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Summer reading reviews

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Summer Reading Reviews

JULY 10, 2018 / LMOE



The contributors to the Avon Hills salon decided to make this issue a variant on an old theme – the summer reading list. Like so many liberal arts alumni/ae, your summer reading list of years ago probably included at least one Russian classic. Our list gives the old reading list a contemporary twist. No, we are not asking that you finally finish reading Lev Tolstoi’s *War and Peace* or disrupt the tranquility of a day at the beach by returning to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamozov*. We are suggesting instead that you take your pick from our list of five Russia themed books.



Noreen Herzfeld's review of Amor Towles' *A Gentleman in Moscow* takes the reader back in time to Moscow's Hotel Metropol and its involuntary guest, Count Alexander Rostov. Sentenced to house arrest in the Hotel Metropol, Count Rostov is a metaphor for the passing of the old Tsarist Russia and a reflection on the ways Soviet citizens found to carry on despite the capricious brutality of life in the Soviet Union from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Louis Johnston also invites the reader to take a Russian journey, the quintessential Russia journey – the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Former NPR Moscow bureau chief, David Greene's *Midnight in Siberia: A Train Journey into the Heart of Russia* is a book for all of us who have fantasized about taking the legendary train trip across Siberia and playing the role of a latter day John Reed covering the unfolding drama of the end of the old Soviet regime and the troubled rise of a new Russia. Piano playing was political in the Soviet Union. That is one lesson you can draw from Louis' second recommendation, Nigel Cliff's *The Van Cliburn Story – How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War*. Cliff tells the story of Van Cliburn's famous performance in Moscow in 1958 and how in effect Van Cliburn broke through the ice of the Cold War and in his mastery of the Russian classical style provided a cultural bridge between Russia and the U.S. Louis' third pick, Marvin Kalb's *The Year I Was Peter the Great: 1956 – Khrushchev, Stalin's Ghost and a Young America in Russia* is the stuff of envy.



Who could not feel at least a tinge of jealousy as Kalb tells his story from Russian language training in Fort Meade, Maryland, to graduate studies in Russian history at Harvard, and finally to an assignment in Moscow in the pivotal year of 1956? Kalb offers you his front row seat to watch the rise and failure of Nikita Khrushchev's reforms. Kalb's book is well worth the read if only to learn about the origins of his "Peter the Great" joke.

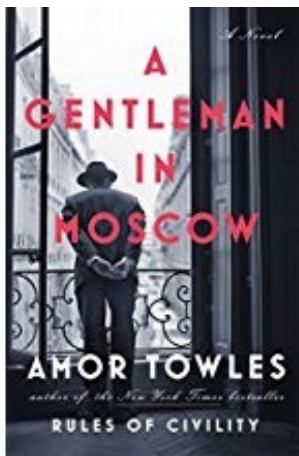
Finally, I offer my recommendation with a bit of caution. Timothy Snyder's *The Road to Unfreedom* might dampen your curiosity or enthusiasm for taking any trip to Russia. Snyder provides a well-researched, alarming, and devastating study of the rise of the Putin regime in the very recent years from 2010 to the present and a convincing argument that the Trump-Putin axis is even far more threatening to democracy than we have feared.

* Nick Hayes



Noreen Herzfeld on *A Gentleman in Moscow*
Amor Towles
Viking, 2016
\$27.00

A Gentleman in Moscow, by Amor Towles is a charming elegy to a lost civilization. The novel takes place entirely in the Soviet era, beginning in 1922 with the sentencing of Count Alexander Rostov to house arrest in the Metropol hotel and



ending in 1954, the year Khrushchev unveiled the world's first nuclear power plant. *A Gentleman in Moscow*, however, celebrates the manners and mores not of the Soviets but of the Tsars. The four confining walls (and sometimes roof) of the Metropol turn out to contain a world of people, events,

objects, and ideas. And while these are described by an outside narrator, we view life in the Metropol almost completely through Rostov's eyes. Thus, luxury hotel and aristocratic interpreter combine to form a lush portrait of the privileged life in Russia, both before and after the revolution.

