



St. Petersburg

by Daniel D. Healey

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Built on the marshy, inhospitable shores of the Gulf of Finland by nameless thousands of serfs, "Sankt-Peterburg" (as it is called in Russian) was the focal point of Peter the Great's drive to bring medieval Muscovy into the European orbit.

It was established in 1703 as a naval center and as the new capital of the Russian Empire. Petersburg's stone palaces, bridges, and embankments lining the graceful Neva River and its many channels and canals justly invited comparisons with Venice. Eventually, Petersburg became the crucible of one of history's liveliest and most articulate homosexual cultures.

It was a city founded by men. Tsar Peter's intense friendships with his advisors and mentors, most famously Prince Alexander Menshikov, whose palace was one of the first and largest in the city, bear the suggestion of a sexual element. For decades, the new capital was oversupplied with healthy hardworking men.

As its most entertaining queer chronicler notes, "Petersburg always seemed an especially favorable place for the development of homoeroticism . . . countless soldiers, sailors and laborers left wives back in the village to come and work in the city. Aspiring young men came: students, military and naval cadets, pages . . . bachelor bureaucrats, looking for secret adventures, willing bathhouse attendants, postillions, and errand-boys. Not forgetting those lonely foreigners hired to work as tutors, coiffeurs, riding-instructors, dancers"

Petersburg's lingering gender imbalance always contradicted a key ambition of its founder and his successors. They wanted to drag the Muscovite elite out of its homosocial ruts and toward the mixed-sex leisure and refinements they associated with European culture.

By the late nineteenth century "Piter" (its more homely name) had become not a follower but a leader of European culture, and it is not a coincidence that it had a vivid homosexual cultural life as well.

The pinnacles are well known: Tchaikovsky's music and the artistic leadership of Diaghilev and his circle in the "World of Art." Mikhail Alekseyevich Kuzmin (1872-1936) is, however, less famous. Yet he invented *the* voice of Russia's gay sensibility. His novella *Wings* (1906) was the first modern coming out story with a happy ending, inspiring self-respect in a generation of gay Russians before the Revolution.

Reprinted frequently since the fall of Communism, it does the same today for a new generation. Kuzmin's vision of homosexuality is breathtakingly fresh for its time: not decadent vice, not biomedical anomaly (he died of boredom when German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld came to call in Leningrad in 1926), but a gift to be savored and explored. His diaries (1905-1934) constitute a chronicle of Petersburg's homosexual life during its most vivid and desperate phases: the frothy, gay eventfulness of the *Wings* years gradually evolves into an elegant, intently queer view of Soviet life.

Petersburg also enjoyed a lively gay male street culture focused on the commercial heart, Nevsky Prospect,

distinguished by a rampant bathhouse life (mentioned in *Wings*), and the local taste for apparently ever-available seamen.

Revolution significantly curbed this "little homosexual world" and yet little is known about the contours of life in gay Leningrad (the city's name from 1924 to 1991). Josef Stalin's mistrust of the crucible of the Revolution expressed itself in the decapitation of its intelligentsia in the 1930s, greatly assisted in the Siege of Leningrad by the Nazis (1941-1944) that claimed hundreds of thousands.

Leningraders formed Soviet Russia's first gay liberation group, "Gay Laboratory" in 1983, but the KGB swiftly shut it down. With the decline and collapse of Communist rule, activism briefly revived. The "Tchaikovsky Fund" (1990) and "Wings" (1991) had some impact before fading in the mid-1990s.

Far more influential has been the publication of a best-selling and learned history of the city's gay male past, *The Other Petersburg*, by a curator using the pseudonym K. R. Rotikov.

Sadly, the city's queer glories seem confined to the past. As St. Petersburg marks its tercentenary, it boasts a thin, rapidly changing list of queer nightclubs and bars, just one gay sauna, no queer periodicals, and little visible community leadership.

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About the Author

Daniel D. Healey is a lecturer in Russian History in the Department of History, University of Wales, Swansea. He is the author of *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* and co-editor (with Barbara Evans Clements and Rebecca Friedman) of *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*. His continuing research interests include the histories of Soviet gender, sexuality, medicine, and law.