.

BONES OF CONTENTION

What happened to the last members of the royal family – even after their execution in 1918 – is a mixture of the macabre, the mysterious and the just plain messy.

The Romanov remains resurfaced back in 1976, when a group of local scientists discovered them near Yekaterinburg. So politically sensitive was this issue that the discovery was kept secret until the remains were finally fully excavated in 1991. The bones of nine people were tentatively identified as Tsar Nicholas II, his wife Alexandra, three of their four daughters, the royal doctor and three servants. Absent were any remains of daughter Maria or the royal couple's only son, the tsarevich Alexey.

According to a 1934 report filed by one of the assassin-soldiers, all five children died with their parents when they were shot by a firing squad in Yekaterinburg. The bodies were dumped in an abandoned mine, followed by several grenades intended to collapse the mine shaft. When the mine did not collapse, two of the children's bodies were set on fire, and the others were doused with acid and buried in a swamp. Even then, most of the acid soaked away into the ground – leaving the bones to be uncovered 73 years later.

In mid-1998 the royal remains were finally given a proper burial in the Romanov crypt at SS Peter & Paul Cathedral (p113), alongside their predecessors dating back to Peter the Great. A 19-gun salute bade them a final farewell. President Boris Yeltsin was present, together with many Romanov family members.

The Orthodox Church, however, never acknowledged that these were actually the Romanov remains, and church officials did not attend the burial. Instead, the church canonised the royal family in recognition of their martyrdom.

Despite the controversy, it seemed the story had finally come to an end (however unsatisfying for some). But in 2007 archaeologists in Yekaterinburg found the bodies of two more individuals – a male aged between 10 and 13 and a female aged 18 to 23. The location corresponds with the site described in the 1934 report; and the silver fillings in the teeth are similar to those in the other family members. Scientists are stating that it is 'highly likely' that these are the remains of the tsarevich Alexey and his sister Maria. The confirmation of their identities and the proper burial of the bones may at last provide closure to this 80-year-old tragedy.

bricks of Moscow. It was supposed to be temporary (Lenin personally preferred St Petersburg). But Russia was turning inward, and Peter's window to the West was closing.

Along with the loss of its capital political status, St Petersburg also lost its noble social status. The aristocratic soul gave up the proletarian body. The royal family had always set the standards for high society, but now the royals were on the run. No Romanov stepped forward to claim the once coveted throne. Nicholas II and his family meanwhile, were placed under house arrest in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo (p219), before leaving on a one-way trip to Siberia. The breakdown of the old order made the old elite vulnerable. The tsar's favourite ballerina, Mathilda Kshesinskaya, pleaded in vain as her Style Moderne mansion was commandeered by the Bolsheviks as party headquarters (see p117). The more fortunate families fled with the few valuables they could carry; the less fortunate who stayed were harassed, dispossessed and disposed of eventually.

The revolution began in Petrograd and ended there, when in March 1921 Kronshtadt sailors staged a mutiny. These erstwhile Bolshevik boosters demanded the democracy they had been promised now that the civil war was won. But Lenin, who had since renamed his political party 'the Communists', was reluctant to relinquish political power. The sailors' revolt was brutally suppressed in a full-scale military assault across the frozen bay, confirming the historical adage that revolutions consume their young.

RED PITER

Soviet Second City

Moscow finally reclaimed its coveted ancient title with the caveat that it was now the world's first communist capital. Petrograd consoled itself as the Soviet second city.

In Russia, it has always been the case that status and wealth flow from political power. Thus, the redesignation of the capital prompted the departure of the bureaucracies: the government ministries, the military headquarters, the party apparatus, which took with them a host of loyal servants and servile lackeys. The population dropped by two-thirds from its prewar count. Economic exchange was reduced to begging and bartering. To make matters worse, the food shortages that first sparked the revolution during the war continued well after. Fuel was also in short supply, as homes went unheated, factory gates stayed shut and city services were stopped. Petrograd was left naked by the Neva.

The new regime needed a new identity. The old aristocratic labels would not do. The city underwent a name-changing mania – streets, squares and bridges were given more appropriate socialist sobriquets. Once known as Orlov Sq, the plaza fronting Smolny Institute was renamed after the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Znamenskaya Sq, named after a nearby church, became Uprising Sq (pl Vosstaniya). The city itself was rechristened Leningrad in 1924, to honour the scourge of the old empire. The change ran much deeper: make no mistake, the old aristocratic world was gone. 'For centuries, our grandfathers and fathers have had to clean up their shit', railed Trotsky, 'now it is time they clean up ours.' Noble pedigree became a marker for discrimination and exploitation. Family mansions were expropriated; art treasures were seized; churches were closed.

SOVIETSKY ANEKDOT

A Soviet census-taker stops a man along Nevsky Pr:
Where were you born? St Petersburg.
Where did you go to school? Petrograd.
Where do you live now? Leningrad.
Where would you like to live? St Petersburg.

Leningrad was eventually revived with a proletarian transfusion. At the beginning of the 1930s the socialist state launched an intensive campaign of economic development, which reinvigorated the city's industrial sector. New scientific and military research institutes were fitted upon the city's strong higher-education foundations. On the eve of WWII, the population climbed to over three million. Public works projects for the people were undertaken – polished underground metro stations, colossal sports complexes and streamlined constructivist buildings muscled in next to the peeling pastels and cracked baroque of the misty past. Even the Bronze Horseman was seen around town in a commissar's cloak.

Who Murdered Sergei Kirov?

Though no longer the capital, Leningrad still figured prominently in Soviet politics. The Leningrad party machine, headquartered in the Smolny Institute (p83), was a plum post in the Communist Party. The First Secretary, head of the Leningrad organisation, was always accorded a seat on the Politburo, the executive board of Soviet power. In the early years Leningrad was a crucial battle front in the bloody intraparty competition to succeed Lenin.

Lenin died at the age of 53 from a stroke, without designating a successor. He was first replaced by a troika of veteran Old Bolsheviks, including Leningrad party head, Alexander Zinoviev. But

1921
Once strong supporters of the Bolshevik cause, sailors and soldiers at Kronshtadt rebel against the communists' increasingly dictatorial regime. The rebellion is brutally suppressed. It is the last revolt against Communist rule until the Soviet collapse.

1924
At the age of 53, Lenin dies without designating a successor. The city changes its name to Leningrad in his honour. Power is assumed by a 'triumvirate' but Stalin increasingly takes control.

1934
Leningrad party boss Sergei Kirov is murdered as he leaves his office at the Smolny Institute. The assassination kicks off the Great Purges, ushering in Stalin's reign of terror.

1940
Rapid industrialisation shows results: the population of the city has rebounded, reaching 3.1 million, and Leningrad is now responsible for 11% of Soviet industrial output.

1941
The Nazis invade the Soviet Union and Leningrad is surrounded, blocking residents from all sources of food and fuel, as the city comes under attack.

1942
On 9 August, the Leningrad Radio Orchestra performs the Seventh Symphony by Dmitry Shostakovich. Musicians are given special rations to ensure they can perform, and the music is broadcast throughout the city.

their stay on top was brief, outmanoeuvred by the most unlikely successor to Lenin's mantle, Josef Stalin, a crude disaffected bureaucrat of Georgian descent.

In 1926 Zinoviev was forced to relinquish his Leningrad seat to Sergei Kirov, a solid Stalin man. The transition reflected deeper changes in the Communist Party: Zinoviev was a haughty Jewish intellectual from the first generation of salon-frequenting socialist talkers, while Kirov was a humble Russian provincial from the second generation of socialist dirty-work doers. Stalin's rise to the top was testimony to his personal appeal to these second-generation Bolsheviks.

In high-profile Leningrad, Kirov soon became one of the most popular party bosses. He was a zealous supporter of Stalin's plans for rapid industrialisation, which meant heavy investment in the city. But the manic-paced economic campaign could not be sustained, causing famine and food shortages. Kirov emerged as a proponent of a more moderate course instead of the radical pace that Stalin still insisted on. The growing rift in the leadership was exposed at a 1934 Party congress, where a small cabal of regional governors secretly connived to remove Stalin in a bureaucratic coup and replace him with Kirov. It was an offer that Kirov flatly refused.

But it was hard to keep a secret from Stalin. Wary of Kirov's rising appeal, Stalin ordered that he be transferred to party work in Moscow, where he could be watched more closely. Kirov found reasons to delay the appointment. He remained in Leningrad – but not for long. On 1 December 1934 as he left a late-afternoon meeting, Kirov was shot from behind and killed, in the corridor outside his Smolny office.

Who murdered Sergei Kirov? The trigger was pulled by Leonid Nikolaev, also a party member – hence his access to the building – and reportedly a disgruntled devotee of the displaced Zinoviev. But circumstantial evidence pointed the finger at Stalin. Kirov's murder was the first act in a much larger drama. According to Stalin, it proved that the party was infiltrated by saboteurs and spies. The ensuing police campaign to uncover these hidden enemies became known as the Great Purges, which consumed nearly the entire postrevolutionary Soviet elite. Leningrad intellectuals were especially targeted. More than 50 Hermitage curators were imprisoned, including the Asian art specialist, accused of being an agent of Japanese imperialism, and the medieval armour specialist, accused of harbouring weapons. Successive waves of arrest, exile and execution effectively transformed the Leningrad elite, making it much younger, less assertive and more Soviet. When it was finally over, Stalin stood as personal dictator of unrivalled power – even by tsarist standards.

The Siege

On 22 June 1941 Leningraders were basking in the summer solstice when Foreign Minister Molotov interrupted state radio to announce an 'unprecedented betrayal in the history of civilized nations'. That day, German Nazi forces launched a full-scale military offensive across the Soviet Union's western borders. Stalin's refusal to believe that Hitler would break their nonaggression pact left Leningrad unprepared and vulnerable.

The German codename for its assault on Leningrad was Operation Nordlicht (Operation Northern Lights). Der Fuhrer ordered his generals to raze the city to the ground, rather than incur the cost of feeding and heating its residents in winter. By July German troops had reached the suburbs, inflicting a daily barrage of artillery bombardment and aerial attacks. All Leningraders were mobilised around the clock to dig trenches, erect barricades, board up buildings. The city's factories were dismantled brick by brick and shipped to the other side of the Urals. Hermitage staff crated up Catherine's collection for a safer interior location; what they did not get out in time was buried on the grounds of the Summer Garden (see the boxed text, p130). The spires of the Admiralty and Peter & Paul Fortress were camouflaged in coloured netting, which was changed according to the weather and season. The youngest and oldest residents were evacuated; everybody else braced. The Bronze Horseman withdrew under a cover of sandbags.

At the end of August the Germans captured the east-bound railway: Leningrad was cut off. Instead of a bloody street fight, the Nazi command vowed to starve the city to death. Food stocks were low to begin with, but became almost nonexistent after napalm bombs burned down the warehouse district. Moscow dispatched tireless and resourceful Dmitry Pavlov to act as Chief of Food Supply. Pavlov's teams ransacked cellars, broke into box cars, and tore up floorboards in search of leftover cans and crumbs. The city's scientists were pressed to develop something edible out of yeast, glue and soap. As supplies dwindled, pets and pests disappeared. A strict ration system was imposed and violators were shot. Workers received 15 ounces (425g) of bread per day; everyone else got less. It was not enough. The hunger was relentless, causing delirium, disease and death. Hundreds of thousands succumbed to starvation, corpses were strewn atop snow-covered streets, mass graves were dug on the outskirts (see p121).

Relief finally arrived in January, when food supplies began to reach the city from across the frozen Lake Ladoga lifeline. Trucks made the perilous night-time trek on ice roads, fearing the *Luftwaffe* above and chilled water below. Soviet military advances enabled the supply route to stay open in the spring when the lake thawed. Leningrad survived the worst; still the siege continued. The city endured the enemy's pounding guns for two more years. At last, in January 1944, the Red Army arrived in force. They pulverised the German front with more rockets and shells than were used at Stalingrad. Within days, Leningrad was liberated.

Composer Dmitry Shostakovich premiered his Seventh Symphony for a small circle of friends in his Leningrad flat in 1941. His performance was interrupted by a night raid of German bombers. He stopped and sent his family into the basement, then played on in anguish and defiance as sirens sounded and fires flashed outside. In spring 1942 the symphony was performed in Moscow and broadcast by radio to Leningrad, to whom it was dedicated.

