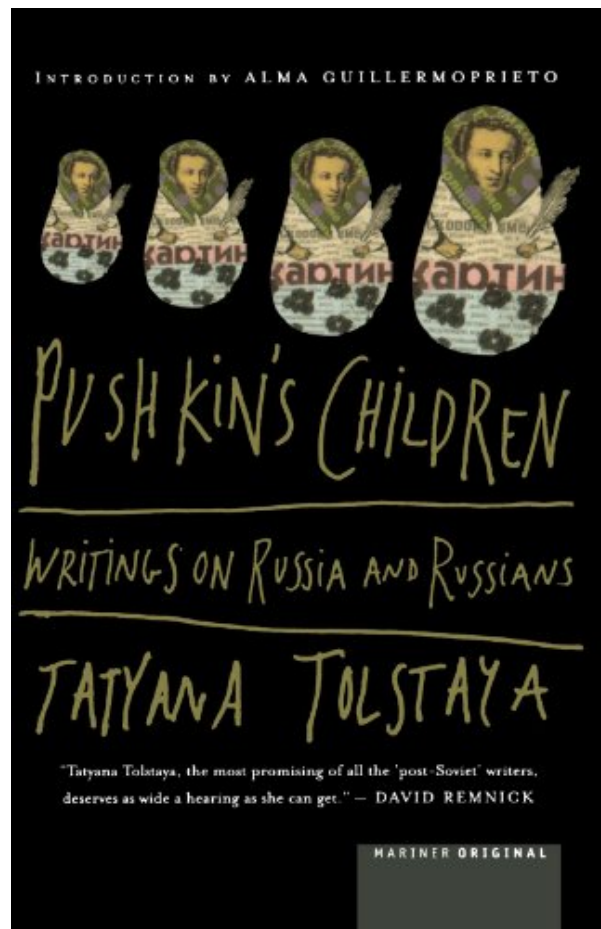


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INTRODUCTION BY ALMA GUILLERMOPRIETO



PUSHKIN'S CHILDREN

WRITINGS ON RUSSIA AND RUSSIANS

TATYANA TOLSTAYA

"Tatyana Tolstaya, the most promising of all the 'post-Soviet' writers, deserves as wide a hearing as she can get." — DAVID REMNICK

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These twenty pieces address the politics, culture, and literature of Russia with both flair and erudition. Passionate and opinionated, often funny, and using ample material from daily life to underline their ideas and observations, Tatyana Tolstaya's essays range across a variety of subjects. They move in one unique voice from Soviet women, classical Russian cooking, and the bliss of snow to the effect of Pushkin and freedom on Russia writers; from the death of the czar and the Great Terror to the changes brought by Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin in the last decade. Throughout this engaging volume, the Russian temperament comes into high relief. Whether addressing literature or reporting on politics, Tolstaya's writing conveys a deep knowledge of her country and countrymen. Pushkin's Children is a book for anyone interested in the Russian soul.

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In search of the Russian soul

By James Ferguson

Tolstaya demonstrates just how hard it is to size Russians up in a collection of book reviews and essays on the Russian character. These stories sparkle with many telling anecdotes, drifting back and forth over time. Pushkin has long held a dear place in the Russian heart because of his "inner freedom," Tolstaya noted. The unconquerable spirit that managed to survive one regime after another over the centuries.

Book reviews dominate this collection, from her appreciation of Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* to her witty dismissal of Gail Sheehy's book on Gorbachev. She also takes aim at Russian authors, in particular the cult that formed around Solzhenitsyn. The Russian soul is something that continually eludes authors. Exceedingly hard to pin down as is the Russian language.

Jamey Gambrell worked with Tolstaya on this translation, giving it the character of her voice. Although most of the pieces were written during the death throes of the Soviet Union, her observations are still timely and present a compelling portrait of Russia in transition. She takes a stab at the enigmatic Vladimir Putin and the events that led up to his ascension to power. She packs into these essays more meat than many scholars do in their massive tomes on Russia. It is a voice that is both fresh and enlightening.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

wonderful

By A Customer

This is a wonderful collection of essays. Tolstaya is sharp, opinionated, and savvy. Full of insight into contemporary Russia -- its leaders and its people.