This underlies both the novel's strengths and its weaknesses. The Metropol becomes for the reader a charming and cozy set, with a quirky cast of characters that begin to feel like family: nine year old Nina, who somehow possesses a master key with which she takes Rostov into the hotel's inner workings; Mishka, a poet friend from Rostov's youth who struggles with the new order; friendly maître d' Andre and temperamental French chef Emil; Anna, an actress and love interest; various government officials and foreign diplomats; Nina's daughter Sophia; and even a one-eyed cat. Both Rostov and the narrator exhibit a wry sense of humor and a fondness for historical and literary digressions. The text is light, witty, and amusing, reminiscent of the chatter at a fin de siècle ball.

Which is also the novel's weakness. The digressions pile up at times. Several characters seem too pat, and while some characters run afoul of the new ruling caste, anything too serious or painful takes place outside the hotel. When a typical obstacle is nothing more than the unavailability of saffron to make bouillabaisse, life in the Metropol, and by extension in Stalin's Russia, looks pretty damn good. Maybe a little too good.

If *A Gentleman in Moscow* has a message, it would be, in Rostov's words, "A man must master his circumstances or be mastered by them." Against the Soviet will toward collectivization and the common good, Towles has written a supremely American ode to the intrepid individual. He suggests that this individualism is not just part of the American psyche, but the Russian as well:

Towles, in describing his book, writes: "Kazan Cathedral is a perfect symbol of Russia's mystique

for me during the Soviet era. Built in 1636 on Red Square . . . Kazan was among Russia's oldest and most revered cathedrals. In 1936, the Bolsheviks celebrated the 300th anniversary of its consecration by razing it to the ground. In part, they leveled the cathedral to clear Red Square for military parades, but also to punctuate the end of Christianity in Russia. But Peter Baranovsky, the architect who was directed to oversee the dismantling, secretly drafted detailed drawings of the cathedral and hid them away. More than fifty years later, when Communist rule came to its end, the Russians used Baranovsky's drawings to rebuild the church stone for stone. . . . At the heart of this history is a lone individual who at great personal risk carefully documented what he was destroying in the unlikely chance that it might some day be rebuilt. The Soviet era abounds with sweeping cultural changes and with stoic heroes who worked in isolation at odds with the momentum of history towards some brighter future."

A Gentleman in Moscow is a good summer read that mixes historical accuracy with flights of fancy. It may start slowly, but it picks up momentum in the second half and by the end leaves the reader wishing that her reservation at the Metropol would last just a few days longer.



Louis Johnston on *Midnight in Siberia: A Train Journey Into the Heart of Russia*

David Greene

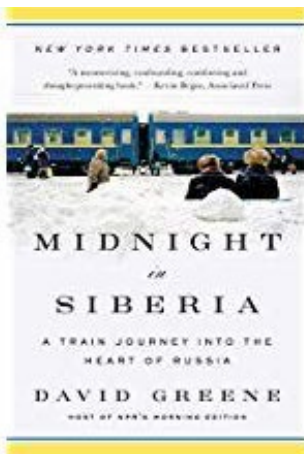
Norton, 2015

\$16.95

Three years in Russia: Marvin Kalb in 1956, Van Cliburn in 1958, David Greene in 2013

I often stumble onto themes in my reading. Over the past few months I've read three books about Russia and the Soviet Union.

I first read David Greene's, [Midnight in Siberia: A Train Journey into the Heart of Russia](#) this past winter. Greene, host of NPR's Morning Edition, served as NPR's Moscow bureau chief from 2009 to 2012. In 2011 he took the Trans-Siberian railroad from Moscow to Vladivostok; the trip affected Greene so much that he decided to do it again in 2013 and use the route as a framework for a memoir about his time in Russia, Ukraine, and other former republics of the



Soviet Union.

I love trains and riding the Trans-Siberian is on my bucket list, so that was what attracted me to the book as well as hearing Greene regularly on NPR. However, I soon found myself immersed in a book that wove together history, memoir, and travelogue to tell a story about Russia today. Here's a taste:

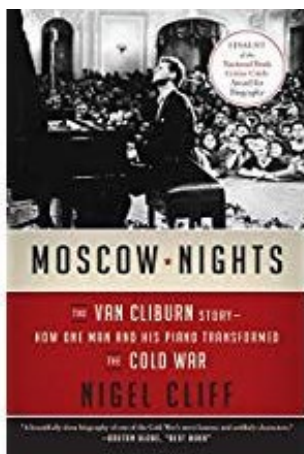
The Russia I saw was very much as Gogol described it more than 150 years ago: careening down an uncertain path. On the Trans-Siberian Railway I began to see a thin line of constancy, connecting Russia's cities and its steppes, its problems and its potential, its past and its future. Cultural heritage seems to pervade a nation that stretches from Europe to Pyongyang and Alaska, making some customs and ways of thinking feel the same through all of Russia's extremities. And across this vast country the emotion that remained constant was an uneasy frustration: Here are millions of people across different landscapes, climates, and communities, all with families they love and ideas to offer, but almost universally unable to answer some simple questions: Where is your country going? And what do you want for its future?

Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story – How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War
Nigel Cliff

HarperCollins, 2016

\$28.99

I love trains, but running close second is music, in general, and especially the piano and pianists. This drew me during the spring to Nigel Cliff's [Moscow Nights: The Van Cliburn Story – How One Man and His Piano Transformed the Cold War](#). Van Cliburn's Beethoven sonatas inspired my own playing during the 1970s and I've always been fascinated by his



victory in the first International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958 and its connection to the Cold War.

The title exaggerates Cliburn's role in the Cold War but it's still a great story.

In particular, Cliff uses recently opened archival material to show how oblivious to politics, and indeed to everyday life, was Cliburn. His mother, a fine pianist herself, determined to form Van into a great pianist in the classical, Russian style. This approach fell out of fashion in the US from the 1940s until Cliburn's arrival, according to Cliff, and was one reason why no one thought that an American could win the Tchaikovsky Competition.

Another reason was that most observers assumed the competition was rigged so that a Soviet citizen, or perhaps a pianist from China or a Warsaw Pact country, would certainly win first prize. Cliff documents the role played by Nikita Khrushchev in ensuring that the competition remained clean. When his minister of culture came to Khrushchev with the news that the American would probably win first prize, and wondered if there is anything he should do, Khrushchev replied, "What do others think of him? Is he the best?" The minister responded, "Yes, he is the best." Cliff writes, "In that case, 'the premier grunted, 'give him the first prize.'"

The Year I was Peter the Great

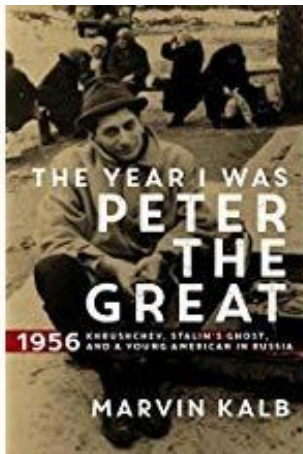
1956 Khrushchev, Stalin's Ghost, and a Young American in Russia

Marvin Kalb

Brookings Institution Press, 2017

\$24.99

Finally, over the past few weeks I read and re-read Marvin Kalb's [The Year I Was Peter the Great: 1956 - Khrushchev, Stalin's Ghost, and a Young American in Russia](#). If ever there was a story of the right person, in the right place, at the right time, this is it.



Kalb grew up in the Bronx and graduated from City College of New York. He volunteered for military service in 1953, and served from mid-1953 through mid-1955 at Army Security

Center in Fort Meade, Maryland, “where I found myself in an elite unit of Russian-speaking soldiers who had studied Soviet communism.”

In December 1955, Kalb was a 25-year-old Ph.D. student at Harvard, working on a dissertation in Russian history. I’ll let him tell you what happened next:

One day in late December, Marshall Shulman, once Dean Acheson’s speechwriter at the State Department and now associate director of the Russian Research Center, asked a question that took me totally by surprise: Would I accept a Moscow assignment as a State Department translator, and would I be prepared to leave in a week or two? It was helpful, he said, that I had recently held a top-secret clearance at the Army Security Center. And, by the way, he added, he needed an answer by tomorrow. I gulped.

Kalb arrived in Moscow in late January and witnessed an extraordinary year in Soviet and world history. Specifically, Khrushchev delivered his [Secret Speech to the 20th Party Congress](#) in February and denounced Stalin along with the system he (and many, including Khrushchev) had built over the past 30 years. In the months that followed, Kalb observed its effects on US-Soviet relations along with the whirlwind it created throughout Soviet society. With hope, he watched as the openness encouraged by the Secret Speech and other changes made by Khrushchev spread from the USSR to Eastern Europe.