The 900 days marked history's longest military siege of a modern city. The city was badly battered – but not beaten. The Bronze Horseman arose from the rubble; the St Petersburg spirit was resilient.

THE RETURN OF PETER

From Dissent to Democracy

Throughout the Soviet period, Moscow kept suspicious eyes trained on Leningrad. After WWII, Stalin launched the 'Leningrad Affair', a sinister purge of the Hero City's youthful political and cultural elite, who were falsely accused of trying to create a rival capital. Several thousand were arrested, several hundred were executed. Kremlin commies were committed to forcing conformity onto the city's free-thinking intellectuals and keeping closed the window to the West. They ultimately failed.

Leningrad's culture club was irrepressible. Like in tsarist times, it teased, goaded, and defied its political masters. Stalin terrorised, Khrushchev cajoled and Brezhnev banished, yet the city still became a centre of dissent. As from Radishchev to Pushkin, so from Akhmatova to Brodsky. By the 1970s the city hosted a thriving independent underground of jazz and rock musicians, poets and painters, reformists and radicals. Like the Neva in spring, these cultural

1944
The Germans retreat. Leningrad emerges from its darkest hour, but more than one million are dead from starvation and illness. The city's population has dropped to an estimated 600,000.

1956
After the death of Stalin, party leader Nikita Khrushchev makes a 'Secret Speech' denouncing Stalin, thus commencing a period of economic reform and cultural thaw.

1964
A coup against Khrushchev brings Leonid Brezhnev to power, ushering in the so-called 'Years of Stagnation'. Poet and future Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky is labelled a 'social parasite' and sent into exile.

1985
A little-known reformer named Mikhail Gorbachev defeats Leningrad boss Grigory Romanov and is elected General Secretary of the Communist Party. He institutes policies of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness).

1990
St Petersburg has recovered from the mid-century war and benefited from industrial and economic development. In the last decade of the 20th century, the city's population tops five million.

1991
On Christmas day, Mikhail Gorbachev announces the dissolution of the Soviet Union. His rival Boris Yeltsin becomes the first president of the newly independent Russian Federation.

currents overflowed when Mikhail Gorbachev finally came to power and declared a new policy of openness and honesty. The Leningrad democratic movement was unleashed.

Gorbachev forced long-time Leningrad party boss Grigory Romanov (no relation to the royals) and his communist cronies into retirement. He held elections for local office that brought to power the liberal-minded Anatoly Sobchak, the darling of the progressive intelligentsia and the first popularly elected mayor in the city's history. Leningrad was at the forefront of democratic change, as the old regime staggered toward the exit.

Where Gorbachev sought to breathe new life into Soviet socialism, his rival Boris Yeltsin was intent on killing it. Just two months after Sobchak's historic election, a last gasp of reactionary hardliners staged a coup. While Yeltsin mollified Moscow, a hundred thousand protestors filled Palace Sq in Leningrad. The ambivalent soldiers sent to arrest Sobchak disobeyed orders, and instead escorted him to the local TV station, where the mayor denounced the coup and encouraged residents to do the same. Anxiously waiting atop flimsy barricades, anticommunist demonstrators spent the evening in fear of approaching tanks. But the inebriated coup plotters lost their nerve, and as the fog lifted, only the Bronze Horseman appeared.

Local Cop Makes Good

When St Petersburg native Vladimir Putin was elected president in 2000, speculation was rife that he would transfer the Russian capital back to his home town. When Lenin relocated the capital to Moscow rather hastily in 1918, it was supposed to be a temporary move. Furthermore, the new millennium brought a new regime: what better way to make a significant break with the past? Most importantly, Putin's personal attachment to his home town was significant.

Born in 1952, Putin spent his childhood in the Smolny district. Little Vlad went to school in the neighbourhood and took a law degree at Leningrad State University, before working in Moscow and East Germany for the KGB. In 1990 he returned to his home town, where he was promptly promoted through the ranks of local politics. By 1994 he was deputy to St Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak. In his office in the Smolny Institute, Putin famously replaced the portrait of Lenin with one of Peter the Great.

As the city economy slowly recovered from collapse and shock, Sobchak was voted out of office in 1996. Putin was then recruited by fellow Leningrader, Anatoly Chubais, to join him in the capital in the Kremlin administration. After another rapid rise through the ranks, he took over the FSB (the postcommunist KGB). In 1999, after Yeltsin sacked two prime ministers in quick succession, politically unknown Putin was offered the inauspicious post. On New Year's Eve, Yeltsin finally resigned and Putin was appointed acting president.

The rest is history. Since then he has won two presidential elections and enjoys immense popularity, despite his increasingly autocratic leanings. Putin will not go down in history as a liberal democrat, but will be seen as the leader that finally established a semblance of stability after more than a decade of political crisis. That, plus US$75 (€52) per barrel oil prices will get you 65% approval ratings. It looks like Putin and his police pals will be around for a few more years at least. Speculation has him serving as prime minister again or perhaps taking a different influential post after his presidential term expires in 2008.

Putin's fondness for his home town is undiminished. Unlike Peter I, he apparently did not care to expend the political capital required to move the political capital. However, he did extend a gesture to that effect by relocating the Constitutional Court from Moscow to the old Imperial Senate. Who needs a bunch of judges nearby scrutinising presidential decrees anyway? Putin also renovated the Konstantinovsky Palace in Strelna (p219) for his personal use as a presidential palace. Now he – in the best tradition of his tsarist forebears – can host his friends and foreign leaders in St Petersburg style.

2000	2003	2003
Economic difficulty and political instability have caused a decline in the Russian population; the population of St Petersburg drops to 4,628,000. St Petersburg native Vladimir Putin is elected President of Russia.	Despite accusations of power abuse and election manipulation, Putin's favoured candidate prevails in local elections. Winning 63% of the popular vote, Valentina Matvienko becomes the governor of St Petersburg.	A year's worth of festivities are organised to commemorate the tercentenary of the founding of St Petersburg. Museums, theatres and palaces are refurbished and thousands of visitors descend on the city to celebrate.

Finding the Future in the Past

In 1991, by popular referendum, the citizens of Leningrad voted resoundingly to change their city's name once more. They chose to restore its original name, the name of its founder, St Petersburg.

As reviled as the communist regime may have been, it still provided a sufficient standard of living, a predictable day at the office and a common target for discontent. The familiar ways of life suddenly changed. The communist collapse caused enormous personal hardship; economic security and social status were put in doubt. Mafia gangs and bureaucratic fangs dug into the emerging market economy, creating contemptible crony capitalism. The democratic movement splintered into petty rivalries and political insignificance. One of its shining stars, Galina Starovoitova – social scientist turned human rights advocate – was brazenly shot dead in her apartment stairwell in 1998. Out on the street, meanwhile, prudish reserve gave wave to outlandish exhibitionism. Uncertainty and unfairness found expression in an angry and sometimes xenophobic reaction.

With the old order vanquished, the battle to define the new one was on. The symbols of the contending parties were on display throughout the city. The nouveaux riches quickly claimed Nevsky pr for their Milano designer get-ups and Bavarian driving machines. (In Russia cars still have the right of way over pedestrians – even on the sidewalk.) The disaffected youth used faded pink courtyard walls to spray-paint Zenith football insignias, swastikas and the two English words they all seem to know. Every major intersection was adorned with gigantic billboard faces of prima ballerinas and pop singers sipping their favourite cups of coffee. And, like all their St Petersburg predecessors, the new ruling elite wants to leave its own distinctive mark on the city: the proposed Gazprom skyscraper. Nothing says 'I own you' quite like a 300m tower of glass and steel (see the boxed text, p57).

Hazy may be the future, but St Petersburg has found a steadying source of unity in its past. Its legacy as Peter's grand imperial capital was never lost; it was just hidden under communist scaffolding. St Petersburg *is* a European city and it *is* Russia's window on the West. In 2003 residents finally felt sure enough about their future to embrace their past with a summer-long tercentennial celebration. Decades of proletarian indifference were scrubbed off the city's elegant Old World façade, restoring its dignified glow. Fireworks illuminated the city's famous golden spires, gleaming anew. A parade of tall sailing ships from around the world gracefully skimmed down the Neva, to the delight of the large crowds along the embankment. All had come to celebrate Russia's city by the sea, and pay homage to the Bronze Horseman, whose restless spirit still haunts its streets.

ARTS

It was Europe – France, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands – that inspired Peter to build this 'window to the West'. And much of the artistry that defines the city exhibits European influences. St Petersburg's most prominent architect was Bartolomeo Rastrelli, an Italian who engraved rococo ornamentation on every façade, including the Winter Palace. Today this baroque building, as part of the magnificent Hermitage, contains one of the world's finest collections of European art. Russian ballet grew out of the teachings of French and Italian masters.

Despite the evident European influences, the city's Russian roots are a more essential source of inspiration for its artistic genius. Musicians and writers have long looked to Russian history, folk culture and other nationalistic themes. One need only peruse the gravestones of the great artists at Tikhvin Cemetery to appreciate the uniquely Russian nature of their body of work.

That St Petersburg produced so many artistic, literary and musical masterpieces is in itself a source of wonder for the city's visitors and inhabitants today. Strolling from one art-filled room to another through the never-ending Winter Palace; grappling with Dostoevsky's existentialist questions while wandering around Sennaya pl; sitting in silent awe as a ballerina bends her body into impossible shapes…such are the sources of inspiration that St Petersburg holds in store for you.

LITERATURE

The love of literature is an integral part of Russian culture: most Ivans and Olgas will wax rhapsodic on the Russian classics without any hesitation. With the end of Soviet censorship, however, it seems that the literati are not sure what to do with their new-found freedom. Slowly but surely, new authors are emerging, exploring literary genres from historical fiction to science fiction.

Check out what the person next to you on the metro is reading: more than likely, it's a celebrity rag or a murder mystery. Action-packed thrillers and detective stories have become wildly popular in the 21st century, with Darya Dontsova, Alexandra Marinina and Boris Akunin ranking amongst the best-selling and most widely translated authors. Realist writers such as Tatyana Tolstaya and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya engage readers with their moving portraits of everyday people living their everyday lives. Meanwhile, social critics like Viktor Pelevin continue the Soviet literary tradition of using dark humour and fantastical storylines to provide scathing social commentary.

Surprisingly, however, St Petersburg is not a magnet for Russian writers in the 21st century (unlike artists and musicians). The contemporary literary scene is largely based in Moscow, and – to some degree – abroad, as émigré writers continue to be inspired and disheartened by their motherland.

top picks

LITERARY SIGHTS

- Dostoevsky Museum (p93)
- Pushkin Flat-Museum (p72)
- Sennaya Pl (p96)
- Dostoevsky Houses (p96)
- Nabokov Museum (p104)
- Alexander Blok House-Museum (p105)
- Pushkin House (p110)

Romanticism in the Golden Age

Among the many ways that Peter and Catherine the Great brought Westernisation and modernisation to Russia was the introduction of a modern alphabet. Prior to this time, written Russian was used almost exclusively in the Orthodox church, which employed an archaic and incomprehensible Church Slavonic. During the Petrine era, it became increasingly acceptable to use popular language in literature. This development paved the way for two centuries of Russian literary prolificacy, with St Petersburg at its centre.

Romanticism was a reaction against the strict social rules and scientific rationalisation of previous periods, exalting emotion and aesthetics. Nobody embraced Russian romanticism more than the national bard, Alexander Pushkin. Pushkin lived and died in St Petersburg. Most famously, his last address on the Moyka River is now a suitably hagiographic museum, its interior preserved exactly as it was at the moment of his death in 1837 (see p72). The duel that killed him is also remembered with a monument on the site (see p124).

Pushkin's epic poem *Yevgeny Onegin* (Eugene Onegin) is set – in part – in the imperial capital. He savagely ridicules its foppish aristocratic society, despite being a fairly consistent fixture of it himself for most of his adult life. The wonderful short story *The Queen of Spades* is set in the house of a countess on Nevsky pr and is the weird supernatural tale of a man who uncovers her Mephistophelean gambling trick. Published posthumously, *The Bronze Horseman* is named for the statue of Peter the Great that stands on pl Dekabristov (p101). The story takes place during the great flood of 1824. The main character is the lowly clerk Evgeny, who has lost his beloved in the flood. Representing the hopes of the common people, he takes on the empire-building spirit of Peter the Great, represented by the animation of the Bronze Horseman.

