H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark D. Steinberg. *Petersburg Fin de Siecle.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. xi + 399 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-16504-3.

Reviewed by Markian Prokopovych

Published on H-Urban (October, 2013)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari (Marywood University)

Mark D. Steinberg's wonderful new book *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* demonstrates clearly that the definition of the turn of the century as an experience relatively uniform across the European continent is outdated and requires careful reformulation. For all the similarities that brought rapidly modernizing and urbanizing Russia into the orbit of broader European developments in the late nineteenth century, in fact to a degree unseen before, the turn-of-the-century denizens of Petersburg clearly lived in a very different fin de siècle from that of their western and central European contemporaries in a number of respects. Most importantly, their understanding of the modern condition, shaped to no uncertain degree by the immediate urban experience of the post-1905 Russian metropolis, was that of pessimistic, hopeless, and chaotic times on the verge of the abyss--or, as repeatedly noted by Steinberg's turn-of-the-century press informants and by the author himself, troubled times (*smutnoe vremia*). Russian writers, thinkers, and journalists who described Petersburg as a symbol of modernizing Russia simply did not possess the optimism of their western, central, and even some eastern European non-Russian counterparts about their respective pasts, presents, and futures at the turn of the century. And yet, as Steinberg argues persuasively throughout the book and especially in the conclusions, this understanding of the modern condition was in no way a deficiency. Rather, it was a deeper knowledge of the local realities, familiar to us from John Milton, Gérard de Nerval, Sigmund Freud, and other thinkers, but felt much more acutely in the Russian capital city (p. 267).

The book starts with the introduction, "Troubled Times," which is followed by a number of imaginatively called chapters, which urban historians will find particularly relevant and appealing. Steinberg analyzes the "City,"[1] its "Streets," "Masks," "Death," "Decadence," "Happiness," and, finally, "Melancholy." He does this by a careful reading of urban writers--personalities ranging from established serious authors through the creators of boulevard literature, to popular and largely unknown journalists. The book is meticu-

lously researched and beautifully written. Not once does Steinberg lose sight of his main argument, to demonstrate how the essence of the turn-of-the-century Petersburg experience was reflected in the press reports and other writings and how it enriches our understanding of the modern urban condition in the cities in the West. Not once does he become entangled in academic jargon and the complexity of his own argument, drawing instead his reader into this perplexing world of crime, death, decadence and chaos. In fact, the book has everything that a good detective novel would have (except, perhaps, the police inspector, whose role is mostly played by an investigative journalist): masked robbery, theft and swindling, café flair and cinema shadows, decadence and suicide, street violence and murder, prostitution and pornography, homosexuality and sex. It even features Lenin, Georgii Plekhanov and other "optimists" of Russian political thought, yet only on the margins, importantly, of its main argument. And quite fitting for a good detective novel, the stories narrated and analyzed on the pages of *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* do not end happily. Rather, as the final and arguably the most powerful chapter on melancholy demonstrates, they are a profound reflection of the nature of the time and the specific locality--indeed, of that fundamental concept of *toska* that no study of modern Russian cultural history can afford to avoid today.

The book makes once again transparent what urban historians have been arguing for decades after the "cultural turn": by taking a closer look at a particular urban culture as reflected in its street events, scandals, dubious establishments, public entertainment, and other examples of urban spectacle--and especially at the urban press and at how it reflected the everyday reality--a different, and often much deeper insight can be gained about the functioning of the modern society than that which emerges from overarching studies in political and social history. It is no accident that imperial ceremony, a subject of many recent historical studies, among them Richard Wortman's groundbreaking *Scenarios of Power*,[2] is marginal to Steinberg's argument, which integrates this discussion on political activism into a subchapter entitled, "Killing time." Similarly, political activists--from Iulii Martov to Lenin and Pavel Miliukov--appear in his analysis only in the context of largely unsuccessful pursuits of happiness. Many will be persuaded to believe that such intellectual and pleasure pursuits did not divert Petersburg denizens from fundamental disillusionment and disappointment in their immediate reality and prospects. The best they could do was to laugh about it. But even this laughter, as Steinberg demonstrates, quoting journalist Olga Gridina, had a peculiar bitterness such that even Mark Twain, had he been a Russian, would have shot himself rather than laugh about the hardships of the Russian reality (p. 227).

