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In *St Petersburg: Shadows of the Past*, Catriona Kelly explores the realm of “mundane memory”—the daily rituals and practices that defined the experience of St. Petersburg/Leningrad from the 1950s to the early twenty-first century. Largely ignoring monuments and commemoration, Kelly pushes her study beyond questions of erasure, suppression, guilt, and trauma. Instead, by taking readers on a lengthy tour of Petersburg over several decades, she unpacks the changing practice and memory of the everyday.

Kelly’s study assesses both the city’s shifting material landscape and Petersburgers’ practice of reflecting on this landscape and its significance. Combining ethnographic and oral history methodologies with cultural theory, Kelly explores what she calls the city’s “interior history”—that is, the city’s backstage world, spaces that were never commemorated, documented in the archives, or featured in postcard images of Russia’s second capital. She searches the city’s alleys, rickety old trams, and also—perhaps most important—the thoughts and impressions of those who have lived in St. Petersburg, including herself. Her sources include memoirs, diaries, online folklore and memory forums, her field notes, and interviews conducted for the Oxford Russian Life History Archive. All allow her to explore city and memory “from the inside” in a way that bridges the gap between official and unofficial memory.

All chapters begin in Soviet Leningrad and end with post-Soviet St. Petersburg, two worlds bound by the shared moniker “Piter,” a neither/nor designation that binds these two identifications. The introduction, “City Panorama,” outlines questions of memory and methodology. Chapter 1, “Moscow Station and Palace Bridge,” explores the world of public transportation. Chapter 2, “Making a Home on the Neva,” discusses housing. Chapter 3, “The Heritage and My Own Front Door: City Spaces,” enters urban neighborhoods, peering through back yards and down pathways known only to locals. Chapter 4, “Initiation into the Working Class,” presents life in industrial St. Petersburg—factory housing, entertainment, and museums, as well as the challenges posed by the

Through this sweeping survey, Kelly examines what it meant to be in St. Petersburg, particularly as modernization, in-migration, and economic change rent asunder the population’s direct connection with its material past. As Leningrad’s old manor houses became communal apartments, they came to be associated with the cramped quarters of the communal apartment, not with the opulence of the nobility, though there were artistic bohemians who gravitated to communal facilities (old mansions) precisely because of this latter association. As Kelly notes, Petersburgers tended to connect not to the material artifacts of the local prerevolutionary past but rather to the artifacts of a broader national past, including such objects as old furnishings, gas lamps, and primus stoves. Their “mundane memory” might center on a neighborhood or café, but everyday Petersburg was nonetheless associated with that which was “Soviet” as opposed to distinctively local. The same might be said of the post-Soviet spaces that followed—private transportation; renovated homes and kitchens; and a proliferation of cafes, malls, and cars. Petersburg’s distinct culture and identity has resided largely outside the mundane—not in back neighborhoods or in the residential landscape but in the city’s imperial heritage and identity.

For urban historians, the book will be a treasure trove of information related to housing, including information on housing types (from barracks and hostels to various apartment styles), popular designations for such housing, the politics of obtaining and swapping flats, the nature of cooperatives, typical Soviet furnishings, the boundaries of urban neighborhoods, and the reality of housing hierarchies (with prestige determined by the size and location of dwelling). Although it focuses primarily on the city center and surrounding neighborhoods, the work discusses factory districts and housing, the distribution of economic and social services throughout the city, and also the Soviet attempt to raise workplace discipline by fostering identification with one’s factory. Overall, as the chapter outline suggests, the work offers a detailed taxonomy of Petersburg’s material infrastructure, complete with a survey of its collective use, valuation, and management.

For those interested in conducting their own study of Russia’s second capital, it is worth noting that Kelly’s study tends to evoke, provoke, and suggest. Perhaps because this is a subtly intimate work, it opens a discussion rather than closing it. Writing in the third person, Kelly blurs the line between first-hand observation and indirect findings. Sometimes, her footnotes offer sourcing—evidence to back a statement. At other moments (often, it seems, after the most intriguing or provocative comments), they identify a work that shaped Kelly’s thoughts. Through them, one traces the place of Kelly’s own reflections in this book. The book’s contents will surely resonate with others who have trekked to this city and experienced—as Kelly did—Petersburg’s miserable weather, poor service, challenging transportation, and various cafes. A true “study from the inside,” the book incorporates the author’s cultural commentary, personal sentiments, and assessments, and these enrich the work immensely, though an authorial “I” is nowhere to be found.

Kelly’s book should be relished for its uncommon detail and personal wit. Each chapter has its own unique insights, quotable quotes, and humorous tales. The work will appeal to those with an interest in Russian culture, literature, economics, and history. Urbanists and those interested in
socialist cities and post-Soviet transitions will also enjoy and benefit from this work.

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