

My Favourite History Place

David Pearce explores St Petersburg

Saint Isaac's Cathedral



Palace Square



Church of the Savior on Blood



St Nicolas Cathedral



If you want to understand Russian history from Peter the Great up to at least the 1917 Revolutions, you have to visit St Petersburg. Like Versailles, St Petersburg was built for an absolute monarch, on an unsuitable site, at the cost of many labourers' lives. Unlike Versailles, it was designed to have practical aspects, as a port with a fortress. In fact the SS Peter and Paul Fortress was never attacked. It is, however, a good place to start a visit, not only because it was one of the first important constructions in St Petersburg but also because rising from within its walls is the Cathedral of SS Peter and Paul. Containing the tombs of Peter the Great and his successors (including the recently interred remains of Nicholas II and his family), the Cathedral is topped by a golden spire. This was one way Peter the Great indicated that his plans to westernise included an Orthodox Church that would be more "protestant".

After Peter the Great, perhaps the most famous modern ruler of Russia was Catherine II. Russian by marriage and Empress by virtue of a coup d'état, Catherine the Great was keen to be associated with Peter and as a tribute commissioned a statue, the Bronze Horseman, erected near the Admiralty looking towards the Neva. Next to the Admiralty (with another golden spire) stands the dramatically grand Winter Palace and its adjoining Hemitages. Here you can wander through rooms filled with paintings from the thirteenth century onwards, many acquired by Catherine to prove she was cultured – as well as enlightened. Alternatively, you could stop to admire the ingenuity of the Paradise Hall with its "hanging garden" and the green and gold splendour of the Malachite Hall or you could follow the imperial family down the Jordan Staircase, formerly used for the celebration in the Neva of Christ's baptism.

Chiefly perhaps, the Winter Palace is now associated with the Bolsheviks' October Revolution, overthrowing the Provisional Government that had assumed power after Nicholas II's abdication in February 1917. There are, however, other places in St Petersburg associated with the developments of 1917 that should be visited. The Tauride Palace (once owned by Potemkin, Catherine's lover and possibly husband) became in 1906 the home of the Duma, Russia's first parliament, joined rather uncomfortably in February 1917 by the Petrograd Soviet led by Trotsky. The Finland Station is where Lenin arrived back in April. The Smolny Institute was taken over as their headquarters by the Bolsheviks. Now moored permanently in the Neva, the cruiser *Aurora* fired at the Winter Palace, while Bolshevik supporters infiltrated the building, apprehended ministers of the Provisional Government and despatched them to the SS Peter and Paul Fortress. 1968 was the first time I visited St Petersburg. Having been Petrograd 1914-24, it was then in its third incarnation as Leningrad and had just celebrated fifty years of Soviet rule. Most people looked poor. Food in the restaurants was plain. Failures and deficiencies were still being blamed on the Second World War. There was a black market in jeans and ballpoint pens. The production at the Mariinsky Theatre was

propaganda; and St Isaac's was a museum promoting atheism. On my first night with no roubles (and currency exchange still has to be done inside Russia) I walked through drab suburban streets. Using a dictionary, I got into conversation with an elderly Russian who, ignoring people in uniform circling around us, bought me ice cream.

During my second visit to St Petersburg in 2005 I got lost. I went into what turned out to be a university building and said to a man on duty at the door with my best Russian accent: "Yusupov? Rasputin?" He went to find someone, who gave me directions in good English to the place where Rasputin was murdered by Felix Yusupov. I said: "*Spasiba*" (Thank you) and watched two stony Soviet faces become human.

To understand a little about St Petersburg's climate, visit in March, when the Neva still has ice and many of the canals are frozen. To understand Russia's past start with St Petersburg

but, more importantly, arrive with an open mind. Many Russians have hated St Petersburg for being too westernised. In my opinion, however, as a piece of evidence it is more complete and straightforward than, say, Moscow and the people are much warmer.

David Pearce studied History at Liverpool University, securing a BA and a PhD. He recently retired from teaching.

[Editor's note] For Historical Fiction set in St Petersburg in 1916 try *Sashenka* (2009) by Simon Montefiore or for Leningrad in 1941 try *The Siege* (2001) by Helen Dunmore.

If you would like to tell us about your history place in a future edition of *The Historian*, in about 700 words, please email: alf.wilkinson@history.org.uk

Henry VIII in ten tweets

Summarising an event or person using ten statements of only 140 characters (including spaces!).

Compiled by Paula Kitching



King Henry VIII
© National Portrait Gallery, London

-  Henry VIII – why? Because you can't move for historical literature retelling his story or that of his family or members of court.
-  Henry was 2nd son of Henry VII, who had become the Tudor king by defeating Richard III at Bosworth Field, ending War of the Roses.
-  Henry's brother Arthur was married to the princess Catherine of Aragon, who Henry fell in love with and married after Arthur's death.
-  That marriage its legitimacy or not caused endless problems with the Catholic Church and helped lead to England's break with Rome.
-  Earlier Henry gained the title 'Defender of Faith' from Pope Leo X for writing "Defence of the Seven Sacraments", a critical text of Luther
-  Despite breaking with Rome launching the Eng reformation (seizing religious land & cash) he kept the title, British monarchs still use it.
-  The reformation became one of the most tumultuous periods in English history creating the Anglican church & keeping the executioners busy
-  He was a keen musician, sportsman and military enthusiast, building Britain's navy. He also liked acquiring houses & palaces.
-  Henry is best remembered by school children for his 6 wives recalled thus – divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, outlived.
-  6 wives led only to 3 legitimate children. He was succeeded by all 3 children: Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I (& many books!)

Follow the HA on Twitter @histassoc