

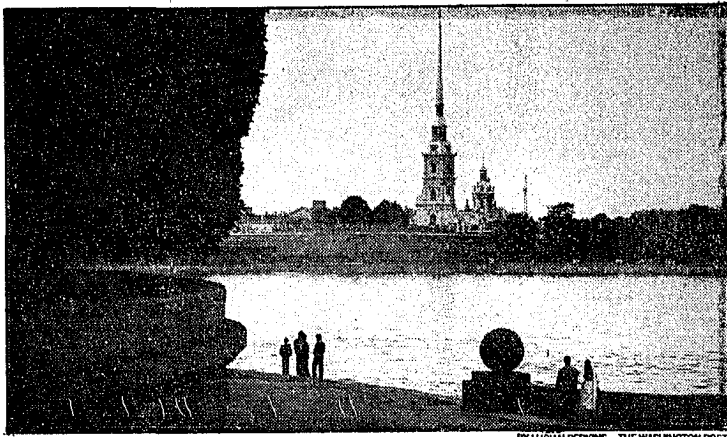
Reading St. Petersburg: Fact and fiction mingle in this Russian city, ...

Dobbs, Michael

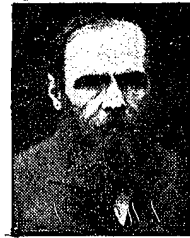
The Washington Post (1974-Current file); Apr 3, 1994;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post

pg. E1



Feodor Dostoevski, right, immortalized St. Petersburg and its river Neva, above (with the Peter and Paul Cathedral in the background).



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Reading St. Petersburg

By Michael Dobbs
Special to The Washington Post

Towards the end of a sultry afternoon early in July, a young man came out of his little room in St-Lane and turned slowly and somewhat irresolutely in the direction of K-Bridge.

—Feodor Dostoevski, "Crime and Punishment"

A well-thumbed copy of "Crime and Punishment" under my arm, I carefully traced the 730 steps taken by Rodion Raskolnikov on his way to murder the old pawnbroker. I crossed a bridge, skirted the Yusupov Palace gardens and approached a large six-story building facing the canal. My heart beat slightly faster as I climbed up a dark, narrow staircase to the fourth floor and rang the bell.

After a short interval, the door opened a crack to reveal the suspicious eyes of a wizened old lady. "Is this where the old pawnbroker lived, the one in 'Crime and Punishment?'" I asked, in my most harmless, non-threatening tone of voice. The woman nodded, and then slammed the door. "Go away. I'm not letting anyone in."

Life has a habit of imitating art in St. Petersburg, Russia's former capital. During its 291-year existence, the city founded by Peter the Great as a "window on the West" has inspired such literary giants as Feodor Dostoevski and Aleksandr Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol and Mikhail Lermontov, Anna Akhmatova and Aleksandr Blok. They paid the city back by immortalizing its streets, canals, palaces and tenements in some of the greatest works of literature mankind has ever produced. Much of the charm of this most beautiful of Russian cities lies in the way in which fact and fiction are inextricably jumbled together in the public imagination.

Sadly, this is a side to St. Petersburg that most foreigners never get to see, either because they are too rushed or because they are too timid. As a Washington Post correspondent based in Moscow, I visited St. Petersburg many times over the

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St. Petersburg

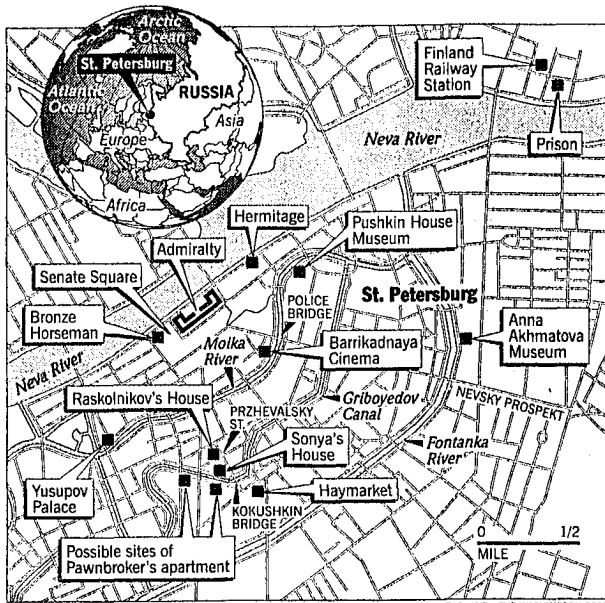
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past five years. On each occasion, I would visit some of the obvious tourist sights, like the Hermitage museum or the Peter and Paul Fortress. For my last trip, I left behind the conventional guidebooks and packed my suitcase with novels and books of poetry. I am glad I did, because I was able to discover an entirely different city, a city that has in many ways changed remarkably little since the days of Dostoevski and Pushkin.

