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St. Petersburg Fin de Siècle: Stories and Visions of Modern Life, 1907-1917

Topic of research:

Modernity is not a singular model of progress or form of experience that can be universally defined, but a varied set of local constructions of global phenomena that need to be investigated historically, textually, and ethnographically; only then can we theorize about modernity is or was. This project, for which most of the fundamental research is now completed, as planned, is an interdisciplinary historical inquiry into the experience of modernity in Russia.

My focus is on Russia's fin de siècle, a term used here not merely as a retrospective historical category—the “last years” before the old political, social, and cultural order fell, which it did, in Russia, with more suddenness and violence than anywhere else—but as a political, social, and cultural moment of characteristically modern crisis and possibility. At the center of attention is St. Petersburg, not only for its centrality as the political, economic, and cultural capital of Russian imperial modernity, but for its exemplariness as a modern urban space. Petersburg is an ideal site for exploring both global commonalities and local difference and multiplicity in the meanings of the modern and of the fin de siècle. My attention is focused on the city as city: its streets and other public places, the people who inhabited these urban spaces, and public discourses (in texts as diverse as boulevard newspapers, “thick” journals, poetry, fiction, photographs, and art) about issues constitutive of this era—order and flux, identities and unsettling uncertainty about self and other, rationality and feeling, progress and degeneration, the meanings of life and the meanings of death, and morality and evil.

Chronologically, this study explores the years between July 1907 (the moment finally ending the revolution of 1905-1907, which left Russian political and social life more contradictory, unstable, and more troubled—and, hence, one might argue, more “modern”—than ever before) and the first days of the 1917 revolution. These were critical, indeed fateful, years in the development of a modern society, politics, and culture in Russia, years of rapid change, possibility, and conflict, of new ways of seeing and telling, of moral determination and cultural decadence, of idealism and disillusionment, of experimentation and anxiety. The stories of everyday urban public life in St. Petersburg—and especially the stories that most fascinated, excited, worried, and unsettled observers—exemplify this critical moment in Russian and European history.

The resulting study, which I hope to complete in draft form during the remainder of my sabbatical, will partly reconsider the relatively familiar story of Petersburg as a site of modern discipline and development, revolutionary politics, and cultural and social innovation. But this is only part of the story of the Russian modern. Particular attention will be paid--for this has emerged as essential--to the other face of Petersburg and of

the modern: the city (and the modernity) of ubiquitous irrationality, anxiety, ambiguity, mystery, transgression, deception, disillusionment, crisis, and death. This darker story of the modern was particularly prominent in the pages of the Russian daily press and preoccupied contemporary writers.

Relevance and contribution to the field:

At the interpretive and theoretical center of attention in this project are themes in contemporary discourse critical to thinking about the meanings of the modern (contemporary concerns, not just impositions of later tropes and theories onto the past): the notion of a public sphere; notions of space (e.g., private and public, safe and perilous, bordered and transgressed) and of time (e.g., the passage of modern time as progress or degeneration or as apocalyptic time); the self and the individual (including the shifting and overlapping identities of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation); ideas about emotion, psychology, and subjectivity; visuality, spectacle, and performance--especially in the public sphere; notions of morality and ethics; questions of what can be known and what remains obscure or (as the newspapers often put it) mysterious; and, throughout, currents of anxiety, uncertainty, and dismay as well as of daring and hope. Most of these interpretive themes have been too little studied in histories of Russia, yet they are essential for interpreting late Imperial Russian cultural and social history and also for linking this particular Russian story to (and distinguishing it from) other histories, other fins de siècle, other modernities.

Approach and Research Methodology

This inquiry will draw on the methodologies of social and cultural history, but also of literary and cultural criticism, art history (and, more generally, visual culture studies), and historical ethnography. My study builds upon the work of scholars (historians, literary scholars, and art historians) who have explored the rich dynamics of cultural, intellectual, and civic life in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russia, though more on Russia *at* the fin de siècle than about the meanings of the category itself in the Russian context. These studies, many of them groundbreaking works, have focused on various elements in this history: institutions of civil society; aspects of popular and lower-class cultures; leisure activities; individual writers, artists, and movements; and discourse about such key cultural themes as sexuality or hooliganism. My project builds on this work, though I often emphasize different themes, use many different sources, bring together diverse sources in a single study, pay more attention to the darker and unsettling sides of these histories, and seek to weave all these elements together (including existing research) into a multifaceted exploration of the meanings of fin-de-siècle modernity in Russia. This study also seeks, through the prism of St. Petersburg, to reconsider existing arguments and theories about modernity (especially about the multiplicity of modernities), urban history, and fins de siècle more generally.

