



Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia

Suzanne Massie

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'Land of the Firebird' is a WONDERFUL and ENGAGING in-depth look of Russian history from 987-1917, spanning the ascension of Vlad and the Orthodox Church to right before the Revolution. With colorful prose Suzanne Massie details the variety of Russian existence--tsars and serfs and merchant-princes and babushkas--no stone is left uncovered as she cross-references nearly a thousands years, writing with equal consideration of art, poetry, country-life, court-life, politics and its myriad games, myths and legends, influence "outside the sphere."

Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia Details

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From Reader Review Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia for online ebook

Chambermusic79 says

Suzanne Massie's book is disappointing. Its main quality is that it is easy to read and quite informative: Massie indulges in picturesque descriptions, often extracted from 19th-century travel accounts; she can get quite lyrical and enraptured. Yet, her love for Old Russia ends up in a rosy ethnographic report that doesn't take into account the complexity of Russian history. Artists and historical characters are flat and reduced to anecdotes, ideas turn into slogans, and in general everything is nostalgically beautiful. There is nothing wrong with the book, if it meant to be a bird's eye overview of "exotic" Old Russia; but as a cultural analysis of pre-revolutionary Russia, it is rather shallow and out of focus. Maybe the fact that it was written in Soviet times for the American general reader, collecting a series of museum lectures, explains such attitude.

Jeanet Alessandra says

Maravilloso libro sobre la mágica Rusia antigua.

Karen says

I don't enjoy history unless it's somebody's story and that's the beauty of this book! It's a history of Russia from the first Kievan Prince to Nicholas II through the stories of its tsars. In addition, it details the accomplishments in art, literature, and music under the reign of each tsar. It's a bit slow in parts but never tedious. It is quite long though. I learned so much from it--chiefly how much the Russian people have suffered under ever single tsar they've had (and sadly, they fared no better under the Soviets). But also interesting random facts--like why amber can be found all over the place in the former Soviet Union. Apparently, it was once believed that amber pieces were the fossilized tears that had fallen on the graves of fallen soldiers (and there have been so many fallen Russian soldiers). It's really a fascinating book.

Sherilyn says

Land of the Firebird is perhaps the greatest book ever written on pre revolutionary russia's now vanished culture. Beginning in 987 with the adoption of Eastern Christianity in Russia, Massie tells of the construction of the great cathedrals and palaces of Kiev and their destruction by the Mongols, and of the rise of Moscow and the Kremlin. She discusses the first and the greatest of the Romanovs and the the flowering of Russian culture in the 19th century. If you love Russia, and all things Russian, this is THE book to read.

Virginia Russell says

I never liked studying history when I was in school. I have spent the majority of my life reading business

books, books about women, self help and spiritual books. I got interested in history, particularly Russian history, through someone who ran a literary group and assigned the new BBC production of War and Peace. I watched it and loved it and that started my interest in Russian history. I really enjoyed this book because it informed me about the rich culture that was old Russia and almost made me want to live in those times. The book gave me a taste of the Tzars who ruled Russia and has inspired me to read further so I purchased Peter the Great, Katharine the Great and Nicolas and Alexandra and now I really have my work cut out for me because each is about a 2 inch book:)

Betty Ho says

A must read for people who is travelling to Russia for the very first time. The author weaves the old russians' travelogs with Russian folklores, a little bit of Russia history, plus the anecdotes of the greatest Russian artists.

This book walks you through the Kremlin in 17th century, the Nizhny fair in N. Novgorod, the Sadovaya Street in St. Petersburg and the Kizhi Island and more. If I'm going to take only one book to Russia, this would be my choice over the Lonely Planet. A truly beautiful book.

Fred Dameron says

Ms. Massie looks at Russian music not as an adjunct to the ballet or opera but as art in and of itself. This is refreshing as many cultural histories see music through the lens of ballet or opera. Nice change. That said she does do an in depth look at ballet. She also looks more at Russian painting more than other books. Over all this is a good starter history of Russian culture and art.