Various theories have been advanced as to why St. Petersburg should have exercised such a remarkable hold over the minds of so many writers and poets. Built on a swamp by hundreds of thousands of slave laborers and buffeted by frequent floods, it owes its existence to the indomitable will of a tyrannical ruler. Dostoevski described St. Petersburg as "the most intentional and abstract city in the world." By building a new capital on the westernmost edge of a vast Asiatic empire, Peter the Great forced his compatriots to take a fresh look at their country. "The emergence of St. Petersburg was similar to the discovery of the New World: it gave pensive men of the time a chance to look upon themselves and the nation as though from outside," writes Joseph Brodsky, a St. Petersburg poet who went on to win the Nobel prize for literature. "There is no other place in Russia where thoughts depart so willingly from reality."

The main difficulty in attempting to devise a literary tour of St. Petersburg is the wealth of original material. A thorough exploration of the city of Pushkin or Dostoevski would take months, possibly years. Entire treatises have been devoted to such questions as whether such-and-such a character from such-and-such a Dostoevski novel lived on such-and-such a street, or just around the corner. Every other building in the center of the city seems to be adorned with a plaque, testifying to an association with some famous writer. If you walk down any street in St. Petersburg in the company of a knowledgeable Russian, you are likely to be bombarded with literary references. This is where Gogol wrote his celebrated play, "The Inspector General." Here is where Raskolnikov bowed to the ground and asked forgiveness. Over there is a coffeehouse where Akhmatova and other young poets liked to gather.

But one has to begin somewhere—and the obvious starting point is the



Bronze Horseman, Etienne Falconet's statue of Peter the Great on the left bank of the river Neva. Depicting the czar seated upon a rearing steed, his right arm thrust in front of him, it symbolizes the willful conquest of nature. One of the best-known monuments in St. Petersburg, it has inspired several works of literature, most notably Pushkin's poem "The Bronze Horseman."

Like many St. Petersburg writers, Pushkin had an ambivalent attitude toward the founder of the city. On the one hand, he recognized Peter as the political and military genius who modernized a backward empire and bequeathed a beautiful city to future generations. "I love thee, masterpiece of Peter—I love thee aspect, graceful and severe," he writes. "Be splendid, Peter's City, and stand, like Russia, strong—for lo, the very conquered element has made her peace with thee at last." On the other hand, he also feels for the thou-

sands upon thousands of victims trampled underfoot for the greater glory of czar and country.

"The Bronze Horseman" tells the story of a penniless clerk, Yevgeny, who loses both his fiancée and his humble living quarters in the Great Flood of 1824. Yevgeny holds the czar responsible for his loss—"he whose fateful will had based the city on the sea"—and goes mad in front of the statue. At the end of the poem, he runs through the streets of the city, pursued by the "hammering hoofbeats" of the statue, the symbol of the little man overwhelmed by powerful forces he can barely comprehend.

From Senate Square (Decembrists' Square), where Peter's statue is located, skirt the city's architectural landmark, the Admiralty, with its glistening golden spire, and head up Nevsky Prospekt. "There is nothing finer than Nevsky Prospekt, not in St. Petersburg at any rate; for in St. Petersburg it is everything," wrote Gogol in a

short story named after the city's most celebrated street. "And, indeed, is there anything more gay, more brilliant, more resplendent than this beautiful street of our capital? I am sure that not one of her innumerable Civil Servants, would exchange Nevsky Prospekt for all the avenues in the world."

Well, this may be overdoing it somewhat. The street has lost much of its luster since Gogol's day: Its facades are crumbling from decades of communist neglect, its stores a shadow of their former selves. But it still boasts numerous literary associations.