No other figure in world literature is more closely connected with St Petersburg than Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81). He was among the first writers to navigate the murky waters of the human subconscious, blending powerful prose with psychology, philosophy and spirituality. Born in Moscow, Dostoevsky moved to the imperial capital in 1838, aged 16, to begin his literary and journalistic career.

His career was halted – but ultimately shaped – by his casual involvement with a group of young free-thinkers called the Petrashevsky Circle. Nicholas I decided to make an example of some of these liberal thinkers, arresting them and sentencing them to death. After a few months in the Peter & Paul Fortress prison, Dostoevsky and his cohorts were assembled for execution. As the guns were aimed and ready to fire, the death sentence was suddenly called off – a joke! – and the group was committed instead to a sentence of hard labour in Siberia. After Dostoevsky was pardoned by Alexander II and returned to St Petersburg, he wrote *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1861), a vivid recounting of his prison sojourn.

The ultimate St Petersburg novel and literary classic is *Crime and Punishment* (1866). It is a tale of redemption, but also acknowledges the 'other side' of the regal capital: the gritty, dirty city that spawned unsavoury characters and unabashed poverty.

In his later works, *The Idiot, The Possessed* and *The Brothers Karamazov,* Dostoevsky was explicit in his criticism of the revolutionary movement as being morally bankrupt. A true believer, he asserted that only by following Christ's ideal could humanity be saved. An incorrigible Russophile, Dostoevsky eventually turned against St Petersburg and its European tendencies. His final home near Vladimirskaya pl now houses the Dostoevsky Museum (p93) and he is buried at Tikhvin Cemetery (p90).

Amidst the epic novels of Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, an absurdist short-story writer like Nikolai Gogol (1809–52) sometimes gets lost in the annals of Russian literature. But his troubled genius created some of Russian literature's most memorable characters, including Akaki Akakievich, tragicomic hero of *The Overcoat,* and the brilliant Major Kovalyev, who chases his errant nose around St Petersburg in *The Nose*. Gogol came to St Petersburg from his native Ukraine in 1829, and wrote and lived here for a decade before spending his final years abroad. He was not impressed by the legendary capital: in a letter to his mother he described it as a place where 'people seem more dead than alive' and complained endlessly about the air pressure, which he believed caused illness. He was nevertheless inspired to write a number of absurdist stories, collectively known as *The Petersburg Tales,* which are generally recognised as the zenith of his creativity.

Symbolism in the Silver Age

The late 19th century saw the rise of the symbolist movement, which emphasised individualism and creativity, purporting that artistic endeavours were exempt from the rules that bound other parts of society. The outstanding figures of this time were the novelists Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900), Andrei Bely (1880–1934) and Alexander Blok (1880–1921) as well as the poets Sergei Yesenin, Lev Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova. The Stray Dog Café (p181), an underground bar on pl Iskusstv (Arts Sq), was a popular meeting place where Symbolist writers, musicians and artists exchanged ideas and shared their work.

Blok and Bely, who both lived in St Petersburg, were the most renowned writers of the Symbolist movement. While Bely was well known and respected for his essays and philosophical discourses, it is his mysterious novel *Petersburg* for which he is remembered. Its language is both literary and musical: it seems the author was paying as much attention to the sound of his words as to their meaning. The plot, however difficult to follow, revolves around a revolutionary who is hounded by the Bronze Horseman (the same statue that harasses Pushkin's character).

Blok took over where Dostoevsky left off, writing of prostitutes, drunks and other characters marginalised by society. Blok sympathised with the revolutions and he was praised by the Bolsheviks. His novel *The Twelve,* published in 1918, is pretty much a love letter to Lenin. However, he later became disenchanted with the revolution and consequently fell out of favour; he died a sad, lonely poet. In one of his last letters, he wrote, 'She did devour me, lousy, snuffling dear Mother Russia, like a sow devouring her piglet'. The flat where he spent the last eight years of his life is now a museum (see p105).

Revolutionary Literature

The immediate aftermath of 1917 saw a creative upswing in Russia. Inspired by social change, writers carried over these principles into their work, pushing revolutionary ideas and groundbreaking styles.

The trend was temporary, of course. The Bolsheviks were no connoisseurs of culture; and the new leadership did not appreciate literature unless it directly supported the goals of communism. Some writers managed to write within the system, penning some excellent poetry and plays in the 1920s; however, most found little inspiration in the prevailing climate of art

ST PETERSBURG LITERATURE

- *Anna Karenina* (Leo Tolstoy) Represents the pinnacle of Russian literature. Set partially in St Petersburg, Tolstoy's tragedy of a woman who violates the rigid sexual code of her time offers an alternative for readers who don't have time for *War and Peace*.
- *The Bronze Horseman* (Alexander Pushkin) Pushkin's poetic epic sees the sculpture of Peter the Great coming to life after a ruinous flood that all but wipes out the city.
- *Buddha's Little Finger* (Victor Pelevin) The story of a St Petersburg poet who fluctuates between two nightmares. Just when he gets comfortable in the schizophrenic ward of a hospital in the 1990s, he wakes up in the midst of the Russian civil war. This darkly comic author won the 1993 Russian Book Prize for his short stories.
- *The Cat and the Cook* (Ivan Krylov) Russia's favourite fabulist, who is buried in Tikhvin Cemetery, has been translated into English – to the delight of children and adults alike. Although Krylov wrote in verse, the translation is prose, accompanied by whimsical folkloric illustrations.
- *Crime and Punishment* (Fyodor Dostoevsky) Dostoevsky's quintessential St Petersburg novel: a poor, tortured student takes control of his destiny by killing a nasty old moneylender. If only it were all that simple...
- *The Idiot* (Fyodor Dostoevsky) If you can't get enough of Dostoevsky, why not tackle this tome, which takes place both in St Petersburg and in nearby Pavlovsk. The descriptions are not quite as evocative as those in *Crime and Punishment,* but the characters are equally complex and the debates no less esoteric.
- *Incidences* (Daniil Kharms) Kharms died in a Leningrad prison in the 1940s, long before his secret musings saw the light of day. Yet these absurdist vignettes are political only in the grim hopelessness of the society they depict.
- *The Madonnas of Leningrad* (Debra Dean) Tells of an old Russian émigré who, as she loses her mind to Alzheimer's, is swept back to her days working at the Hermitage during the Siege, when she was sustained by her love of the art that no longer hung on the walls.
- *The Master of Petersburg* (JM Coetzee) Coetzee imagines Dostoevsky's return to St Petersburg to investigate the death of his stepson. It is a powerfully written tale of grief, paying homage to Dostoevsky.
- *Nevsky Prospekt* (Nikolai Gogol) A superb evocation of the city's vast main avenue and the amusing characters that haunt it. This short story will entice any first-time readers to discover Gogol's other *St Petersburg Tales*.
- *Petersburg* (Andrei Bely) Bely's modernist novel is often compared to Joyce's *Ulysses.* At once baffling and thrilling, it weaves together snippets of personal stories, capturing the mysticism of the Symbolist movement and the strife of 1905 St Petersburg.
- *Poem Without a Hero* (Anna Akhmatova) This epic poem describes St Petersburg with both realism and monumentalism, somehow capturing the contradictory relationship Akhmatova had with her home town.
- *Pushkin House* (Andrei Bitov) This highly lauded novel revolves around the titular literary institute on Vasilevsky Island (see p110) and is crammed with references to the Russian writers who are remembered there. Eccentric characters, nonlinear plotlines and imagined dialogue add up to an insightful commentary on Soviet life.
- *Speak, Memory* (Vladimir Nabokov) As the title implies, the celebrated novelist Vladimir Nabokov lets his memory speak in this memoir of his childhood in St Petersburg. His characteristically evocative prose makes for a tale that is more impressionistic than factual, but nonetheless fascinating.
- *The Twelve* (Alexander Blok) Blok's long poem describes 12 Bolshevik soldiers marching through the streets of revolutionary Petrograd in the midst of a blizzard. Critics did not respond well to the obvious comparison between the soldiers and the 12 Apostles who followed Christ.
- *We* (Yevgeny Zamyatin) Although Zamyatin moved to Petrograd to join the Bolsheviks, his 'counter-revolutionary' writings were mostly banned by the Soviets. In the best Orwellian tradition, this dystopian novel is part fantastic science fiction, part scathing political critique.
- *We the Living* (Ayn Rand) While Rand always generates mixed reviews, this novel – based in part on her own youth in Leningrad – is unlike her other work. Three young dreamers struggle to establish their identities in postrevolutionary Russia; there are no happy endings.

'serving the people'. Stalin announced that writers were 'engineers of the human soul' and as such had a responsibility to write in a partisan direction.

The clampdown on diverse literary styles culminated in the late 1930s with the creation of socialist realism, a literary form created to promote the needs of the state, praise industrialisation and demonise social misfits. While Stalin's propaganda machine was churning out novels with titles such as *How the Steel Was Tempered* and *Cement,* St Petersburg's literary community was secretly writing about life under a tyranny. The long-established tradition of underground writing flourished.

Literature of Dissent

Throughout the 20th century, many talented writers were faced with silence, exile or death, as a result of the imposing standards of the Soviet system. Many accounts of Soviet life were *samizdat* publications, secretly circulated among the literary community. The Soviet Union's most celebrated writers – the likes of Boris Pasternak, Mikhail Bulgakov and Andrei Bitov – were silenced in their own country, while their works received international acclaim.

No literary figure is as inextricably linked to the fate of St Petersburg-Petrograd-Leningrad as Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), the long-suffering poet whose work contains bittersweet depictions of the city she loved. Akhmatova's family was imprisoned and killed; her friends exiled, tortured and arrested; her colleagues constantly hounded – but she refused to leave her beloved city and died there in 1966. Her former residence in the Fountain House now contains the Anna Akhmatova Museum (p87).

In 1946 Akhmatova's work was denounced by Communist Party officials as 'the poetry of a crazed lady, chasing back and forth between boudoir and chapel'. As a reward for her cooperation in the war effort, Akhmatova was allowed to publish again after WWII. Nonetheless, she was cautious, and she worked in secret on masterpieces such as *Requiem*. Through all this, her love for her city was unconditional and unblinking. As she wrote in *Poem Without a Hero*: 'The capital on the Neva; Having forgotten its greatness; Like a drunken whore; Did not know who was taking her'.

When Nikita Khrushchev came to power in 1953, he relaxed the most oppressive restrictions on artists and writers. As this so-called 'thaw' slowly set in, a group of young poets known as 'Akhmatova's Orphans' started to meet at her apartment to read and discuss their work. The star of the group was the fiercely talented Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky seemed to have no fear of the consequences of writing his mind. In 1964 he was tried for 'social parasitism' and exiled to the north of Russia. His sentence was shortened after concerted international protests led by French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He returned to Leningrad in 1965, only to immediately resume his thorn-in-the-side activities.

During Brodksy's absence, Khrushchev had been overthrown and replaced by a more conservative Brezhnev. It was Brezhnev who came up with the plan to silence troublemaker writers by sending them into foreign exile. Brodsky was put on a plane to Germany in 1972.

The postglasnost era of the 1980s and 1990s uncovered a huge library of work that had been suppressed during the Soviet period. Authors such as Yevgeny Zamyatin, Daniil Kharms, Anatoly Rybakov, Venedict Erofeev and Andrei Bitov – banned in the Soviet Union – are now recognised for their cutting-edge commentary and significant contributions to world literature.

BALLET

First introduced in the 17th century, ballet in Russia evolved as an offshoot of French dance combined with Russian folk and peasant dance techniques. In 1738, French dance master Jean Baptiste Lande established the Imperial Ballet School in St Petersburg – a precursor to the famed Vaganova School of Choreography (see p75).

The French dancer and choreographer Marius Petipa (1819–1910) is considered to be the father of Russian ballet, acting as principal dancer and Premier Ballet Master of the Imperial Theatres and Imperial Ballet. All told, he produced more than 60 full ballets, including the classics *Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*.