5 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Not stupid, but really funny

By Bruce P. Barten

Intellectuals have problems fitting in with the big buddies in the world. This might be more true in Russia during the last few centuries than elsewhere, but PUSHKIN'S CHILDREN by Tatyana Tolstaya does not have an index, in which to look up Lenin, for his opinion on the intelligentsia, to illustrate the point. The intellectual freedoms which literary people in Russia had been seeking since the time of Herzen were finally granted by Gorbachev. But then the Partocracy, "accustomed to doing nothing concrete, to producing a lot of empty talk, they were shaken from their usual rut by the very mystery of what was happening. They were so baffled that it was easy to sweep them from their posts. When someone has fainted, you can quickly throw them out the door." (p. 44). People who live in democracies should recognize the ability of voters to do this to rulers on a regular basis, if the voters have enough reason and are given the opportunity.

In the case of Gorbachev, the larger question of how he managed to preside over the collapse of an empire and an economic system is of unusual interest for people in democracies whose outlooks for wealth are not stable. Tolstaya pictures the intelligentsia as being too moral to grasp the downside of what would happen when "Gorbachev made his first, and perhaps his most serious, mistake. He forbade the people to drink.

"The intelligentsia forgave him for this (they were `moved by their own perdition'). The Partocracy was happy. Here was a concrete task, and a familiar one: to fight, to root out, to fire people from their jobs. They set to tearing out grape vines, paving over rare vineyards in the Crimea, uprooting muscat so fine and expensive that `the people' couldn't get near it. They only counted the monstrous losses when the campaign was over. During the campaign, however, people cursed Gorbachev, bought up all the sugar, perfected their knowledge of moonshine manufacture, and most important of all, grasped that they could do everything their own way and not get caught or punished. An epidemic of hoarding began. Sugar, soap, matches, and lightbulbs disappeared, and then sheets and pillows, and then clothes, shoes, eggs, and finally bread." (p. 45). Most of the people in the world live in countries where they do not need to depend on their government to supply them with such items, and even the United States, rich as it is in so many ways, might expect to be able to conquer anyplace it chooses without having to furnish such items to everybody. Even the current road map might appear to create a state for the Palestinians in an area in which Jewish settlements are the hoarders of anything they might really want. Long before, this book, PUSHKIN'S CHILDREN, starts with a book review of SOVIET WOMEN: WALKING THE TIGHTROPE, by Francine du Plessix Gray, in which reality conforms to the old maxim, "Women can do everything, and men do all the rest." (p. 3). War and prison camps kept men away from homes and jobs in the first half of the twentieth century. "An honest person tried his or her best not to participate in this `official' life. Those who did get involved in the hellish machine were broken: either it destroyed all traces of individuality and compromised them morally and ethically, or--if a person rebelled--it threw him out of society, sometimes sending him as far as Siberia." (p. 11).

Things change as the essays in this book were written. "In January 1994, no one talks about politics and no one explains anything, no matter how much I ask. No one understands anything. No one believes in anyone or anything." (pp. 127-128). With incredibly high prices, "But there are happy surprises, too: a medicine that I bought in America for \$50 turned out to be so cheap in Russia that I bought fifteen jars and paid only five cents for it. (I should have bought thirty jars.)" (p. 128).

Another explanation for the collapse of the Soviet Union was in the personality conflict between its primary leaders. "In February 1991, Yeltsin was dying to speak on television and Gorbachev wouldn't let him. . . . Many people understood that the conflict between these two strong personalities did in fact threaten the

country with collapse--and with unforeseen consequences." (p. 147). Then, "Having rushed to `seize' Russia, he didn't know what to do with it." (p. 151). Yeltsin is pictured as dreaming that things would be better for him if he were in America. "(I wonder whether, somewhere in the depths of Yeltsin's subconscious, he is remembering the last house of the last Russian tsar, given to Nikolai II by the Bolsheviks, which Yeltsin himself had blown up on orders from Moscow.) In any event, I rather think that if an American president willfully decided to get rid of California, Nevada, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Texas, the two Virginias, both Carolinas, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, the grateful American people wouldn't build him anything more than a hut in Alaska, at best, and wouldn't give him any sled dogs either." (pp. 151-152).

This book is really too good. Even if you know a lot of what this book covers, the point of view is unusual and witty enough to make it entertaining. But in our times, even PUSHKIN'S CHILDREN has to admit, "Recently Americans have not shown much interest in what is going on in Russia." (pp. 185-186). The final paragraph, dated 2000, includes the kind of things that feed current fears. "Russians began to remove everything they possibly could from institutes and factories, and to sell everything they stole, including state secrets--actual, not imagined ones. They stole poisons, mercury, uranium, cesium, and vaccines. Even, in one instance, smallpox virus." (p. 242). Take it from an author who "used to buy meat patties at some tank factory. No one ever stopped me." (p. 242).

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