On the right, as you walk up the street from the Admiralty, watch out for the **Barrikadnaya Cinema** (No. 15), on a corner facing the Moika River. A neoclassical building with two-story-high columns, it once housed the Talon restaurant, a favorite gathering place for writers and artists. During the 19th century, the Talon was an obligatory stop on the daily social round: Pushkin's hero, Yevgeny Onegin, drops into the restaurant on his way to the theater. In the late 18th century, it was the residence of the city's police chief. In Pushkin's day, the nearby bridge over the Moika was called **Politselskiy (Police) Bridge**, and this is the way it is still known to anyone familiar with Russian literature. After the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, it was renamed **Narodny (People's) Bridge**.

Almost catty-corner from the Talon restaurant, at Moika 12, is Pushkin's last apartment in St. Petersburg, now the **Pushkin House Museum**. This is where the poet was brought on Jan. 27, 1837, after being wounded in a duel with his wife's lover, a Spanish diplomat named d'Anthes. Here again, life imitated art. The circumstances of Pushkin's duel with his dreamy, artistic friend, Lensky. In the poet's apartment, you can still see the bullet-holed black waistcoat that Pushkin wore during the duel and a carefully preserved lock of his hair.

Two days after the duel, Pushkin died. Tens of thousands of people flocked to the building on the Moika to pay their last respects, despite the government's best efforts to bury the poet in secret. The regime of Nicholas I regarded Pushkin, the

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most famous writer of his age, as a dangerous troublemaker who refused to accept the authority of the censor. In Russia, under both the czars and the Communists, poets and writers have traditionally been regarded as potential threats to national security.

After visiting Pushkin's apartment, relax with a canal tour of the city. During the summer, small motorboats can be hired from the mooring post next to the Police Bridge, or a little farther up Nevsky Prospekt on the Griboyedov Canal. (Boat rentals cost from \$15 to \$25, depending on how far you want to go).

These boats are one of the best ways to see St. Petersburg—and understand its social makeup. Part of the appeal of the city for writers lies in the close proximity of several very different worlds, demarcated by the various waterways. The aristocratic heart of the city was concentrated in the thin strip of land between the Neva and Moika rivers, which were lined with palaces, embassies and ministries. Poor clerks like Pushkin's Yevgeny lived on the islands, on the other side of the Neva. The area around the Griboyedov Canal was a natural breeding ground for desperate, Dostoevskian characters: a demimonde of students, workers and struggling writers.

The antipathy between one section of the city and another was reinforced by architecture and urban geography. The symbolist writer Andrei Bely contrasted the harmonious symmetry of the Neva embankment and Nevsky Prospekt with the disorganized chaos of the islands and other working class districts. In his novel "Petersburg," described by James Joyce as one of the most brilliant works of modern literature, social distinctions are reduced to geometry. "He was cut off from the scum of the streets by four perpendicular walls," writes Bely, describing the thoughts of the senator, Apollon Apollonovich, as his carriage flies down arrow-straight Nevsky Prospekt: "Apollon Apollonovich did not like the islands: the population there was industrial and coarse . . . The islands must be crushed! Riveted with the iron of the enormous bridge, skewered by the arrows of the prospects . . ."

To a large extent, these social and geographic distinctions still hold good today. Had Russia been allowed to develop normally, like a Western country, the streets around the Griboyedov Canal would have been yuppified by now. What was a slum area on the edge of St. Petersburg in Dostoevski's day would have become prime real estate. But thanks to the deep-freeze effect of communism, it has retained much of its original character. There are still plenty of poor students, thieves, prostitutes, drunks and aged widows living in the ramshackle communal apartments in the old Haymarket area, many of whom could have wandered straight out of the pages of a Dostoevski novel.

A good starting point for exploring this part of town is the **Kokushkin Bridge**, next to the former Haymarket (now called **Plotschad Mira**, or Square of Peace). Dostoevski tells us that Raskolnikov stood on the bridge, gazing into its murky waters and pondering his destiny. After killing the pawnbroker with an ax, he briefly considers throwing the murder weapon into the canal, but is dissuaded by the sight of the barges passing by and women doing their laundry. People no longer do their washing in the canal, but there is plenty of activity along the banks: workers munching sandwiches, drunks, strolling lovers.