In 1907, Petipa wrote in his diary, 'I can state that I created a ballet company of which everyone said: St Petersburg has the greatest ballet in all Europe'. At the turn of the 20th century, the heyday of Russian ballet, St Petersburg's Imperial School of Ballet rose to world prominence, producing superstar after superstar. Names such as Vaslav Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova, Mathilda Kshesinskaya, George Balanchine, Michel Fokine and Olga Spessivtzeva turned the Mariinsky Theatre (p188) into the world's most dynamic display of the art of dance.

Sergei Diaghilev graduated from the St Petersburg Conservatory, but he abandoned his dream of becoming a composer when his professor, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, told him he had no talent for music. Instead he turned his attention to dance, and his Ballets Russes took Europe by storm. The Petipa-inspired choreography was daring and dynamic, and the stage décor was painted by artists such as Alexander Benois, Mikhail Larionov, Natalya Goncharova and Leon Bakst. The overall effect was an artistic, awe-inducing display unlike anything that was taking place elsewhere in Europe.

A TALE OF TWO BALLERINAS

In the West, most people associate Russian ballet with the male stars whose well-documented flights from the Soviet Union made them household names: Nureyev, Nijinsky, Baryshnikov. But to Petersburgers, the magic of the dance is tied to two women – Anna Pavlova and Mathilda Kshesinskaya.

Pavlova, born just outside St Petersburg in 1881, first danced at the Mariinsky in 1899. Within a decade she and Nijinsky were dancing together in some of the most exciting productions the world had seen, mainly choreographed by Michel Fokine. In 1909, when the Ballets Russes in Paris produced Fokine's *Les Sylphides* (*Chopiana* in Russia), audiences were rapturous. Pavlova's light-as-air grace was an instant sensation. In 1912 she emigrated to form her own ballet company in the West. Her ambassadorial skills (representing ballet, that is) remain unmatched. She is largely credited for taking ballet to the US. Her most remembered role is in Fokine's *The Dying Swan,* written especially for her. Anna Pavlova died in 1931, while touring the Netherlands. She caught pneumonia after her train derailed and she went out in the cold to see what happened. Apparently, just before she died she asked to hold her costume and hear the music from *The Dying Swan*.

Mathilda Kshesinskaya, born in 1872 near Peterhof, graduated from the Imperial School of Ballet and instantly became its star. She was the first Russian dancer to master 32 consecutive *fouettés en tournant* (spins done in place on one leg), then considered the ultimate achievement in ballet. She was also the subject of curiosity and admiration for her private life, as she was the lover of Nicholas II before he became tsar. She hosted glamorous balls in her mansion that were attended by the elite of St Petersburg society. She emigrated to France in 1920, where she lived and taught ballet until she died in 1971. She is revered as a heroine of her times – for her outspokenness, her professional mastery and for the debonair way she controlled her own affairs. Her old mansion now houses the Museum of Political History (p117), but there's a wonderful exhibition about the ballerina inside.

Under the Soviets, ballet was treated as a natural resource. It enjoyed highly privileged status, which allowed schools like the Vaganova and companies like the Kirov to maintain a level of lavish production and no-expense-spared star-searches. Still, the story of 20th-century Russian ballet is connected with the West, to where so many of its brightest stars emigrated or defected. Anna Pavlova, Vaslav Nijinsky, Rudolf Nureyev, Mikhail Baryshnikov, George Balanchine, Natalya Makarova, Mathilda Kshesinskaya, to name a few, all found fame in Western Europe or America.

The Kirov, whose home is the Mariinsky Theatre (p188; the company is sometimes referred to as the Mariinsky Opera and Ballet), has been rejuvenated under the fervent directorship of Valery Gergiev. The Mariinsky's calling card has always been its flawless classical ballet, but in recent years, names like William Forsythe and John Neumeier have brought modern choreography to this establishment. The Mariinsky's credibility on the world stage is set to soar further in 2008 on completion of its controversial new theatre being built adjacent to the old one on the Kryukov Canal (see p56).

MUSIC

St Petersburg has a rich musical legacy, dating back to the days when the Group of Five and Peter Tchaikovsky composed here. Opera and classical music continue to draw crowds, and the Mariinsky and the Philharmonia regularly sell out their performances of home-grown classics. (Surprisingly, earlier music – such as baroque and medieval music – is not as well known or as well loved. But the directors of the Early Music Festival are out to change that – see the boxed text, p190).

Music-lovers come in all shapes and sizes, however. Even when rock-and-roll was illegal, it was being played in basements and garages. Now, 20 years after the weight of censorship has been lifted, St Petersburg is the centre of *russky rok,* a magnet for musicians and music-lovers, who are drawn to its atmosphere of innovation and creation.

Classical Music & Opera

As the cultural heart of Russia, St Petersburg was a natural draw for generations of composers, its rich cultural life acting as inspiration for talent from throughout Russia. Mikhail Glinka is often considered the father of Russian classical music. In 1836 he premiered *A Life for the Tsar* in St Petersburg. While European musical influences were evident, the story was based on Russian history, recounting the dramatic tale of a peasant, Ivan Susanin, who sacrificed himself to save Mikhail Romanov.

In the second half of the 19th century, several influential schools – based in the capital – formed, from which emerged some of Russia's most famous composers and finest music. The so-called Group of Five – Modest Mussorgsky, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Alexander Borodin, César Cui and Mily Balakirev – looked to folk music for uniquely Russian themes. They tried to develop a distinct sound using unusual tonal and harmonic devices. Their main opponent was Anton Rubinstein's conservatively rooted Russian Musical Society, which became the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1861. The competition between the two schools was fierce. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote in his memoirs: 'Rubinstein had a reputation as a pianist, but was thought to have neither talent nor taste as a composer.'

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840–93) seemed to find the middle ground, embracing Russian folklore and music as well as the disciplines of the Western European composers. In 1890 Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades* premiered at the Mariinsky. His adaptation of the famous Pushkin tale surprised and invigorated the artistic community, especially as his deviations from the original text – infusing it with more cynicism and a brooding sense of doom – tied the piece to contemporary St Petersburg.

Tchaikovsky is widely regarded as the doyen of Russian national composers and his output, including the magnificent *1812 Overture,* his concertos and symphonies, the ballets *Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker,* and his opera *Yevgeny Onegin* are among the world's most popular classical works. They are certainly the shows that are staged most often at the Mariinsky and other theatres around St Petersburg (see p188).

Following in Tchaikovsky's romantic footsteps was the innovative Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971). He fled Russia after the revolution, but his memoirs credit his childhood in St Petersburg as having a major effect on his music. *The Rite of Spring* (which created a furore at its first performance in Paris), *Petrouchka* and *The Firebird* were all influenced by Russian folk music. The official Soviet line was that Stravinsky was a 'political and ideological renegade'; but he was rehabilitated after he visited the USSR and was formally received by Khrushchev himself.

Similarly, the ideological beliefs and experimental style of Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–75) led to him being alternately praised and condemned by the Soviet government. As a student at the Petrograd conservatory, Shostakovich failed his exams in Marxist methodology, but still managed to write his First Symphony before he graduated in 1926. He wrote brooding, bizarrely dissonant works, as well as accessible traditional classical music. After official condemnation by Stalin, his Seventh Symphony (Leningrad Symphony) brought him honour and international standing when it was performed during WWII. The authorities changed their mind again and banned his anti-Soviet music in 1948, then 'rehabilitated' him after Stalin's death. These days he is held in high esteem as the namesake of the acclaimed Shostakovich Philharmonic Hall (p189), where the local symphony orchestra regularly performs.

top picks

ST PETERSBURG ALBUMS

- **Pictures at an Exhibition** Modest Mussorgsky
- **Seventh Symphony (Leningrad Symphony)** Dmitry Shostakovich
- **Ubiytsy sredi nas** Dva Samolyota (Two Airplanes)
- **Kollektsioner Oruzhiya or Granatoviy Album** Splean
- **Udelyvaem Ameriku Nachalo** Leningrad

Since 1988 Valery Gergiev has revitalised the Kirov Opera company, which continues to perform at the Mariinsky Theatre (p188). The Russian classics still top the list of performances (thanks, in part, to the demands of the tourists). But Gergiev is also willing to be a little adventurous, taking on operas that had not been performed in half a century or more. In 2003 he undertook an ambitious production of Shostakovich's opera *The Nose* (based on Gogol's surreal story, see p40).

Gergiev is also responsible for initiating the Stars of White Nights Festival (p18), an annual event which showcases the best and brightest dancers and musicians.

See p188 and p189 for details of St Petersburg venues for opera and classical music.

ST PETE'S LOCAL BEATS

Yury Vosskresensky is a photographer, journalist and co-owner of City Bar, one of St Petersburg's favourite expat bars (see p179). Yury books bands to play at City Bar on Friday and Saturday nights, so he stays on top of the local music scene, too. We spoke with Yury about contemporary music in St Pete.

St Petersburg is widely considered Russia's best music city – meaning the best place to hear great music, the best place to be a musician. Is this true?

It's definitely true. All of the classic Russky Rock groups are from Petersburg: Grebenshchikov (*Akvarium*), Kino, Televizor, NOM, Sekret. The city's favourite home-town band is Dva Samolyota. These guys have moved on to other projects, but they still play together once a year at Griboedov (p184).

Those are old-timers. What about new up-and-coming groups?

It's not only the old guys. Petersburg's legacy continues with younger groups like Splean. Billy's Band plays music that you won't hear anywhere else – romantic, jazzy, Tom Waits–type stuff. Of course, you can't talk about music in Petersburg without mentioning Shnurov (see the boxed text, opposite)…

Where is the best place in the city to hear great music?

It depends on the kind of music. JFC Jazz Club (p185) has talented, interesting musicians playing just about every single night.

For punk, there is usually something going at Fish Fabrique (p184) or Orlandina (p184). Tunnel Club (p183) is a very specialised place with a beautiful interior and the best techno music. It attracts a strange clientele but it is perfect for those people who like that kind of thing. For artsy, indie rock music, Red Club (p185) and Griboedov (p184) are great choices.

What is new in the St Petersburg club scene?

Maina (p184) is a brand new club, *[less than six months old at the time of research]*, which is trying something totally unique. It is located on the outskirts of town in a residential area – a so-called 'bedroom district'. There is nothing going on out there, but *everybody* lives there. Maina is an upscale place with a cool, industrial interior. It provides a high level of service and brings in great musicians – real stars. It is catering to the class of people that appreciates quality – beautiful surroundings, excellent entertainment – but providing it in a completely new, unusual location. For now, this place is very popular, but it will be interesting to see how Maina succeeds.

Another very interesting new concert space is called the Place (p185), near Baltiysky vokzal. Right now, this part of the city seems like it is out of the way, but it is developing very quickly and soon it will have its own cultural life.

What makes St Petersburg such an exciting music town?

Petersburg is a synthetic city. It has a bad climate; it has always been plagued by floods. We have a saying in Russia that a mad town attracts mad people. Mad people are often creative people.

Rock

Russian music is not all about classical composers. Ever since the 'bourgeois' Beatles filtered through in the 1960s, Russians both young and old have supported the rock revolution. Starved of decent equipment and the chance to record or perform to big audiences, Russian rock groups initially developed underground. By the 1970s – the Soviet hippy era – the music had developed a huge following among the disaffected, distrustful youth.

Although bands initially imitated their Western counterparts, a home-grown sound was emerging in Leningrad in the 1980s. Boris Grebenshchikov and his band Akvarium (Aquarium) caused sensations wherever they performed; his folk rock and introspective lyrics became the emotional cry of a generation. Yury Shevchuk and his band DDT emerged as the country's main rock band. The god of Russian rock was Viktor Tsoy and his group Kino. His early death in a 1990 car crash ensured his legend a long life. On the anniversary of Tsoy's death (15 August), fans still gather to play his tunes and remember the musician, especially at his grave at Bogoslovskogo Cemetery.

Many contemporary favourites in St Petersburg have been playing together since the early days. The most prominent (and perhaps most popular) local fixture is Dva Samolyota (Two Airplanes), a ska band exhibiting influences of Latin-jazz, reggae and afro-beat. These days the group plays together only occasionally, but its members are still fixtures on the local scene, as drummer Sasha Sindalovsky is the owner of the town's top music club, Griboedov (p184), and bassist Anton Belyankin owns Datscha and Fidel (p182).