Sadly, by late summer and early fall he saw the Soviets crush the opposition engendered by the Khrushchev reforms, first in Poland, then more violently in Hungary. By the end of 1956, Kalb heard Khrushchev offer a toast: “God grant that every communist be able to fight as Stalin fought!”

Kalb tells wonderful stories, including how Khrushchev came to call him Peter the Great every

time they met. The best tale is in the book's postscript. I won't spoil it, but imagine that you were working in an archive, gathering material for your dissertation, when someone taps you on the shoulder and says, "You have a call, uh, from a man who says he is, uh, Edward R. Murrow."

Perhaps I should book that trip on the Trans-Siberian sooner rather than later...

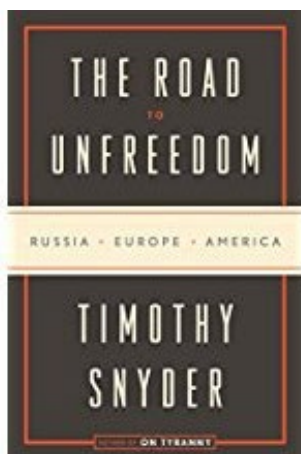


Nick Hayes on *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*

Tim Snyder

Tim Duggan Books, Penguin Random House, 2018

\$27.00



In this past year, did you find yourself drawn, like an involuntary tropism, to stories of the rise of an autocratic president, his administration by corruption and cronyism, and his pandering to far right nationalism, then Timothy Snyder's history of the rise of Russian President Vladimir Putin, *The Road to Unfreedom*, is for you. If you feared for your own descent into paranoia as you followed the news of how Putin's hand stretched into Ukraine and Crimea, Syria, assassinations by poisoning in the U.K., and into the inner

circle of the Trump White House, Snyder's *The Road to Unfreedom* offers some consolation. At least your fears are real and not paranoiac delusions.

The reviews and critics of Snyder's new book agree on one thing. *The Road to Unfreedom* is "unignorable." He is a bit intimidating. His resume would humble even the most arrogant of scholars. The footnotes in *The Road to Unfreedom* lend credibility to the line in his resume that claims a command of seven languages. Any discussion of WWII today must include Snyder's *Blood Lands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. It is a blood-chilling account of the genocidal collusion of Hitler and Stalin. In 2017, Snyder stepped into the public arena with the publication of *On Tyranny*. In this case, Snyder drew upon the tragic history of twentieth century Europe on how to survive in an age of dictatorship and totalitarianism. He predicted, moreover, the inevitability that Trump will take a script from the Nazis and fake a military crisis, declare martial law, and impose a dictatorship.

The Road to Unfreedom weaves together three distinct genres. There is Snyder's personal voice that turns many sections of the book into a memoir. He recounts how the birth of his children coincided with the crisis in Ukraine or his presence and voice at numerous gatherings as the conflict unfolded.

He provides a convincing narrative of Putin's orchestration of the crisis in Europe since 2010 and the complicity of the Trump organization.

Lastly, he adds the perspective of a philosopher of history. Snyder frames his narrative as a conflict of two competing views of history: "inevitability" and "eternity." The former derives from the Enlightenment and underscores the tradition of liberalism and the rule of law. The latter grew out of late nineteenth century nationalism and feeds fascism and the ultra-right.

To be honest, Snyder lost me in his digressions into "inevitability" and "eternity." Had he asked for my advice, I would have told him to take his cue from Tolstoy's War and Peace. Develop your story. If you want to philosophize about history, add it as a separate section at the end.

His observations on today's politics, however, are clear, unmistakable, and a cause for alarm.

Take the issue of "fake news." It was not the invention of Trump. Snyder documents Putin's reliance on "fake news" as a key weapon in his political arsenal. Snyder makes a convincing case that Putin had invested heavily in cyberwarfare and had personally approved a strategy to target the U.S. 2016 elections. Snyder leaves the reader with little doubt that the Kremlin favored Trump and interfered in the U.S. election. Snyder makes an even stronger case. The Kremlin's most outrageous act of "fake news" was, in fact, the invention of Donald Trump as a presidential candidate. He was, Snyder concludes, the "Russian candidate."