I should make clear that locating the landmarks of "Crime and Punishment" and other Dostoevski novels is a somewhat inexact science. Deciphering his abbreviations is simple enough. "K— Bridge" is clearly Kokushkin Bridge. "St— Lane" is obviously Stolyarni Lane, since renamed **Przhevalsky Street**, where the writer himself lived for several years. Dostoevski is extremely precise in describing the neighborhood, but does not give exact addresses, and some of the fictional details may have been deliberately jumbled up. Figuring out precisely where his heroes lived revolves around such questions as whether Sonya Marmeladova turned left or right after leaving Raskolnikov's house and the way the sun sets along the twisting canal. In reconstructing Raskolnikov's movements, I have accepted the best guesses of the experts.

The most widely accepted location for Raskolnikov's house is now **Grazhdanskaya** (formerly **Srednaya Meshchanskaya**) 18, an apartment building two blocks from Kokushkin Bridge. It attracts a steady stream of Dostoevski lovers and would-be Raskolnikovs, who make their way up to the attic on the fifth floor, where the hero of "Crime and Punishment" is presumed to have lived. (It's the first stairway on the right, after you have entered the courtyard. The security code is 490.)

On the staircase leading up to the attic, graffiti writers have left messages for Raskolnikov, some sympathetic, some humorous. "Rodya, I understand you." "Rodya, I know where another old woman lives." "Rodya, have you forgotten your ax?" Down in the courtyard, residents are happy to show you the (now walled-up) cellar where Raskolnikov finally found his ax.

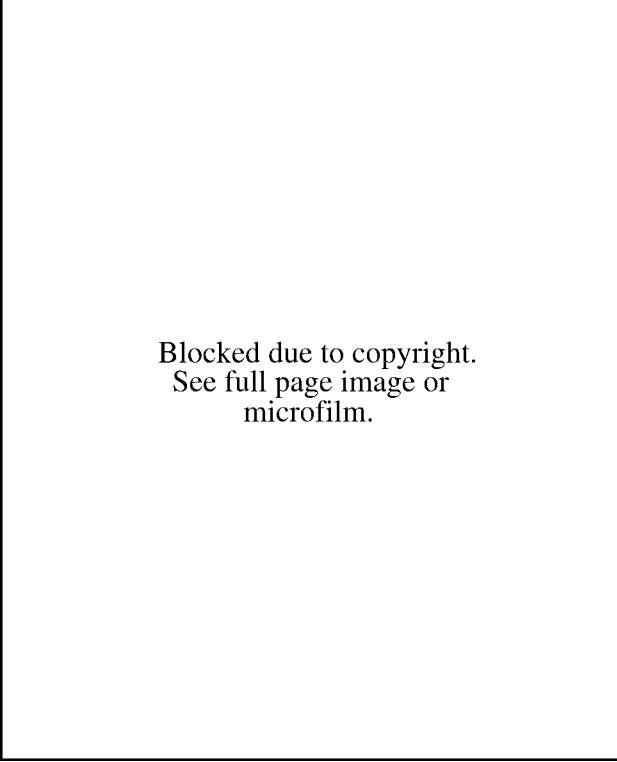
Raskolnikov's girlfriend, Sonya, is believed to have lived around the cor-

ner at **Kaznacheyeskaya 73**, midway between the **Voznessensky** and **Kokushkin** bridges. I was directed to a third-floor apartment (No. 9) overlooking the canal, inhabited when I visited by a charming young couple, Olga and Igor. The building is said to have undergone a *kapitalni remont* (major reconstruction) since Sonya's day, so you have to use your imagination a little here. Dostoevski informs us that a character named Svidrirov lived a few steps away from Sonya's front door and used to eavesdrop on her conversations. Sure enough, on the third floor, there is one other apartment right next door.

The pawnbroker's apartment has been located several hundred yards down the Griboyedov Canal (known as the **Ekaterinsky Canal** in Dostoevski's day), at either **Griboyedova 104** or **118** (**Sadovaya 65**, if you approach it from the other side). Raskolnikov, we are told, reached the apartment by a roundabout route and returned along the canal. Either location captures the feel of the Dostoevski novel, with a large inner courtyard and a plain facade facing the canal. Since the inhabitants of either house are willing to swear blindly that this was where the pawnbroker actually lived, suspend your disbelief and plump for one or the other.