Jeff says

"Land of The Firebird". Suzanne Massie. 1980. "Land of the Firebird" is lyrical, exuberant, lush in it's breadth and beauty. Massie guides the reader through a cultural exploration of what she refers to as "Old Russia". -the Russia that existed before the 1917 revolution. She introduces the great painters, poets, composers and writers of Russia, but clearly it is the folk culture of the peasantry that Massie is most drawn to. Massie published her book at a time when the Soviet Union was powerful, enigmatic and rightfully feared. Her book at times, seems to be written with the sole purpose of counterbalancing the brutal images cast by the events of Russia's post-revolution history. Like Suzanne Massie herself, the people of 'Old Russia' appear nurturing, warm, generous and creative. Unlike many historians, Massie finds no difficulty in finding great beauty and warmth in a land beleaguered by harshness and cruelty.

J Layne says

Author Suzanne Massie is the person who had Reagan memorize the Russian phrase Trust but verify (doverey, no proverey in Russian). Reagan read her book before his Geneva summit meeting with Gorbachev in Nov 1985. Easy to read, even though this is a textbook. Chapters are short, and the writing is very good. Fascinating and violent history of Russia ending before the 1917 revolution. What surprised me most about the Russia before 1917 was their religious emphasis and frequent religious festivals and focus on Christ. Reading this history of Russia makes me want to read a further history of Russia starting at the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution to current times.

Carol says

This is a beautifully written and pictured history of pre-revolutionary Russia. It makes you aware of Russia's rich culture and heritage of art along with the stories of its royalty. Very inspiring

Kerry says

Perhaps this book could be considered a simplified version of Russian history, but for someone who is interested in Russian culture (because this is, at its heart, more of a cultural history), this volume might be a good entry point. For those who are already familiar with Russian history and culture, it probably offers nothing new, but for those who aren't, it just might encourage the development of full-fledged interest in the subject, with *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* being a logical next step for more in-depth acquisition of knowledge.

Eva Ebert says

It's a huge work, covering every part of Russian culture and art from the earliest times up to the revolution. In many ways it is everything you could want to know about the subject. It covers very little history and politics, so you'll have to look elsewhere for that.

My only real problem with the book is that Massie gets too personal sometimes. She is extremely positive when describing the Russian society and the tsars; whatever problems there might have been with suppression or poverty is glossed over or simply not mentioned. It is symptomatic, that even in the chapters about the last decade leading up to the revolution, she gives no hints as to what actually was at the root of it, but describes the time as one of great freedom and overflowing with new artistic and political ideas. All this could be overlooked if she at least was consistent, but there are a couple of times in the book, where she writes unfavourably of someone and it is always a person whose style she doesn't like, most notably Catherine the Great. So after reading this, which should have been the ultimate book about Russian art and culture, I come away with the feeling that I need to read some more, to get another's perspective.

Katrina Sark says

p.108 – It is an irony of history that Peter, the most masculine of rulers with the Spartan tastes of a soldier,

was to be succeeded by a series of women. During the rest of the 18th century, Russia was ruled by four empresses. Two of them were exceptional: Peter's daughter, Elizabeth, and a little princess from Germany who came to be called Catherine the Great. In the fifty-five years of their combined reigns, these two women, totally opposite in taste and temperament, were both in their different ways to lay the foundations for the flowering of Russian culture that was to come in the 19th century.

p.116 – Operas became very popular. At court, they were given once a week and for every important occasion. To insure a full audience, Elizabeth firmly extracted a fifty-ruble fine from those who were invited and did not appear, which sounds very like something her father would have done.

At court every week the Imperial Corps of Cadets with their officers gave theatrical performances. Elizabeth followed every detail. She provided rich costumes and sometimes went backstage to help with the costuming and makeup herself. On occasion, she even went so far as to lend her own jewels to the cadets who performed female roles.

p.136 – At the beginning of her reign, Catherine talked and wrote a great deal about “liberty” and inflamed the aristocracy with ideas about freedom. In the last years of the 18th century, just as they were in Europe, voices in Russia were being raised against bondage. Some enlightened nobles had begun freeing their serfs. But Catherine refused to hear such opinions. As she became older she became more and more conservative. She called Washington “a rebel,” imposed censorship on Voltaire's writings and, to the point of ridiculousness, even on some of the laws she had written herself.