MY NAME IS SHNUR

Leningrad, the punk ska band from St Petersburg, was banned from the radio and forbidden from performing in Moscow. But such controversy only fuelled its popularity. Lead singer Sergei Shnurov claims 'Our songs are just about the good sides of life – vodka and girls that is.'

But besides being rowdy and bawdy, the lyricist is known for his ironic insights on contemporary culture. 'Money' satirises society's pervasive consumerism, while 'WWW' is a commentary on the alienation caused by modern technology. Most famously, 'Menya Zovut Shnur' ('My Name is Shnur') and its accompanying animated video are a harsh critique of authority.

Nowadays, Leningrad is widely played on Russian radio, thanks in part to filler noise that covers up the most vulgar lyrics. The brassy 14-piece ensemble has toured Europe and America, and was featured on the soundtrack to the 2005 film *Everything is Illuminated*. But that doesn't mean the spunky, punky band is going mainstream. Leningrad continues to act in ways that are unexpected, uncouth and outrageous; and the fans wouldn't have it any other way.

St Petersburg is responsible for producing several groups that are now world renowned. Ranking among Russia's most widely respected and admired musicians of the 21st century is Splean (not 'Spleen', as a sort of tribute to the Fab Four). These rockers' wide-ranging styles and straightforward, almost poetic lyrics have earned them fans around the world, but they got their start right here in St Pete. Bad behaviour, biting lyrics and punky ska sound combine to make Leningrad another enduring favourite (see the boxed text, above).

Perhaps metal rockers Amatory have always had the stuff of legends. Certainly fans of their rough guitar and growling vocals thought so. But when Gang, their lead guitarist, died from liver cancer in 2007, it sealed their place in St Petersburg rock history (if leaving the group's future in question).

Switch on Russian MTV and you'll see local versions of boy bands and disco divas all doing their sometimes desultory, sometimes foot-tapping stuff. Meanwhile, St Petersburg clubs (see p183) are filled with garage bands, new wave, punk, hard rock and more than a few Beatles cover bands.

VISUAL ARTS

It should come as no surprise that St Petersburg is an artistic place. The city was designed by artists, so it is certainly picturesque. In the early years, aristocrats and emperors filled their palaces with endless collections of paintings and applied arts, guaranteeing a steady stream of artistic production. These days, hundreds of thousands of visitors come here to see the masterpieces that hang in the Hermitage and in the Russian Museum.

But St Petersburg's artistic tradition is not only historical. The city's winding waterways, crumbling castles and colourful characters continue to inspire creative types. Artists assail passers-by as they stroll down Nevsky pr, inviting them to sit for a portrait or peruse their cityscapes. Smaller streets are lined with galleries displaying pretty pictures of gold-domed churches or grittier depictions of darker places (see p150). The souvenir market (p153) is filled with watercolours; nightclubs double as art galleries (see Art-Vokzal, p183, or Manhattan, p184). St Petersburg has always been a city of artists and poets, and that legacy endures.

Academy of Arts

Known both as the Imperial Academy of Arts and the St Petersburg Academy of Arts, this official state-run artistic institution was founded in 1757 by Count Ivan Shuvalov, a political advisor, education minister and longtime lover of Empress Elizabeth. It was Catherine the Great who moved the Academy out of Shuvalov's home, commissioning the present neoclassical building on Vasilevsky Island (see p110).

The Academy was responsible for the education and training of young artists. It focused heavily on French-influenced academic art, which incorporated neoclassicism and romanticism. Painters like Fyodor Alexeyev and Grigory Chernetsev came out of the Academy of Arts.

Peredvizhniki

In the 19th century, artist Ivan Kramskoy led the so-called 'revolt of 14' whereby a group of upstart artists broke away from the powerful but conservative Academy of Arts. The mutineers considered that art should be a force for national awareness and social change, and they depicted common people and real problems in their paintings. The Peredvizhniki (Wanderers), as they called themselves, travelled around the country in an attempt to widen their audience (thus inspiring their moniker).

The Peredvizhniki included Vasily Surikov, who painted vivid Russian historical scenes, and Nikolai Ghe, who favoured both historical and biblical landscapes. Perhaps the best loved of all Russian artists, Ilya Repin has works that range from social criticism *(Barge Haulers on the Volga)* to history *(Cossacks Writing a Letter to the Turkish Sultan)* to portraits.

Many Peredvizhniki masterpieces are on display at the Russian Museum (p76), as well as the Brodsky House-Museum (p74).

By the end of the 19th century, Russian culture was retreating from Western influences and looking instead to nationalistic themes and folk culture for inspiration. Artists at this time invented the *matryoshka*, the quintessential Russian nesting doll. One of the world's largest collections of *matryoshkas* is on display at the Toy Museum (p118).

Mikhail Vrubel was inspired by Byzantine mosaics and Russian fairytales. Painters like Nikolai Roerikh and Mikhail Nesterov incorporated mystical themes, influenced by Russian folklore and religious traditions. All of these masters are prominently featured at the Russian Museum.

top picks

CONTEMPORARY ART

- Russian Museum – Benois Wing (p77)
- Pushkinskaya 10 (p91)
- Museum of Anna Akhmatova (p87)
- Manege Central Exhibition Hall (p104)
- Marble Palace (p72)
- New Exhibition Hall (p91)

Avant-Garde

From about 1905 Russian art became a maelstrom of groups, styles and 'isms', as it absorbed decades of European change in a few years. It finally gave birth to its own avant-garde futurist movements.

Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova were the centre of a Cézanne-influenced group known as the Knave of Diamonds. This husband-wife team went on to develop neoprimitivism, based on popular arts and primitive icons. They worked closely with Sergei Diaghilev, the founder of Ballets Russes, designing costumes and sets for the ballet company that brought together some of the era's greatest dancers, composers and artists (see p43).

The most radical members of the Knave of Diamonds formed a group known as Donkey's Tail, which exhibited the influences of cubism and futurism. Larionov and Goncharova were key members of this group, as well as Marc Chagall and Kazmir Malevich.

In 1915 Malevich announced the arrival of Suprematism. His utterly abstract geometrical shapes (with the black square representing the ultimate 'zero form') finally freed art from having to depict the material world and made it a doorway to higher realities. See one of his four *Black Square* paintings – and other examples of Russian avant-garde – at the Hermitage (p143).

Works by all of these artists are on display at the Russian Museum, as well as the Brodsky House-Museum.

Soviet Art

Futurists turned to the needs of the revolution – education, posters, banners – with enthusiasm. They had a chance to act on their theories of how art shapes society. But at the end of the 1920s abstract art fell out of favour. The Communist Party wanted socialist realism. Images abounded of striving workers, heroic soldiers and inspiring leaders, some of which are on display at the Russian Museum. Two million sculptures of Lenin and Stalin dotted the country; Malevich ended up painting portraits and doing designs for Red Square parades.

After Stalin, an avant-garde 'Conceptualist' underground group was allowed to form. Ilya Kabakov painted or sometimes just arranged the debris of everyday life to show the gap between the promises and realities of Soviet existence. Erik Bulatov's 'Sotsart' pointed to the devaluation of language by ironically reproducing Soviet slogans or depicting words disappearing over the horizon. In 1962 artists set up a show of 'unofficial' art in Moscow: Khrushchev called it 'dogshit' and sent it back underground.

Neo-Academism & Non-Conformist Art

As the centre of the avant-garde movement in Russia at the turn of the last century, St Petersburg never gave up its ties to barrier-breaking, gut-wrenching, head-scratching art. And since the end of communism the city has rediscovered its seething artistic underbelly.

Much of St Petersburg's contemporary art scene revolves around Pushkinskaya 10, a centre where artists and musicians continue to congregate and create (see p91). This place was 'founded'

PAINTING PUSHKINSKAYA

Evgeny Tykotsky is an artist who has been living at Pushkinskaya 10 (p91) since its 'founding' in the late 1980s. His whimsical paintings have hung in the Russian Museum, the Anna Akhmatova Museum in the Fountain House and the Museum of Non-Conformist Art. We talked to Evgeny about the history of Pushkinskaya 10 .

Tell me how you came to live here.

In the late 1980s, these apartment blocks stood empty. No one lived here. The lifts were falling down; old grumpy cats ate the rubbish in the yard; there was no water or electricity. The houses were empty! One day, some artists, musicians and bandits wandered past and noticed that no one lived there and decided to move in. That was 1989. They moved in and took over. That was the squat.

I meant to move in there with the rest. But first I went to borrow some money from my grandmother. Then I found myself a bottle of port wine *[Do not confuse this with port! It's another beastie altogether.]* and after that I couldn't move very well. Someone carried me into a spare room to sleep for a while. When I woke up, I saw my friends – well, they weren't friends yet, but they are friends anyway… They were all asleep with the sleep of the dead (possibly from port wine). So I found some Living Water and sprinkled them with it. They all woke up and started to paint…

This house was first filled with dilettantes, and professionals, and amateurs…but mostly it was filled with poets. It was filled with children of the Moon!

It all sounds very magical. How does that time – the late 1980s – compare with Pushkinskaya 10 today?

Well, how can you compare your youth and your first love with adulthood? You are now an adult, you are no longer 17 years old, you have had many loves… You like some, you don't like others, and if you don't like this one, well, never mind, he is gone now anyway. But your first love you remember your entire life. And that's how you might compare this period with what used to be.

That was a wild period. It was love and life; we drank wine and vodka; we painted, we fell in love…

There was no light or water in the house. Bellonka – my neighbour above me – she had water and I had electricity. So in the evening I would borrow some water, then make supper on my little electric stove and invite her to sup with me… We would spend the evenings talking about family, about art, about all sorts of things. That's how our paintings were born. There were many marvellous times then.

Now we are a 'Society of Artists'. There is something official about it all. It's like any living being: it's born like some dandelion under the asphalt; then it grows and breaks through the asphalt. That's the first real life, that little growth! Then it grows up and it's a dandelion, and it loses its flower and fades…like us, we are all fading.

What do you have to say to artists today – young people who don't have the Living Water and the cats and the port wine to inspire them?

People – I say this to any person, not just an artist: love and be loved. That's all, you don't need anything else. The rest will come. If someone stops loving you, you will be horribly upset, suffer and think and all that. And from that tragedy will be born a painting, music, poetry. And if you are loved, that will also give birth to art and poetry that is not coloured by tragedy. That's all. What else can I possibly wish them?

But of course, if those young ones need something, let them come, let them visit me personally! We will sit and talk! Perhaps they will understand something of this life then!

in the late 1980s, when a bunch of artists, musicians and other plagues on society moved into an abandoned building near Pl Vosstaniya (see the boxed text, p49, for an insider's account of this history). The centre has since developed into an artistic and cultural institution that is unique in Russia, if not the world.

In the early 1990s Timur Novikov founded the neo-academic movement as an antidote to 'the barbarism of modernism'. This return to classicism (albeit with a street-level, junkshop feel) culminated in his foundation of the Museum of the New Academy of Fine Arts, which is housed at Pushkinskaya 10. Although he died in 2002, he continues to cast a long shadow on the city's artistic scene.

Over the years, the hodgepodge of artists, exhibits and studio space at Pushkinskaya 10 has grown. The centre is now officially known as the Free Culture Society, although it's still often referred to by its original address. In 1998 the Free Culture Society opened the Museum of Non-Conformist Art, with its own collection of 'unofficial' art from the 20th and 21st centuries. Most importantly, the various museums and galleries at Pushkinskaya 10 showcase the ever-growing oeuvre of its member artists, including not only paintings but also photographs, sculptures, collages, videos, set and graphic designs, and music.

CINEMA

The Lenfilm studio on the Petrograd Side was a centre of the Soviet film industry, producing many much-loved Russian comedies and dramas – most famously, Sergei Eisenstein's *October* (1928). Lenfilm has continued in the postcommunist era to work with some success as a commercial film studio. However, the removal of Soviet-era state funding for film-making has inevitably led to torpor in the local industry.