The sources for this project include the periodical press (newspapers, especially the mass-circulation “boulevard” papers, popular magazines, intellectual “thick journals,” literary and artistic journals, political newspapers and magazines, individual memoirs, contemporary books and brochures, literature (notably the great amount of poetry and fiction devoted to the city—especially the poetry of Aleksandr Blok and Andrei Belyi’s famous modernist novel, *Petersburg*, photography (images published in the press but

especially the remarkable collection held in the Central State Archive of Film, Photo, and Sound Documentation of St. Petersburg), and Russian silent films of the era. The dialogues and interconnection between these diverse texts—in many ways deeply connected culturally but usually studied quite separately—are a key part of the design of this project.

I conducted this research primarily at the Russian National Library and at the Library of the Academy of Sciences in Petersburg.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

As a result of the research, key themes have emerged, likely to structure the book by chapters:

--*Public discourse on the modern.* Although it has often been said that Russian lacks a word for modernity (sovremennost' connoting simply "our times" at any given time), it is clear from intensive reading of publications (esp. the press) of those years that Russians of various cultural levels were quite preoccupied with the question of the early-20th century as a distinctively "modern" time (in the Western sense of the word) and with discussing what this meant for themselves and the country. The meanings of big city life, especially cities like St. Petersburg, were at the center of these concerns, for the particularly modernness of the city--its flux, chaos, inability to fully be comprehended (nepostizhimost'), presence of strangers, mixture of danger and possibility, mixture of both oppressive rationality and frightening (or exhilarating) disorder, etc.--was seen to characterize these new times as a whole. Paradoxically, the problem of the backwardness of Russian urban life--its relative lack of modernity--was seen to be as much a source of suffering as the extent of modernity.

--*The street.* How public street life was seen and narrated was central to how this moment of crisis in Russian urban modernity (and how Petersburg) was understood. Streets, boulevards, squares, bridges, canals and rivers--and sites linked to the street such as café-chantants, restaurants, etc--were scenes of endless play of public discovery, engagement, negotiation, and conflict. Flâneurs (a category central to comparative studies of modernity and often used in the Russian press) walked and gazed at urban life (though with as much anxiety as daring). Prostitutes and hooligans--categories of public presence and performance that were often linked--prowled city streets, creating a sense of public moral disorder and danger as well as desire. Men preyed on children playing in the streets. Con-artists used the streets as their stage for performing varied deceptions. Such stories of the Petersburg street were partly stories of opportunity and pleasure, of the enchantments of modern city life often described by scholars of the modern, of bending and transgressing such categories of power as class and gender. However, especially in Russia, stories of the street were very often stories of danger, painful disorientation, moral disintegration, and fear.

--*Masquerade.* Stories of public masquerade, disguise, deception, and uncertainty were ubiquitous--both literal masks (e.g. on the faces of burglars or of reveling women at masquerade balls, and especially the figurative "masks" said to veil the faces of all modern men and women and to both disguise true selves and allow transgressive realizations of alternative selves. Stories about "well dressed" and seemingly "respectable" men or women turning out to be thieves, sexual predators, prostitutes, or murderers, which were pervasive in the popular press of the day, can be seen as

emblematic not only of the intense visuality of modern life (its phantasmagoric and spectacular nature, as some theorists of modernity have called it) but also of the pervasiveness of disorienting and dangerous (as well as creative and opportune) deception and the accompanying impossibility of legibility.

--*Death*. While death is universal and inevitable, a great deal of the dying (or threats to life) in fin-de-siècle Petersburg was something specially (and, often, terribly) connected to the nature of the city, to the modern condition, and especially to modern mentalities. Among the characteristic pathologies of modern city life, contemporaries regularly reported, were suicide (an almost daily item in the newspapers in these years, provoking a wave of discussion), murder (a social phenomenon, a public spectacle, and a variously interpreted story), rape (often ending in murder), children dying due to neglect or infanticide (leading to proposals, for example, to legalize abortion), industrial accidents, loss of life (or at least limbs) under the wheels of railroads and especially of the new (after 1907) electric trams, disease (chronic tuberculosis and periodic urban epidemics of cholera), the frequent discovery of unidentified dead bodies in various parts of the city, and a wave of fatal and near-fatal street stabbings (*nozhovshchina*), shootings, and acid throwing incidents. These stories and how they were told and interpreted (expressing notions of degeneration, for example, or of powerlessness in the face of difference and unreason, or the low value of life) are the focus of two chapters, one of violence and murder and one on suicide.