p.138 – In 1764, inspired by Fénelon's Education of Women, Catherine decided to found a school for girls. She established this school at the Smolny Convent, where there was already a school for orphans founded by Elizabeth.

p.139 – Among the nobility, one of those who criticized her was a princess, Catherine Vorontsova-Dashkova, who had been one of her closest friends in the early days when Catherine was a Grand Duchess. Princess Vorontsova was from the highest nobility; her godparents had been Empress Elizabeth and the luckless Peter III. She had been given a superb education; she studied mathematics at the University of Moscow, read widely in foreign literature and spoke several languages. When they met, she was fifteen and Catherine was sixteen; Vorontsova became Catherine's closest friend and confidante. She enthusiastically championed Catherine's cause among the nobility and helped to bring her to the throne. Princess Vorontsova married Prince Mikhail Dashkov, an officer in the Imperial Guards who died six years later while on active service. Dashkova never married again. She opposed Catherine's liaison with Grigory Orlov and twitted her in verse for her yes-men, her imitative foreign ways and the loose morality of her court. Her Imperial Majesty was not amused, and so for fifteen years Dashkova was banished from the court. During that time she lived on her estate or traveled widely in Europe.

Dashkova was a striking example of the independence possible for Russian noblewomen at the time. In Russia, as distinguished from other European countries of the period, women had civil equality. They had a legal right to keep their own fortunes and lands. A husband could languish in prison in debt, yet his wife was not legally responsible for paying his debts. Women of substance could therefore exercise considerable degree of independence in managing their lives.

p.140 – In Russia, the powerful Prince Potemkin admired her greatly and the two corresponded regularly. In 1783, perhaps influenced by him, Catherine called Dashkova back to court and named her head of the Academy of Sciences, a post which she occupied with great distinction for fourteen years, the only woman in Europe to occupy such an exalted intellectual position. Dashkova was extraordinarily energetic and farseeing in her post as director and did a great deal to encourage native scholarship. At a time when French was being encouraged as the language of the court, she founded a Russian Academy whose main language was the perfection of the Russian language, and she became its first president. Under the auspices of the Academy, she organized public summer lectures open to all, which were a great popular success. She managed to raise professors' salaries and to double the number of scholarships for talented students of all classes, including peasants, whose education was completely taken over by the crown. Persistently, she raised large funds for the support of the Academy and the School for Foundlings.

p.151 – The last years of her reign were a bleak period for Russian culture.

p.153 – The revenge of the thwarted son was swift; on the day of his coronation he changed the law of succession. From henceforth only males could rule Russia. He dismissed Catherine's architects, banished her

friends and closed off contacts to the West.

p.217 – [For the premiere of *Inspector General*] Gogol coached the actors himself, and the play had its premiere on April 19, 1836, in the beautiful yellow and white Alexandrinsky Theatre which had recently been completed by Rossi.

p.226 – Count Sheremetev was instrumental in bringing to Russia Charles Didelot, a French dancer and ballet master who had worked in Paris, Bordeaux and London and the Swedish court. His arrival proved to be a decisive factor in the course of Russian ballet. When he first came to St. Petersburg in 1801, he found a company of 114 dancers with its own repertory, a school, and a flourishing ballet culture. The three well-equipped theatres, all subsidized by the state, had workshops capable of producing wardrobes and scenic decorations far superior to those in England and France.

In 1809 Alexander I ordered a reorganization of the ballet school. Pupils were to be systematically taught academic subjects as well as music and the theatrical arts.

p.227 – In 1816 Didelot was given a position of undisputed authority and remained in Russia until his death in 1837. In the twenty-eight years that he was director of the ballet in Russia, he more than achieved his goal, molding the school and company into the best in Europe. Under him, ballet took a prominent place in Russian art which it never lost.

