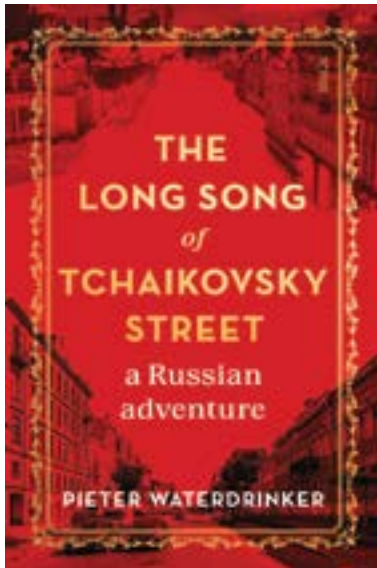


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The Long Song of Tchaikovsky Street: A Russian Adventure

By Pieter Waterdrinker

Translated by Paul Evans

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When Pieter Waterdrinker was twenty-six years old, he was at his home in the Netherlands when a man knocked on his door and asked him to smuggle bibles into the Soviet Union as he had somehow heard that Waterdrinker spoke Russian. Thus began Waterdrinker's forty-year love/hate affair with Russia and its people.

Waterdrinker's *The Long Song of Tchaikovsky Street* is part-memoir and part-history book, but always a personal account of life in Russia from the late 1980s to the early 2020s. The book is subtitled *A Russian Adventure*, and what an adventure it is!

For more than thirty years, Waterdrinker lived in Russia, he and his wife only moving to the south of France in 2022 due to the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia. His first adventure in Russia began in the late 1980s, selling bibles illegally to Christian groups in Russia. He then became a tourist guide shepherding western Europeans around Russia amid the crumbling ruins of the Soviet Empire during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years. Not surprisingly, Drinkwater says that most western Europeans cannot hope to truly understand the Russian psyche and that even he, living in both Moscow and St Petersburg for well over thirty years with a Russian wife, can only touch on understanding what it is to be Russian.

Despite his Dutch origins, Waterdrinker's writing is imbued with a mixture of loss, melancholy, fatalism and nostalgia. This is a memoir about a people who destroyed a way of life—tsarist Russia—only to recreate it in another form—Soviet Russia. Waterdrinker quotes Mark Twain—'History doesn't repeat itself, but it

often rhymes'—and this theme can be seen again and again throughout Waterdrinker's writing as he contrasts the turbulent times of the end of the Soviet Union with the turbulent times of its birth in the 1917 revolution, and also contrasts life in Russia with life in the 'decadent' West.

Over these decades, Waterdrinker meets and befriends some fascinating characters, from his initial partner in various enterprises, Swindleman (who lives up to his name), to Russian aristocrats living in decaying mansions. Then there is his Russian brother-in-law, who was determined to make a better life for himself by buying a yacht.

All of these people are part of the rich tapestry that makes up this memoir, as Waterdrinker begins his exploration of Russian twentieth century history and its people by beginning with his own street, Tchaikovsky Street in St Petersburg which, like most of Russia, is not what its name implies. It is not named after the famous composer but instead 'after some communist or other'.

However, this is a somewhat flawed account by Waterdrinker, as at times his writing meanders. While he is drawing parallels between events of the 1980s and 1990s with the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, it is sometimes difficult for the reader to ascertain which period of Russian history he is actually writing about.

Nevertheless, this memoir is a fascinating insight into Russian twentieth century history. It is also a haunting elegy to a world that has passed, and a damning indictment of a failed system that promised much and delivered little. Despite its flaws, it is a memoir well worth reading.