

Seeing Past the Present in Moscow, Part One

By [John Freedman](#)

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Russia is a place that wears its culture on its sleeve. I once spent a week in Yekaterinburg and right out the window of my hotel was a small, yellow, two-story building with a plaque on it. This was where Anton Chekhov stayed a few nights before continuing on his soon-to-be famous journey from Moscow to the Siberian penal colony at Sakhalin in 1890.

It colored my outlook for my entire stay in the city. Every day when I walked past that small building, I metaphorically tipped my figurative hat to Mr. Chekhov as if he were still there. In a sense he was.

Moscow, too, is filled with little corners that bring the past to life. And although bronze, marble and iron plaques of various sizes and designs are there to remind us of this, we tend to walk right past them without taking notice. The modern metropolis encroaches from all sides on these modest attempts at remembrance.

Over the course of the coming summer, while most everyone in Moscow theater is hibernating, waiting for the fall and winter to bring back the theater season, I will lead you on a few walks around Moscow to offer some glimpses at the past lives that continue to live among us.

Following are some observations and thoughts to accompany the photo gallery that you can access above.

Mikhail Bulgakov is a cult figure throughout the world. When Mick Jagger wrote the first lines of "Sympathy for the Devil" — "Please allow me to introduce myself/I'm a man of wealth and taste" — he was thinking of Bulgakov's novel "The Master and Margarita."

One of the most famous and long-running theater productions in Moscow is Yury Lyubimov's dramatization of "The Master and Margarita" at the Taganka Theater. Believe it or not, it has been running at the Taganka since 1977. In fact, you can see that show at the Taganka on Saturday this week, and [three more times in July](#).

Between 1921 and 1924 — well before work began on "The Master and Margarita" — Bulgakov lived at the address that is now 10 Bolshaya Sadovaya Ulitsa. The stairwell leading to his apartment there has been decorated by decades of enthusiasts and graffiti artists, and the site has become a genuine tourist draw.

These days, the plaque commemorating Bulgakov competes for attention with one of the most ubiquitous phenomena of contemporary cultural life in Moscow: a coffee house.

The life and death of Alexander Fadeyev makes for one of the more unsettling and tragic literary stories of the Soviet period. Fadeyev was a talented writer who made his reputation quickly after his debut in 1923. But he was also drawn to power, as is witnessed by his involvement in various official literary organizations throughout his life.

Most famously, Fadeyev was first a secretary and then the general secretary and chairman of the board of the Writers Union during the years when hundreds of writers that did not toe the Communist Party line were persecuted. When Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1956, Fadeyev, a heavy drinker by then, took his own life.

The plaque commemorating the years when Fadeyev lived at 27 Tverskaya Ulitsa is surrounded by symbols of what now represents the seat of power in Russia — high and low finance.

Emil Gilels was one of the best in a long line of great Russian pianists. Born in Odessa in 1916, he lived the last 35 years of his life — from 1950 to 1985 — just a stone's throw from Pushkin Square at 25/9 Tverskaya Ulitsa. This was an elite building erected to house many of Moscow's top performers in the late Stalin era. The attractively decorated columns on the building still mark this as one of the most elite addresses in the city.

You will be forgiven if you do not recognize the name of Alexei Surkov. A poet who served alongside Fadeyev in the Writers Union, he was known for his stridently patriotic poems, many of which were put to music and became popular songs during World War II. He twice

won the Stalin Prize and was one of those who translated the poetry of Mao Zedong into Russian.

The plaque reminding us that Surkov lived at 19 Tverskaya Ulitsa across the street from Pushkin Square from 1949 to his death in 1983 is nearly lost in the chaff and chaos of modern Moscow.

Lyubov Orlova was one of the great sirens of the Soviet silver screen. Her husband Grigory Alexandrov made numerous hit films with her in the lead — "Jolly Fellows" (1934), "Circus" (1936), "Volga-Volga" (1938) and "Spring" (1947) are just a few of them.

Blonde, beautiful, and both stylish and down-to-earth at the same time, Orlova continues to be an icon of Russian culture. She has had ships named after her, a stamp issued in her honor, and even a planet named for her — 3108 Lyubov.

A commemorative sculpture — it is more than just a plaque — hangs imposingly above one of the corners of another Moscow landmark: the first McDonalds restaurant ever opened in Russia. Orlova lived in this building at 29 Bolshaya Bronnaya from 1966 to 1975.

Incidentally, in the photograph of the Orlova sculpture you can also see a plaque erected last year to honor Mikhail Ulyanov, the popular actor and former artistic director of the Vakhtangov Theater.

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