p.229 – During his long career in Russia, Didelot invited many foreign ballerinas to dance with his company. From these foreign dancers, whom the Russians carefully studied, they absorbed the best of European virtuoso techniques, which they incorporated into their own style. In 1837 the supreme ballerina Maia Taglioni made a triumphal debut in Petersburg, dancing *La Sylphide*. She was idolized by the press and public. Nicholas I was a great ballet enthusiast, often visiting backstage and on several occasions providing extra funds for productions when they were needed.

p.230 – In 1830 Glinka went off to Europe to study music and stayed away for four years. He spent three years in Italy where he met Donizetti and Bellini and watched them conduct their operas. He came to the conclusion that beautiful as it was, their music was better suited for sunny climes because “we who live in northern countries feel differently; impressions either leave us cold or penetrate to the depth of our soul. With us, it is always a matter of great joy or bitter sorrow.” He continued to Berlin, where he studied counterpoint, fugue and harmony, with the finest German teacher of the day.

p.308 – Lost in the countryside 130 miles south of Moscow, Yasnaya Polyana was an estate of some four thousand acres, which had been owned by Tolstoy’s aristocratic grandfather, Prince Volkonsky, and left to Tolstoy. The grounds were filled with venerable linden trees, birches, firs, elms, elders and huge bushes of lilacs. There were four ponds, a deep stream and four little hamlets of humble izbas inhabited by 350 peasant families. The white wooden manor house, embellished by a peristyle of columns and a neoclassical pediment flanked by two pavilions, looked out on this calm rolling landscape.

p.310 – During the seven years it took Tolstoy to write this colossal novel [*War and Peace*], which finally ended with the publication in December of 1869 of the sixth and final volume, his young bride, who was only twenty when he began, shielded him from everything. She took over the household accounts and the management of the estate. She cared for a large household, gave birth to four children and still found time to painstakingly recopy his pages in her beautiful curling script. Tolstoy covered his pages with a tight microscopic, almost illegible handwriting, scribbling innumerable corrections, crossing out sections, adding thoughts between lines, in the margins and on the backs of pages. As he wrote, he often added trial adjectives in the margins, bits and fragments of ideas from which he then constructed a scene. After the babies slept and the servants had retired, Sofia would begin her work by flickering candlelight. Skillfully, often working far into the night, Sofia deciphered amputated words and half-finished sentences. When she was finished, she would return the neatly copied pages to his night table where he would find them in the morning, only to have to face them again, entirely covered with corrections the next evening. Tolstoy made many drafts of each chapter, usually five or six, and was always unhappy when he had to give up a manuscript and could make no more changes. Patiently, Sofia recopied them all. Before he finished, she had recopied most of *War and Peace* seven times.

p.311 – Note: Sofia carefully saved the rough drafts of Tolstoy’s writings and never threw away a scrap of paper on which he had written. The manuscripts for *War and Peace* were laid aside untouched for many years in an unused room. Eventually Sofia had twelve wooden cases made, put all the manuscripts in them,

and sent them for safekeeping to the Rumyantsev Museum in Moscow where they remain today.

p.322 – At Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy received all the leading magazines and newspapers, foreign as well as Russian, and kept up with most of the significant books published abroad. His desk was piled with letter from all over the world; his correspondents over the years ranged from Thomas Edison to Ghandi. In 1895, when his *The Power of Darkness* was staged at the Imperial Theatres of both Moscow and St. Petersburg, Yasnaya Polyana was overrun with production, set and costume designers, who came to make sketches of peasant cottages, buy up peasant women's costumes, take photographs and learn the correct pronunciation for various folk expressions.

p.329 – When Catherine the Great established the Academy of Fine Arts as an institution, her aim had been to enrich the cultural life of the nation, to make of art an honored and legally protected profession. Her statutes specified that graduates of the Academy were to work as independent artists, free of military service. She attached a boarding school to the Academy which have its students, rich or poor, a fine education and sent them off prepared to take their places among the cultural elite of the nation. Paul and Alexander I interfered little in the Academy's affairs, but when the imperious Nicholas I, with his passion for military precision, came to the throne, it was a different story.

p.408 – One could hear and see the best performers and works that Russia and Europe could provide. At the Mariinsky Theatre the new operas of Tchaikovsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov were produced impeccably, as well as the operas of Wagner, with the finest German singers of the day. There were also French and Italian Opera which brought their world-famous stars. Rimsky-Korsakov was the regular conductor of the symphony concerts of the Imperial Music Society which invited as guests the greatest conductors and virtuosos of Europe. Sarah Bernhardt had Bartel were regular visiting members of the permanent French dramatic company of the Mikhailovsky Theatre.