After the old lady on the fourth floor of Griboyedova 104 very sensibly refused my request to inspect her rooms, I was given a warm welcome by another old lady on the floor below. The place was almost exactly as Dostoevski described it: an entrance door held by a chain, a dark hallway, divided by a thin partition from a tiny kitchen, and two other small rooms.

The biggest disappointment was the Haymarket, which is described by Dostoevski as the focus of the dissolute everyday life of this part of town. You can still find the spot where Raskolnikov bowed down to ask forgiveness, but sadly, most of the square has



"There is nothing finer than Nevsky Prospekt [above], not in St. Petersburg at any rate; for in St. Petersburg it is everything," wrote Gogol. Today, the street has lost much of its luster, but it still boasts numerous literary associations.

been ripped apart by communist planners. The local church has been torn down. Further repair works are underway to build a new subway station here, so it's a good idea at this point to return to Nevsky Prospekt (one stop on the Metro).

No description of literary St. Petersburg would be complete without mentioning the poets and writers of

the Soviet period, who struggled to preserve the Russian literary tradition under appalling circumstances. There are many famous names: Aleksandr Blok, Sergei Yesenin (who committed suicide in what is now part of the Astoria hotel), Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetayeva and Joseph Brodsky. But the most emblematic Leningrad writer for me is Anna Akhmatova, who managed to endure the Bolshevik revolution,

the Stalinist terror and the wartime blockade of the city by the Nazis with her reputation and principles intact. When she died in 1966, the streets of her native city were filled with mourners. She had outlasted her bureaucratic tormentors. Like Pushkin and Tolstoy, she had kept alive the "great Russian word."

The place most associated with Akhmatova in St. Petersburg is the crumbling **Sheremetyev Palace** on the **Fontanka River**, just north of **Nevsky Prospekt**. Akhmatova moved into a communal apartment on the third floor of the palace in the mid-'20s and, with the exception of the latter part of the war, stayed here until 1952. It was here that both her son, **Lev Gumilev**, and her lover, **Nikolai Punin**, were arrested during the Terror. (Her first husband, **Nikolai Gumilev**, was shot by the Bolsheviks in 1921 as an alleged counter-revolutionary.) The southern wing of the palace, where Akhmatova lived, has been turned into the **Anna Akhmatova Museum** (34 **Fontanka**, with an entrance on **Litsey Street**).

Unfortunately, the very act of prettying up the apartment to receive tens of thousands of visitors makes it extremely difficult to imagine what it must have been like in Akhmatova's day, when half a dozen families were crammed into six rooms. The poet herself had very few possessions—a Bible, a couple of books, her writing table—so there is little to remember her by directly. But the photographic exhibition provides a good sense of her extraordinary life, and there are some interesting mementos from the Gulag, the vast Stalinist prison camp system. Perhaps the most poignant is a book made out of tiny pieces of bark, upon which the prisoners clandestinely inscribed Akhmatova's poetry in minute handwriting.

After visiting the house on the **Fontanka**, it is worth driving about

1½ miles north to the other side of the river, to the place that inspired the poem for which Akhmatova is best remembered, "Requiem." After her son was arrested in 1935, Akhmatova spent 17 months outside the **central Leningrad prison** (**Arsenalnaya 7**) seeking news of what had happened to him. A few hundred yards from the **Finland Railway Station**, where Lenin received a triumphant welcome from his followers in 1917, the place is easily recognizable by the "red blind prison-wall" described in Akhmatova's poem.

By describing her own thoughts as she waited by the prison gate, she describes the fate of an entire generation of Soviet women whose loved ones vanished into the Gulag. "If ever in this country they should want to build me a monument," writes Akhmatova, "I consent only on condition that they erect it . . .

. . . here, where I stood for
three hundred hours
And where they never, never
opened the doors for me.
Lest in blessed death I should
forget
The grinding scream of the
Black Marias,
The hideous clanging gate, the
old
Woman wailing like a wounded
beast.
And may the melting snow drop
like tears
From my motionless bronze
eyelids,
And the prison pigeons coo
above me
And the ships sail slowly down
the Neva."

Michael Dobbs, a Washington Post correspondent currently on leave, was The Post's Moscow bureau chief from 1988 to 1993.