There are, of course, exceptions. Ever since the *Russian Ark* (2002), St Petersburg native Alexander Sokurov has been recognised as one of Russia's most talented contemporary directors. The world's first unedited feature film, the *Russian Ark* was shot in one unbroken 90-minute frame. Sokurov's films have tackled a wide range of subjects and he is in the midst of a tetralogy of films about world leaders, including Hitler *(Molokh),* Lenin *(Taurus)* and Japanese Emperor Hirohito *(The Sun).* Sokurov's most recent triumph was *Alexandra,* the moving tale of an elderly woman who visits her grandson at an army base in Grozny. The title role is played by Galina Vishnevskaya, opera doyenne and wife of composer/conductor Mstislav Rostropovich.

A rising star in St Petersburg's film industry is Alexey German, who gained attention with his 1998 film *Khrustalyov! My Car!* Based on a story by Joseph Brodsky (see p43), the film tells the tale of a well-loved military doctor who was arrested during Stalin's 'Doctor's Plot'. In more recent years, this prolific director has put out *Garpastum,* set in prerevolutionary Petrograd, and *Hard to be a God,* an adaptation of the popular science-fiction book.

Other Lenfilm successes include Alexey Balabanov's *Of Freaks and Men,* the joint project of Boris Frumin and Yury Lebedev *Undercover,* and Andrei Kravchuk's *The Italian,* all of which enjoyed some critical acclaim in the West.

St Petersburg hosts the Festival of Festivals (p18), an annual noncompetitive film event in June. Partly sponsored by Lenfilm, the festival is no doubt an attempt to draw film-makers to this fair city, as well as to draw attention to its films. A smaller but more innovative event is Message to Man (p18), a festival featuring documentary, short and animated film. For a list of local cinemas, see p192.

THEATRE

While it may not be completely accessible to most travellers due to language barriers, theatre plays a major role in St Petersburg performing arts. At least a dozen drama and comedy theatres dot the city streets, not to mention puppet theatres and musical theatres (see p190 for a list of venues). As in all areas of the performing arts, contemporary playwrights do not receive as much attention as well-known greats and adaptations of famous literature. Nonetheless, drama has a long history in Russia and St Petersburg, as the cultural capital, has always been at the forefront.

In the early days, theatre was an almost exclusive vehicle of the Orthodox Church, used to spread its message and convert believers. In the 19th century, however, vaudeville found its way to Russia. More often than not, these biting, satirical one-act comedies poked fun at the rich and powerful. Playwrights like Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov decried the use of their art as a tool of propaganda or evangelism. Other writers – Nikolai Gogol, Alexander Griboyedov and Alexander Ostrovsky – took it a step further, writing plays that attacked not just the aristocracy but the bourgeoisie as well. Anton Chekhov wrote for St Petersburg newspapers before writing one-act, vaudevillian works. Yet it is his full-length plays that are his legacy.

Towards the end of the 19th century Maxim Gorky represented an exception to this trend in anti-establishment theatre. His play *The Song of the Stormy Petrel* raised workers to a level superior to that of the intellectual. This production was the first of what would be many socialist realist performances, thus earning its author the esteem of the Soviet authorities.

The futurists had their day on the stage, mainly in the productions of the energetic and tirelessly inventive director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who was one of the most influential figures of modern theatre. His productions of Alexander Blok's *The Fair Show Booth* (1906) and Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* (1918) caused sensations at the time. Both Anna Akhmatova and Dmitry Shostakovich cited Meyerhold's 1935 production of *Queen of Spades* by Tchaikovsky as one of the era's most influential works.

During the Soviet period, drama was used primarily as a propaganda tool. When foreign plays were performed, it was for a reason – hence the popularity in Russia of *Death of a Salesman,* which showed the inevitable result of Western greed and decadence. However, just after the revolution, theatre artists were given great, if short-lived, freedom to experiment – anything to make theatre accessible to the masses. Avant-garde productions flourished for a while, notably under the mastery of poet and director Igor Terentyev. Artists such as Pavel Filonov and Malevich participated in production and stage design.

ST PETERSBURG ON THE SCREEN

- *Brother* (*Brat;* Alexey Balabanov; 1997) This gangster drama portrays the harshness of post-Soviet Russia, as a geeky kid – played by superstar Sergei Brodov – returns from his army service and joins his brother working as a hit man in St Petersburg. It has become a cult movie for the postperestroika generation.
- *End of St Petersburg* (*Konets Sankt-Peterburga;* Vsevolod Pudovkin; 1927) Produced to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution, this silent film was a landmark for Soviet realist cinema.
- *Errors of Youth* (*Oshibki Yunosti;* Boris Frumin; 1978) After dishonesty in the army, boredom in the countryside and failure in love, the superfluous Soviet man Dmitry Gurianov ends up as a black marketeer in Leningrad. A brave attempt at realism, the film was, of course, banned.
- *Garpastum* (Alexey German; 2005) The Russian *Field of Dreams*. Two brothers – passionate football fans – hatch a scheme to buy their own playing field. Unfortunately, a little thing called WWI interferes.
- *Golden Eye* (1995) The James Bond film features Pierce Brosnan as 007 driving along the Moyka river in a tank. Many scenes were shot – at least partially – at Lenfilm and in St Petersburg.
- *Irony of Fate* (*Ironiya Sudby;* Eldar Ryazanov; 1975) This national favourite is screened every New Year's Eve. After a mind-bending party in Moscow, the protagonist wakes up in Leningrad, unbeknownst to him. Lo and behold, his key fits into the lock of an identical building at the same address in a different town. Comedy ensues.
- *The Italian* (*Italienets;* Andrei Kravchuk; 2007) An orphan decides to give up on being adopted by an Italian couple to run away in search of his birth parents. The film does not skimp on gory details about the tough life of a runaway, but in the end it's a feel-good movie.
- *October* (*Oktyabr;* Sergei Eisenstein; 1928) Eisenstein's brilliant depiction of the Russian Revolution. The lighting needs of the production left the entire city without electricity during the shoot. The most famous scene – the storming of the Winter Palace – remains an almost unmatched piece of cinematography.
- *Of Freaks and Men* (*Pro Urodov i Lyudey;* Alexey Balabanov; 1998) A change of gear for Balabanov, this dark art-house film portrays the lives of pornographers in prerevolutionary Petrograd. Shot in sepia tones using the style of early Russian cinema, it has some astounding scenes.
- *Russian Ark* (*Russky Kovcheg;* Alexander Sokurov; 2002) Filmed in one single 96-minute tracking shot, Sokurov's masterpiece is an eccentric film that muses on the history and destiny of Russia through the metaphor of a stroll through the Hermitage.
- *Undercover* (*Ne Legal;* Boris Frumin & Yury Lebedev; 2005) A post-Soviet version of a Cold War thriller. A Soviet spy, who has long been working in Helsinki, must return to Leningrad as an undercover agent. The film was lauded for its comedic perspective and its minimal anti-Soviet sentiment.

Even socialist theatre was strikingly experimental: the Theatre of Worker Youth, under the guidance of Mikhail Sokolovsky, used only amateur actors and encouraged improvisation, sudden plot alterations and interaction with audience members, striving to redefine the theatre-going experience. Free theatre tickets were given out at factories; halls that once echoed with the jangle of their upper-class audience's jewellery were now filled with sailors and workers. The tradition of sending army regiments and schoolchildren to the theatre continues to this day. See p190 for more information on theatres in St Petersburg.

ARCHITECTURE

Peter's intention was to build a city that rivalled Paris and Rome for architectural splendour. He envisioned grand avenues, weaving waterways and magnificent palaces. While he did not live to see this dream become a reality, he made a pretty good start. And his successors – especially Empresses Anna, Elizabeth and Catherine – carried out their own even more elaborate versions of their forebear's plan. Today, central St Petersburg is a veritable museum of 18th- and 19th-century architecture, with enough baroque, classical and empire-style extravagances to keep you ogling indefinitely.

PETRINE BAROQUE

The first major building in the city was the Peter & Paul Fortress (p113), completed in 1704 and still intact today. Peter recruited Domenico Trezzini from Switzerland to oversee early projects. It was Trezzini more than any other architect who created the style known as Petrine Baroque – heavily influenced by Dutch architecture, of which Peter was enamoured (like everything else from Holland). Trezzini's buildings included the Alexander Nevsky Monastery (p90), the SS Peter & Paul Cathedral (p113) within the fortress and Twelve Colleges (p110) on Vasilevsky Island.

Initially, most funding was diverted to the war against Sweden, meaning there simply wasn't enough money to create the European-style city that Peter dreamed of. Once Russia's victory was secured in 1709, the city began to see feverish development. In 1711 the Grand Perspective, later Nevsky Prospekt, was initially built as a road to transport building supplies from Russia's interior. Nevsky pr was supposed to be a perfectly straight avenue heading to Novgorod. The existing kink (at pl Vosstaniya) is attributed to a miscalculation by builders.

Stone construction was banned outside the new capital, in order to ensure that there would be a sufficient number of masons free to work on the city. Peter ordered Trezzini to create a unified city plan designed around Vasilevsky Island. He also recruited Frenchman Jean Baptiste Alexander LeBlond from Paris. The two architects focused their efforts on Vasilevsky Island, even though most people preferred to live across the river on the higher ground of Admiralty Island. The pink Menshikov Palace (p110) was the finest in the city, far grander than Peter's Winter Palace (p67).

THE AGE OF RASTRELLI

Empress Anna oversaw the completion of many of Peter's unfinished projects, including Kunstkamera (p107) and Twelve Colleges (p110). Most significantly, she hired Italian Bartolomeo Rastrelli as chief architect, a decision that more than any other has influenced the city's look today. His major projects under Anna's reign were the Manege Central Exhibition Hall (p104) and the Third Summer Palace, which has since been destroyed. Rastrelli's greatest work, however, was yet to come.

Anna left her mark on the face of St Petersburg in many ways. She ordered all nobles to pave the street in front of their properties, thus ensuring the reinforcement of the Neva Embankment and other major thoroughfares. A massive fire in 1737 wiped out the unsightly and run-down wooden housing that surrounded the Winter Palace, thus freeing the historic centre for the centralised city planning that would be implemented under Empress Elizabeth.

Elizabethan St Petersburg was almost entirely the work of Rastrelli, whose Russian baroque style became synonymous with the city. His crowning glory, of course, was the construction and remodelling of the Winter Palace (p66), which he completed in 1762, shortly after Elizabeth's death.

Rastrelli's second major landmark was Anichkov Palace (p76) on the Fontanka. After that creation, he became the city's most fashionable architect; commissions soon followed to build Stroganov Palace (p73), Vorontsov Palace (p75), Kamennoostrovsky Palace (p120), Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo (p220) and the extension of LeBlond's Grand Palace at Peterhof (p217). The sumptuous Smolny Cathedral (p83) is another Rastrelli landmark. His original design included a massive bell tower that would have been the tallest structure in Russia. The death of Empress Elizabeth in 1761 prevented him from completing it.

Rastrelli's baroque style would go out of fashion quickly after Elizabeth's death. But his legacy would endure, as he created some of the most stunning façades in the city, thus contributing to the Italianate appearance of contemporary St Petersburg.

CATHERINE'S RETURN TO CLASSICISM

Despite her fondness for Elizabeth, Catherine the Great was not a fan of her predecessor's increasingly elaborate and sumptuous displays of wealth and power. Catherine's major philosophical interest was the Enlightenment, which had brought the neoclassical style to the fore in Western Europe. As a result, she began her long reign by departing from baroque architecture and introducing neoclassicism to Russia.

The first major neoclassical masterpiece in Catherine's St Petersburg was the Academy of Arts (p110) on Vasilevsky Island, designed by Jean-Baptiste-Michel Vallin de la Mothe. Catherine employed a wide range of architects, including foreigners such as Vallin de la Mothe, Scot Charles Cameron and Italians Antonio Rinaldi and Giacomo Quarenghi; she also commissioned many home-grown architects such as Ivan Starov and Vasily Bazhenov.

Catherine's plan was to make the palace embankment the centrepiece of the city. To this end, she commissioned the Little Hermitage by Vallin de la Mothe, followed by the Old Hermitage and the Hermitage Theatre (p188) on the other side of the Winter Canal. These buildings on Dvortsovaya pl (p66) were followed by Quarenghi's magnificent Marble Palace (p72). Catherine also developed the embankment west of the Winter Palace, now the English Embankment (Angliyskaya nab), creating a marvellous imperial vista for those arriving in the city by boat.