St. Petersburg had four opera houses. Moscow, Tiflis, Odessa and Kiev also each had an opera house with permanent companies which gave performances though eight-and nine-month seasons.

p.411 – From their first year on, pupils at the school were used in productions at the Mariinsky Theatre of Opera and Ballet, one of the loveliest and most welcoming theatres in the world. Designed in 1860 by Alberto Cavos, the theatre with its blue hangings adorning the boxes, its stalls and barriers painted in gilt with white background, its sparkling crystal chandeliers, and chairs upholstered in blue velvet, had an atmosphere of great gaiety and yet of coziness. The vast, airy auditorium was so skillfully constructed that the stage was clearly visible from every seat.

Like the other Imperial Theatre in St. Petersburg and Moscow, the Mariinsky was supported by the tsar with an annual subsidy of 2 million gold rubles. Thanks to this steady and generous patronage, and the protected artistic atmosphere at the school, Russian ballet at the end of the century had no rival. Ballet had developed elsewhere in Europe – Paris, London, Vienna, Milan and Copenhagen – from 1800 to 1845, but by the end of the century it was in sad decline.

p.412 – At the end of the century, there were 180 dancers in the Mariinsky Theatre, all strictly graded in rank, through which they progressed from cadets to captains. First came the corps de ballet, then coryphée, sujet, prima ballerina and prima ballerina assoluta, or for a man, soloist to the Tsar. Salaries corresponded to rank, proceeding through the grading system with parts given according to ability. The term of service was twenty years, after which the dancers received a pension for life. Their dancing shoes were made in Paris, and they too, were distributed according to rank; the corps de ballet was entitled to one pair for every four performances, coryphée for every three, solo dancers for two, first dancers every night and ballerinas each act.

p.421 – A young man named Alexander Benois, who came from a distinguished family of Venetian and French artists who had emigrated to Russia in the early 19th century, was the heart of the original group [World of Art]. Benois' father was architect of the Imperial court; his uncle, Alberto Cavos, had designed two opera houses in St. Petersburg, as well as the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. The Benois household was always full of painters, sculptors and architects. Alexander Benois, himself an artist, was a storehouse of knowledge of art history and was especially interested in the art of the theatre.

p.457 – In 1906 in St. Petersburg, Vera Komissarzhevskaya, a famous actress, began her Dramatic Theatre and invited Meyerhold to be its director. In this theatre on Offizerskaya Street with its curtain designed by Bakst depicting a sphinx and a Greek temple, Meyerhold staged plays by the Symbolist writers Sologub and

Andreev, his most ambitious project being a series of poetic dramas by the Symbolist poet Alexander Blok.

Emily Welch says

This book was my textbook in my first Russian (history) class ever, and it is, without a doubt, part of the reason that I continued to pursue Russian as a field of study. A wonderful and engaging story of Russian history with a peppering of folktales and beautiful imagery.

Mary Dalton says

I never imagined I would enjoy reading this book as much as I did. I've always been drawn to Russian culture (culture prior to the Revolution, that is), and LAND OF THE FIREBIRD confirmed why for me. This is a sweeping overview of Russia's history, starting with the Middle Ages and touching upon the influences of people like Peter the Great, the Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine, the creation of cities like Saint Petersburg, the richness of life in the country (the author does not take the view that peasant life was uniformly bleak or colorless), and the role of religion in life and art. By the time Massie reaches the final chapters on the development of The World of Art group (headed by Diaghilev and including individuals like Fokine, Stravinsky, and Bakst), you understand how such a group came to be -- the source was Russia itself, in all its complexity and color.

Massie doesn't write like an academic -- her writing isn't dry or emotionally-removed, but impassioned and lyrical, which I liked. I read the book over the winter and loved being immersed in the topic.