The book's shortcomings derive, ironically, from being at the cutting edge of its discipline and aiming, simultaneously, to reach out to a general audience. While tackling broader themes of metropolitan existence not limited to the Russian context, this is clearly a book written for a reader intimately familiar with Russian history. Although the main argument is never compromised by unnecessary cultural references, sometimes such references would have been helpful to those not initiated into the intricacies of Russian literary and cultural history. One example is the analysis of the "heroes of our times," a notion that deserved a complete subchapter in the discussion of decadence (pp. 166-170) but which appears repeatedly throughout the entire book. This reference to the work of Mikhail Lermontov is self-evident to Russian historians; however, a broader readership would have benefited enormously from a short note on how pervasive the term is in modern Russian culture and what exactly it is used to describe. The book is full of such literary jewels that will remain undisclosed to many.

The recent interest in the history of emotions, and especially in senses, emotions, and the city

has already manifested itself in a number of monographs and international conferences.[3] Steinberg's analysis of how the city can be "seen" and "mapped" with noise, odors, as well as the sense of pleasure or danger that is the subject of the chapter on streets is therefore in line with the recent urban historical literature. Repeated and relevant references to the work of Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Baudelaire, and Max Weber provide a good theoretical framework for analyzing the turn-of-the-century Russian metropolis; however, Steinberg does not engage with other authors included in the bibliography, especially Peter Fritzsche's work on Berlin 1900 and Nathaniel Wood's recent monograph on Cracow.[4] Many arguments of ***Petersburg Fin de Siècle*** have clear parallels in the scholarship on other metropolises of the time, yet rarely does his analysis expand beyond a comparison with Paris. Finally, there is a much larger body of literature on urban violence, street gangs, disease, death, suicide, and murder than what has been included in the section "Selected Comparative Studies of Cities and Modernity" of the bibliography.[5]

These shortcomings, however, are not likely to divert the attention of urban historians from this excellent book that will be greeted with enthusiasm by scholars of Russian and east and east-central European history more broadly. It is an outstanding contribution to the existing scholarship and a major academic achievement both in terms of the clarity of its argument and the elegance of its style. It will inspire further comparative studies focusing on other metropolises in the region and beyond that undoubtedly will refine and revisit Steinberg's argument about the nature of the fin de siècle.

Notes

[1]. The actual urban development of Petersburg during the turn of the century is beyond the main focus of the author's attention and is limited only to a short subchapter, "The Physical City."

[2]. Richard Wortman, ***Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), and ***Scenarios of Power: From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[3]. See, for example, Alexander Cowan and Jill Steward, eds., ***The City and the Senses: Urban Culture since 1500*** (Historical Urban Studies, Ashgate 2007); "Sensing the City: Experience, Emotion and Exploration, 1600-2013," Annual Conference of the Urban History Group, University of York, UK, April 4-5, 2013; "The City of Emotions: Modern Cities and People's Responses to Urban Transformations, Nineteenth and Twentieth Century," conference session presented at the 11th International Conference of the European Association for Urban History, Prague, August 29 - September 1, 2012; and "The Five Senses of the City: From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary Period," conference organized by Robert Beck, Ulrike Krampl, and Emmanuelle Retaillaud-Bajac, University of François-Rabelais de Tours, France, May 19-20, 2011.

[4]. Peter Fritzsche, ***Reading Berlin 1900*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Nathaniel D. Wood, ***Becoming Metropolitan: Urban Selfhood and the Making of Modern Cracow*** (Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

[5]. Secondary literature is divided into two sections, the first including books on St. Petersburg, Russian cities, and Russian modernity, and the second one comprising selected comparative studies. Endnotes to the chapters offer a much richer selection of sources than those included in the bibliography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Markian Prokopovych. Review of Steinberg, Mark D. *Petersburg Fin de Siecle.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 2013.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37054