The single most meaningful addition was the Bronze Horseman (p101) by Etienne-Maurice Falconet, an equestrian statue dedicated to Peter the Great. It is perched atop an enormous 1500-tonne boulder from the Gulf of Finland, known as Thunder Stone, which is supposedly the largest stone ever moved by man. Falconet worked on the statue for a staggering 22 years and returned to Paris an angry, frustrated man. He never even saw the completed version of this most enduring of St Petersburg's monuments.

Other notable additions to the cityscape during Catherine's reign included the new Gostiny Dvor (Merchant Yard; p75), one of the world's oldest surviving shopping centres. Elizabeth had commissioned Rastrelli to rebuild an arcade that had burned down in 1736; but Catherine removed Rastrelli from the project and had it completed by Vallin de la Mothe, who created a more subtle and understated neoclassical façade. The purest classical construction in St Petersburg was perhaps Vasily Stasov's Tauride Palace (p85), built for Prince Potemkin and surrounded by William Gould's expansive English gardens.

RUSSIAN EMPIRE STYLE

Alexander I (r 1801–25) ushered in the new century with much hope that he would see through Catherine's reforms, becoming the most progressive tsar yet. His most enduring architectural legacy would be the new Alexandrian Empire style, a Russian counterpart to the style that had become popular in prewar Napoleonic France. This style was pioneered by a new generation of architects, most famously Carlo Rossi.

Before the Napoleonic Wars, the two most significant additions to the cityscape were the Strelka, the 'tongue of land' at the tip of Vasilevsky Island, and Kazan Cathedral, prominently placed on Nevsky pr by Andrei Voronikhin. The Strelka (p107) had long been the subject of designs and proposals as a centrepiece to St Petersburg. Thomas de Thomon finally rebuilt Quarenghi's Stock Exchange and added the much-loved Rostral Columns to the tip of the island. The end result created a stunning sight during summer festivities when the columns lit the sky with fire, a tradition that still continues today. The Kazan Cathedral (p73) is a fascinating anomaly in St

Petersburg's architectural history. It had been commissioned by Paul and reflected his tastes and desire to fuse Catholicism and Orthodoxy. As such it is strikingly un-Russian, borrowing many of its features from contemporaneous Italian architecture from Rome and Florence.

Following the Napoleonic wars, Carlo Rossi initiated several projects of true genius. This Italian architect defined the historic heart of St Petersburg with his imperial buildings – arguably even more than Rastrelli. On Palace Sq, he created the sumptuous General Staff Building (p66), which managed to complement Rastrelli's Winter Palace without outshining it. The building's vast length – punctuated by white columns – and the magnificent triumphal arch make Palace Sq one of the most awe-inspiring urban environments in the world. The final touch to Palace Sq was added by Auguste Montferrand, who designed the Alexander Column (p66), a monument to the 1812 trouncing of Napoleon. On the pedestal of the Alexander Column, a bas-relief depicts winged figures holding up a plaque which reads, 'To Alexander I from a grateful Russia'. Rossi also completed Mikhailovsky Palace (now the Russian Museum; p76) as well as the Gardens behind it and Mikhailovskaya Sq (now Arts Sq, p74) in front of it.

Rossi's genius continued to shine through the reactionary rule of Nicholas I. In fact, Nicholas was the last of the Romanovs to initiate mass municipal architecture; and so Rossi remained in favour, despite Nicholas' personal preference for Slavic-revival style that was very popular in Moscow.

Rossi's largest projects under Nicholas were the redesign of Senate Sq (now pl Dekabristov; p101) and Alexandrinskaya Sq (now pl Ostrovskogo; p75), including the Alexandrinsky Theatre (p190) and Theatre St (now ul Zodchego Rossi). The Theatre St ensemble is a masterpiece of proportions: its width (22m) is the same height as its buildings, and the entire street is exactly ten times the size (220m).

IMPERIAL ST PETERSBURG

Although Rossi continued to transform the city, the building that would redefine the city's skyline was St Isaac's Cathedral (p100). An Orthodox church built in a classical style, it is the fourth largest cathedral in Europe. Montferrand's unique masterpiece took over three decades to construct and remains the highest building in St Petersburg. Nicholas I denied Montferrand his dying wish to be buried inside St Isaac's Cathedral, as he considered it too high an honour for an artisan.

Nicholas' reign saw the construction of St Petersburg's first permanent bridge across the Neva (Annunciation Bridge, now Lieutenant Schmidt Bridge) and Russia's first railroad (linking the capital to Tsarskoe Selo). A more useful line to Moscow began service in 1851, and Nikolaevsky Station (now known as Moscow Station; Moskovsky vokzal) was built to accommodate it.

Other projects completed during Nicholas' reign had a military theme: Stasov's Trinity Cathedral (p98) was built for the barracks of the Izmailovsky Regiment; the Narva Gates (p147) was another monument to the 1812 defeat of Napoleon; and the Moscow Gates (p146) commemorated victory against the Ottoman Empire in 1828. One final masterpiece of the era was Shtakenschneider's fantasy on the Fontanka, the Beloselsky-Belozersky Palace (p94).

The reigns of Alexander II and III saw few changes to the overall building style in St Petersburg. Industrialisation under Alexander II meant filling in several canals, most significantly the Ligovsky Canal (now Ligovsky pr). A plan to fill in Griboedov Canal proved too expensive to execute and the canal remains one of the city's most charming.

The main contribution of Alexander III was the Church of the Resurrection of Christ, better known as the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood (p72), built on the site of his father's 1881 assassination. Alexander III insisted the church be in the Slavic revival style, which explains its uncanny similarity to St Basil's Cathedral on Red Sq in Moscow. Architects Malyshev and Parland designed its spectacular multicoloured tiling, the first hints of the Russian Style Moderne that would take the city by storm by the end of the 19th century. Painters such as Mikhail Nesterov and Mikhail Vrubel contributed to the interior design.

That the ineffective and conservative Nicholas II presided over one of the city's most exciting architectural periods was pure chance. As the city became richer and richer during the 19th century, the industrialist and merchant classes began building mansions in the fêted Art Nouveau style, known in Russia as Style Moderne. The Petrograd side was the most fashionable of the era, so that is where the majority of Style Moderne buildings were constructed. The back streets reveal many gems from the late 19th century and early 20th century, including the fabulous mansion of the ballet dancer Mathilda Kshesinskaya, which now houses the Museum of Political History (p117).

SOVIET LENINGRAD

As in all other spheres, the collapse of the tsarist regime in 1917 led to huge changes in architecture. In the beleaguered city, all major building projects stopped; the palaces of the aristocracy and the mansions of the nouveaux riches were turned over to the state or split up into communal apartments. As the Germans approached Petrograd in 1918, the title of capital returned to Moscow; the city went into a decline that was to last until the 1990s.

The architectural form that found favour under the Bolsheviks in the 1920s was constructivism. Combining utilitarianism and utopianism, this modern style sought to advance the socialist cause, using technological innovation and slick unembellished design. Pl Stachek is rich with such buildings, such as the Kirov Region Administrative Building on Kirovskaya pl and the incredibly odd Communication Workers' Palace of Culture on the Moyka Canal.

Stalin considered the opulence of the imperial centre of renamed Leningrad to be a potentially corrupting influence on the people. So, from 1927, he initiated a plan to relocate the centre to the south of the city's historic heart. His traditional neoclassical tastes prevailed. The prime example of Stalinist architecture is the vast House of Soviets (p145), which was meant to be the centrepiece of the new city centre. Noi Trotsky began this magnificent monstrosity in 1936, although it was not finished until after the war (by which time Trotsky had himself been purged). With its columns and bas-reliefs, it is a great example of Stalinist neoclassical design – similar in many ways to the imperial neoclassicism pioneered a century beforehand. The House of Soviets was never used as the Leningrad government building, as the plan was shelved after Stalin's death in 1953.

WWII and Stalin's old age saved many buildings of great importance: the Church of the Saviour on Spilled Blood, for example, was slated for destruction before the German invasion of the Soviet Union intervened. Many other churches and historical buildings, however, were destroyed.

During the eras of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, St Petersburg's imperial heritage was cautiously respected, as the communist leadership took a step back from Stalin's excesses. Between the 1950s and 1970s, a housing shortage led to the construction of high-rise Soviet apartment buildings, which would cover huge swathes of the city outside the historic centre. For many visitors, this is their first and last view of the city. Examples of archetypal post-Stalinist Soviet architecture include the massive Grand Concert Hall (p189) near pl Vosstaniya and the nondescript Finland Station (p122) on the Vyborg Side.

top picks

QUIRKY ARCHITECTURE

- **Chesme Church** (p146) Many consider this gothic masterpiece to be St Petersburg's single most impressive church. Despite its small size, its magnificent colour scheme and sense of movement are striking.
- **Church of St John the Baptist** (p87) Byzantine meets Muscovite revival. The wonderful façade of this unique church is completely atypical of its time and place.
- **Tower House** (p116) One of the many Style Moderne masterpieces on the Petrograd Side, Tower House rises majestically over Kamennoostrovsky pr with its balconies and unusual crenulations borrowed from English medieval castles.
- **Vitebsk Station** (p239) Built in 1904, Russia's oldest train station is graced with a gorgeous Style Moderne interior.
- **House of Soviets** (p145) The best representative of high Stalinism in the city, this magnificent monstrosity on Moskovsky pr is right out of *1984*. Don't miss the fantastic frieze depicting the working people's struggle.
- **Morskoy vokzal** (p235) Overlooking the Baltic, the quintessentially constructivist sea terminal is worth the trip out to the tip of Vasilevsky Island.

CONTEMPORARY ST PETERSBURG

Contemporary building efforts have been focused on the reconstruction of imperial-era buildings, many of which were derelict and literally falling down due to 70 years of neglect. Some success stories include the renovation of the Grand Hotel Europe (p205), Mikhailovsky Castle (p74) and Gostiny Dvor (p75), as well as most of the palaces and cathedrals around town. The renovation of Pochtamtskaya ul – including the main post office and the new Popov Communications Museum (p104) – is a stunning example of introducing new technology and design without altering the historic façade.

As so much energy has gone into preservation efforts in the historic centre, a modern St Petersburg architecture has not emerged. That said, some cutting-edge (and controversial) architectural projects are under way: see below.

ENVIRONMENT & PLANNING

Among its many nicknames, St Petersburg is the 'Northern Capital', the 'City of 101 Islands' and the 'City of 300 Bridges'. All are apt monikers for this northerly city, which today sits on 42 islands at the mouth of the Neva River, connected by some 340 bridges.

The low-lying, marshy environment means that St Petersburg is vulnerable to flooding. Plaques around the city mark the water levels from past floods, the most famous of which was the great flood of 1824, which killed some hundreds of people and inspired Pushkin's brooding masterpiece *The Bronze Horseman*. This marshy wetlands necessitated the many canals that now weave their way around the city.

GREEN ST PETERSBURG

The most significant environmental problem in St Petersburg is the pollution of the Neva River and the Baltic Sea, mainly from industrial sources. Air pollution is also a concern, especially due to the increase in automobile traffic and uncontrolled emissions by vehicles, but it is mitigated to some extent by the winds off the sea.

In 1998 experts estimated that some 40% of residential sewage was dumped – untreated – into the Neva and/or the Gulf of Finland. As many as 500 companies dumped industrial waste into the river system.

Greenpeace has operated an office in Russia since 1992. However, like most nonprofit organisations, it is subject to incessant police harassment and endures constant problems with its registration status. In 2007 Greenpeace commenced its Clean Neva campaign to monitor and publicise the pollution levels in the river and its tributaries. The initial results were shocking, showing that discharge far exceeded the allowable concentrations of oil products and other dangerous chemicals. (Follow the progress of the campaign at www.saveneva.ru.)

Environmentalists have become concerned about industrial projects all around the Gulf of Finland that threaten the coastline. The Leningrad Nuclear Power Station (LAES) at Sosnovy Bor, 80km west of St Petersburg, is one of the oldest Chernobyl-type reactors in the world. It has been the site of past leakages and at least one major accident in 1975. Activists claim that the plant is dangerous and should be shut down before another disaster occurs, citing the particular risk for workers who do not have the benefit of proper safety regulations. Meanwhile, LAES has commenced plans to construct a new treatment centre for nuclear waste on site.