--*Decadence*. Everywhere in public forums, it seemed, Russians were talking about moral disorder, the ubiquity of catastrophes, the pervasive spirit of tragedy, of contemporary life as depraved, and perhaps of coming apocalypse. Concretely, the press was filled with stories of moral fall and failure: e.g. women lured into prostitution, dens of iniquity (gambling, brothels, etc), the depraved life of many both rich and poor, the loss of moral compass of the times as a whole. Almost invariably, these stories are cast in moral-philosophical terms and linked to the questions of modern times.

--*Emotion*. I found in my research constant attention to "mood" (*nastroenie*) and feeling in efforts to make sense of the condition of Russian urban life in the years. Publications in these years are filled with talk of ideals and especially disillusionment (*razocharovanie*), with various public and private moods (notably the often discussed "toska"--a difficult to translate mix of melancholy, sad anxiety, and longing), with "god-seeking" (a loose religious movement I will examine in this context of the landscape of feeling), and with fear (including quite tangible everyday fears for one's safety and survival). At the same time, this was a time of a great deal of laughter--often bitter or ironic, but inspired by a type of humor just the same.

--*The visual*. Linked to these questions of mood, but also to the pervasiveness of various forms of spectacle in the modern city, were questions of the visual. Everyday life, as related in the press, was full of talk of seeing and being seen--indeed, the modern city, as observers and scholars since Baudelaire have noted, was an obsessively visual place. In addition to considering the visuality of everyday public life, this chapter will look at the work of artists, photographers, and filmmakers--all much discussed publicly--whose works were filled with efforts to "see" the world in modern ways and to see the modern world.

--*Poetics*. The final chapter will link many of these themes together in an exploration of St. Petersburg, and the modern, as the subject of literary text. Journalistic and other

critical discussions of the city and the modern cannot be separated from the long history of writing about the meaning of Petersburg (especially starting with Pushkin and extending through Gogol, Dostoevsky and others), which will be considered briefly. At the same time, modern literary writing about the city, notably the poetry of Blok and Bely's novel *Peterburg*, cannot be understood apart from public, especially journalistic, treatments of the modern city and of Petersburg. These textual traditions were intertwined. This chapter will look at literary work--especially of the years 1907-1916--in relation to other textual treatments of Petersburg as a modern metropolis.

Policy Recommendations

Because my work involved regular interactions with Petersburg (and, more briefly, Moscow) scholars--through discussions of my research and talks presented at universities--I would offer one policy-relevant observation. The present moment is a critical one in Russian civic life. Many Russians are understandably anxious and pessimistic: convinced that economic and political progress to date is fragile and in any case, the growing prosperity has continued to leave most of the population in increasingly frustrated poverty as well as often feeling considerable anger about inequality, corruption, and excessive (and, people tend to add, ill-intentioned) foreign influence and power. At the same time, the state under Putin is putting increasing pressures on key institutions of civil society--notably the press, cultural institutions, and universities--in order to strengthen what is called the "vertical of power." All of the scholars I met were anxious: about the country's economic future, about widespread discontent with Russia's rapid changes (a recent poll, by the way, showed Chubais to be the most hated man in Russia), about the massive planned withdrawal of state support for cultural institutions, about the Soviet-like transformation of once lively television, about an increasingly chilled environment for public dissent. Simultaneous to this--and this brings me to my recommendation--Western foundations and governments are offering less and less support to one of the most essential civic institutions for preserving and disseminating a critical perspective on the direction of Russia's society and politics: the universities and other institutions of higher learning (including new private ones). Just at the time when alternative perspectives are most needed, universities and other cultural institutions (theaters, museums, the press, etc.) are facing but the reduction of state support and international aid. The US policy community should seriously consider ways of supporting such institutions as critical foundations for preserving open debate in Russia.