

Peterburgers

William N. Harris

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Dedication

To Katherine, my daughter and inspiration. You are living proof that God is gracious, richly granting His favor to those who love Him. May Christ grant you the desires of your heart as you bloom in Him.

* * *

I am grateful to Dick Sleeper for his unfailing support. Without his continuing selfless kindness this book would not have been possible. I also want to acknowledge Connie Bartels and Dianne Palmer-Quay who contributed their editing expertise.

Finally, I want to recognize my friends in Saint Petersburg, Eric Bartels, Suzanne Achgill, Bill O'Byrne, Roman Popov, Mike and Dana Kozlarek, Gennady and Tanya Budanov, Gennady and Natasha Gavrillov, and Nadine Krueger among others, who have taught me much about life in Western Russia. Blessings on you all!

Introduction

Three hundred years ago the Russian peasants tasked with building Saint Petersburg saw their tsar, Peter the Great as high and lifted up; they served him as his doting children. Peter took a more top-down view: Elite people he lavished, burgers he consumed.

A lucky few peasant patties became Peter's close friends and drinking buddies, rising from burgerdom in their squalid shacks to soar sunward, ascending to live it up in princely palaces. The rest, of course, remained Peterburgers; Peter's consumables for manning his navy, cannon fodder for his assorted wars, serfs to enrich his treasury, and forced laborers to build his "window to Europe," Saint Petersburg.

Today, there's no prouder place in Russia than her cultural capital, Saint Petersburg (unofficial motto: *If you think Moscow's so great, why don't you move there?*). This city is world famous for its contrasts. Russians here have been inspired by art, trembled in terror, advanced scientific discovery, fought "contaminating" new ideas, lived in extreme luxury, or died under forced labor, starvation, or torture.

The first time I laid eyes on Saint Petersburg was on a typically icy, windswept March morning. At the time, I had no idea that within a year I would move

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my family here from Yakutsk, Siberia, six time zones away.

Along with our children, James and Katherine, my wife, Robin, and I had already lived in Siberia for some time. Still, when we moved to Western Russia, we found the contrasting culture of Saint Petersburg shocking.

There are only three ways to overcome culture-shock: (1) Run away (be a tourist or short-termer); (2) Run for cover (stay longer, but hide from the local situation, living as insulated as possible from cultural stress); (3) Run to win (stay long-term and work toward full cultural competence).

Our family chose this third way, the hard but delightful path of learning about Russia. We began by studying full-time with a professional language teacher for almost a year in the Russian Far East, then continued to study on our own for another six years after moving up to Yakutsk in Siberia.

Robin and the kids made solid progress in Russian, but I discovered myself pioneering a fourth way to run: (4) Run and run endlessly on the language learning hamster wheel. My running didn't really overcome culture-shock, but it did build up enough static electricity to discharge the occasional lightning bolt. I tried tapes, CDs, self-study this's and that's, cluelessly sorting my case endings, imperfectives, verbs of motion, and all manner of other grammatical mysteries I'd gone to great lengths to avoid in high school. I found a new reason to be grateful purgatory doesn't exist—because I would have to spend it learning Russian.

Like a lot of other missionaries who decide to learn Russian on their own, much of my effort resulted in noise and smoked bearings. Missionaries

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who master the local language (either formally or on their own) accomplish great things in their ensuing years of ministry. Those who struggle with Russian and for whatever reason, make poor progress, well, after a few years of hamster wheeling, most of them ditch focused language study altogether. To their credit, many of them still accomplish a lot. It's just that in comparison to what they *could have* accomplished with full linguistic competence, it's hard to call their service very successful. Supporters would do their missionaries a favor if they insisted that they annually take language competency tests to demonstrate increasing mastery of the local language—at least for their first few years of ministry.

For five years I divided my time between unguided language study at home each morning and ministry around town each afternoon. I eventually reached the point where I could counsel without a translator, but finally begged my mission to let me go get some professionally guided language training. I also wanted to teach at a Christian University, something not available anywhere in Yakutia.

Our ultimate goal was to bond more fully with Russia's people in order to love and serve them better. To do that, we chose to study Russian language and culture in Saint Petersburg. We knew, of course, that becoming culturally well adjusted in Russia included much more than just language learning. It also meant learning Russian history, local customs, important places, body language, the Russian perception of time, appropriate dress, and all those other myriad details which local people know without thought and which mark clueless newcomers as total goombas.

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Those are just the externals. Beyond them is the vast inner world of morality, conscience, and values. *Peterburgers* doesn't attempt to cover all of that ground, but is step along the road to understanding Russians. It's a newcomer's view of the world's contrastiest capital and her peppery people.

My stories about the palaces, commoners, and idiosyncrasies of life here are true. I hope you'll come to know Saint Petersburg's ordinary folk, the Peterburgers, better as you read about our experiences among them.

My other intent in writing *Peterburgers* is to help those who send missionaries here to understand life in the cooker so that they'll pray with more intelligence, and to remind fresh meat missionaries, sizzling to serve here on Russia's grill, that stripes are earned by fire. Enjoy!