In more positive developments, after some pressure from local activists, the city has taken steps to implement programmes for separate waste collection and recycling, including the purchase of necessary containers. Local housing authorities have promised that the necessary legislation would be passed to bring the system of waste collection to EU standards as early as 2007. However, it's not clear how useful such recycling bins and collection systems are, as the city lacks the waste-processing facilities to treat the refuse.

URBAN PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

St Petersburg has had more than its fair share of urban planners. Starting with Peter the Great, every regime change was accompanied by a change in vision for the city and every new ruler sought some way to leave their mark on it. The current post-Soviet regime is no exception (although the parties leaving their mark are as much corporate as governmental).

The cityscape of St Petersburg is so architecturally rich that any movement for change or modernisation raises concern. There is a sense that the 'historic heart', at least, should remain 'historic'. As such, new construction generates some degree of controversy. Critics argue that even the Soviets didn't have the nerve to alter the imperial centre beyond the bare minimum.

GAZPROM CITY

No urban development project raises as many concerns as the notorious Gazprom City. At the suggestion of public relations consultants, no doubt, Russia's largest oil company changed the name of its project to Okhta Centre, named after a tributary of the Neva.

The name may have changed, but the beast has not. The Okhta Centre is supposed to be the city's first super-tall skyscraper, towering almost 400m over the Neva (that's three time higher than the spire of the SS Peter & Paul Cathedral). The only other structure that even comes close to that height is the 310m TV tower, which is well removed from the historic heart. The Okhta Centre is planned to occupy the site of an abandoned factory on the Vyborg Side, just opposite Smolny Cathedral (p83). The €1.6-billion bill will be shared evenly by Gazprom and St Petersburg city.

The design, product of another British firm RMJM, is for a rocketlike glass-and-steel structure that has been called the 'corn cob' and 'Gaz-zilla'. There is a small contingent of supporters that cites the project's economic benefits and architectural innovation, but most residents are against this intrusion on the historic city skyline. Even Unesco has raised objections, indicating that continuing with construction could lead to the inclusion of St Petersburg on its 'World Heritage in Danger' list.

In September 2007 – on the anniversary of the first day of the Siege of Leningrad – protesters took to the streets. Political opposition leaders teamed up with architecture buffs and historians, recruiting as many as 5000 residents to participate in the March of the Preservation of St Petersburg. 'Gazprom, go home!' residents chanted; however, it's not clear if anyone was listening.

The new Mariinsky II, under construction behind the present theatre on Teatralnaya pl at the time of research, is one example of a project that has generated some controversy (see p101). This remarkable building will totally break with St Petersburg's architectural tradition, and in doing so inevitably enrage many more traditional residents. Dominique Perrault's unique design is a black marble theatre wrapped in a vast irregular golden glass dome, the so-called 'golden envelope'. Without doubt the first major architectural addition to the city in the 21st century, Mariinsky II is due to open in 2009.

Another project is underway just around the corner at New Holland (Novaya Gollandiya; p105). Financed by a Moscow billionaire, the 18th-century island neighbourhood will be converted into a 21st-century urban space, combining retail, cultural and residential buildings. It is expected to be completed in 2010. The London architecture firm that won the bid, Foster & Partners, is responsible for the famous 'gherkin' in London and the new complex on the site of the old Rossiya Hotel in Moscow. The architects promise to restore the old timber warehouses and to maintain the low-rise norm of the neighbourhood; but sceptics are still suspicious. The most controversial construction project is undoubtedly the much maligned Okhta Centre (see Gazprom City, above).

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

St Petersburg is extreme – not only geographically but also politically and ideologically. St Pete's radical ideas have more than once been at the forefront of political change in Russia. Most famously, this is where the revolutions occurred in 1905 and 1917. Years later, St Petersburg would play a leading role in the democratic movement, spawning reformers like Galina Starovoitova and Anatoly Chubais, as well as the less-than-democratic future president, Vladimir Putin.

In June 1991 Leningrad residents voted to restore the city's original name. When a group of hardline communists tried to overthrow the reformist Mikhail Gorbachev, hundreds of thousands of St Petersburg residents took to the streets in protest, filling Dvortsovaya pl in front of the Winter Palace. Mayor Anatoly Sobchak appeared on local TV to denounce the coup, encouraging others to do the same.

The city's enthusiasm for democracy did not ultimately spread to the rest of Russia. The economic collapse and political chaos of the 1990s resulted in a backlash against liberal reformers. Sobchak's rueful comment was that 'We have not achieved a democracy, but rather a police state over the past 10 years'.

One of Putin's first acts as president was to divide Russia into seven 'super-regions'. The city of St Petersburg makes up one part of the Northwest Region of Russia, which includes the autonomous republics of Karelia and Komi, much of Western Arctic Russia and the enclave of Kaliningrad. That means there are three separate strata of power: the local governor, the regional presidential envoy and the national government. As of 2005, both the local governor and the regional presidential envoy are proposed by the president and approved by the legislative assembly (not popularly elected).

The local governor works in tandem with the St Petersburg legislative assembly to run the city. The main seat of power in the city is the governor's office at Smolny Institute (p83), currently occupied by Valentina Matvienko, a Putin loyalist and former presidential envoy to the Northwest Region.

Matvienko's tenure in Smolny has been marked by economic growth and unprecedented development, which explains why the population is generally complacent. Throughout Russia, citizens are enjoying stability and prosperity, elements that have been absent for a quarter of a century or more. It's easy to understand how they can overlook the occasional diversion from the democratic path.

Although Matvienko enjoys broad support, she has come under fire for her support of Gazprom City (see the boxed text, p57), as well as for her close alliance with Putin. She certainly has not strayed far from the president's side. Matvienko publicly urged Putin to stay on for a third presidential term (in 2008), even though the constitutional limit is two. In 2006 – one year before her term would expire – she was reappointed for another term and approved by the legislature.

St Petersburg was one of several cities around Russia that hosted Dissenters' Marches in the lead-up to the 2008 presidential election. The protest rallies were organised by the Other Russia, a broad umbrella-group of opposition leaders, including former chess champion Gary Kasparov. On each occasion, thousands of people marched down Nevsky pr, calling for Matvienko's dismissal as well as for electoral and judicial reforms at a federal level. Local media hardly covered the Dissenters' March, while Governor Matvienko called the protesters 'youth of extremist persuasion'.

The first of such events was held almost exactly one year before the scheduled presidential election on 3 March 2008. Follow-up rallies took place in April, June and September, the latter targeting the construction of Gazprom City. As many as 5000 residents marched to protest the administration's acquiescence to big business (see p57).

Nobody can deny the apolitical attitude that is prevalent not only in St Petersburg but throughout Russia. While the Rose and Orange Revolutions have taken place just next door in Georgia and Ukraine, Russians stand quietly by and watch President Putin censor their press and handpick his successor. But nobody is indifferent to the fate of the stunning St Petersburg skyline: if anything can act as a political motivator in this town, it's the preservation of their cherished *Piter*.

MEDIA

While the days of *Pravda* are long gone, the mass media in recent years has been a battleground, where the Kremlin and big business fight for control of the so-called 'free' press. As a result of such battles, the Russian press now is largely self-censoring, rather than government-censored. Newspapers and TV stations that were critical of the Kremlin have been largely silenced; you are unlikely to read or see much criticism of the government anywhere in the Russian media.

NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES

Though a far cry from the one-note news days of the Soviet era, most of Russia's biggest papers are mouthpieces for the various powerful bodies that own them, be they political parties or rich businessmen. The public – long used to reading between the lines – know how to take a bit from here, a bit from there, and imagine a truth that's somewhere in between.

The most popular Russian dailies are *Izvestia* (www.izvestiya.ru in Russian), *Kommersant* (www.kommersant.com) and *Vedomosti* (www.vedomosti.com), which is affiliated with the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The government's official newspaper is the *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* (www.rg.ru in Russian), while the tabloids are represented by *Komsomolskaya Pravda*.

Novaya Gazeta (www.novayagazeta.ru) is a well-known liberal rag that is published in Moscow. It was famous mainly for its column by investigative reporter, Anna Politkovskaya, who was tragically murdered in 2006. She gained notoriety after playing an active role in negotiations with Chechen rebels during hostage crises in 2002 and 2004, as well as for her fervent opposition to the Chechen War. Her controversial book, *Putin's Russia*, was published in the UK in 2004; *A Russian Diary: A Final Account* was published posthumously.

TELEVISION

He who controls the TV controls the country – and no one understands this better than President Putin. In 2000 his administration conducted a heavy-handed legal attack on the owners of NTV, which was then a relatively professional, independent national TV station. The multimillionaire owner, Vladimir Gusinsky, was hounded for tax evasion and corruption charges, until he finally fled to Spain.

Few commentators regarded Gusinsky as any more corrupt than any other oligarch (or high-level politician for that matter); that he was being singled out seemed a clear signal that Putin's new government wished to control voices of dissent and encourage progovernment reporting. In 2001 gas giant Gazprom conducted a surprise buy-out of a controlling portion of NTV shares. Dozens of reporters quit the station, and its programming and acerbic tone were changed overnight. Now, in terms of independent journalism, there's little to distinguish NTV from the state-owned channels.

Not that Russian TV is managed by some Soviet-styled spooks. In fact the heads of the main state channels – Channel 1 and Rossiya – were among those young journalists who gave Russian audiences a taste of editorial freedom in the 1990s. Many faces on the screen are still the same, but news and analysis are increasingly transforming into ideological brainwashing. Only RenTV, a private channel owned by the state power grid, has coverage that somewhat deviates from the party line. RenTV purportedly broadcast the most complete coverage of the Dissenters' March in 2007, showing violent clashes between protesters and police.

Despite the range of channels, most Russian TV is an appalling mix of South American soap operas which are dubbed in Russian, Soviet films, straight-to-video Hollywood pap and endless musical concerts.

RADIO

Most of St Petersburg's popular radio stations play a mix of trashy Euro pop and its even more over-the-top Russian variant. Still, their play lists are often unexpectedly eclectic. Some of the more popular FM stations include: Eldoradio (101.4 MHz); Radio Modern (104 MHz); the grating Europa Plus (100.5 MHz); and the more diversified Radio Nostalgie (105.3 MHz). More Russian content can be heard on Kanal Melodia (91.1 MHz), Russky Shanson (100.9 MHz) and Russkoe Radio (104.4 MHz). Two stations focus almost exclusively on local news and features: Eko Peterburga (91.5 MHz) and Severnaya Stolitsa (105.9 MHz).

FASHION

On first impressions, conspicuous consumption seems to be the theme of Russian fashionistas, as New Russia is awash in exclusive designer labels and exorbitant price tags. Connoisseurs argue, however, that *la mode* in St Petersburg is becoming more sophisticated, now creatively mixing well-known Western brands with up-and-coming local designers.

Russian models have certainly taken the fashion world by storm, with beauties such as Natalya Vodianova and Evgenia Volodina dominating the pages of *Vogue* and *Elle*. St Petersburg designers are also attracting increasing attention, both at home and abroad. Tatiana Parfionova is Russian fashion's most famous name. Ever since she took home the 'Golden Button' award from her premiere in 1995, her tsarina-inspired designs and hand-embroidered embellishments have attracted world-wide attention.

Local designer Lilia Kisselenko organises the biannual Defile on the Neva (p19). This *prêt-à-porter* (ready-to-wear) event takes place in April and October at venues around the city, showcasing designers' collections from around Russia.

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Such high fashion is not so interesting to the average Sveta or Sergei on the street, though. These days, most Russians wear the same clothes as their counterparts in the West: blue jeans, business suits and anything in between. St Petersburg's many shopping centres are filled with the same stores that you might find anywhere in Europe.

Only winter differentiates Russian style, bringing out the best or the worst of it, depending on your perspective. Fur is still the most effective and most coveted way to stay warm. Some advice from a local fashion connoisseur: 'Your protests that fur is cruel are likely to be met by blank stares and an uncomfortable shifting of feet. Don't come in winter if that offends you.'

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