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St. Petersburg as Symbolic Center; Lecture Abstract

The new capital that Peter the Great built on the shores of the Neva at the beginning of the eighteenth century was not only a governmental center, facing west, but a symbol or group of symbols representing what Russian monarchy was meant to become. It announced the adoption of a secular Western model of state to replace the religious Byzantine model enshrined in Moscow. It represented what Clifford Geertz has described as “an exemplary center,” not exemplary of the cosmos, but of an ideal of Western state and society, that could inform the service, behavior, and culture, of the Russian elite. Peter’s successors patterned their own scenarios on his myth, seeking to make Peterburg exemplary of the stages of the West that Russian monarchy was emulating. My lecture will discuss the evolution of the image of Petersburg to fit the successive transformations of the Petrine myth.

In building Petersburg, Peter presented a new image of empire, based on the example of Rome, rather than Byzantium. The translatio imperii now took on new meanings as Peter sought to endow his capital with a secular sacral aura. Peter created an identification with Rome, not by making it resemble Rome, but by adopting symbols and devices associated with western classical traditions. Baroque palaces, statues, and references made the new affiliations visible. The figures of classical antiquity provided symbols of secular power and virtue, Mars, Minerva, Neptune and others, elevating sovereignty to a realm of

sublime neo-Platonic forms. Following his example, Peter's successors, Anna Ioannovna and Elisabeth Petrovna, built massive palaces in Rococo design that distanced the noble elite from the ruled and displayed foreign fashion, amusements, and culture—markers of imperial grandeur and power.

Catherine the Great made Petersburg the exemplar of a different Rome, first of all Rome as an empire great in extent and diversity. Russia, having grown with the conquest of the southern Steppe, the Crimea, the Western Ukraine and most of Poland, was likened to ancient Rome. The neo-classical styles of architecture, emphasized simplicity and reserve in place of the elaborate Baroque decorations and references of previous decades. Rome also recalled the heritage of Marcus Aurelius, the emperor as giver of laws, and an elite dedicated to civic duties. Portraits of Catherine and Falconet's statue of Peter the Great depicted allegories of the enlightened monarch.

The monumental architecture of the first half of the nineteenth century presented a different image of the empire—as military colossus and powerful administrative state. The victorious wars against Napoleon inspired Alexander I and Nicholas I with a sense of invincibility and Providential mission. Russia now appeared not only as a European power, but as the avatar of Western monarchy, heir to the ethical and religious beliefs of the West. At the same time, the Ministerial Reform of Alexander I spurred the growth of the tsarist administrative state, now presented as the model of enlightened absolutism.

Petersburg of the early nineteenth century exemplified the military-administrative state bent on safeguarding the religious mission of monarchical

government. The principal expressions of the new image were not palaces, the playgrounds of the elite, but spacious parade grounds, immense maneges, and monumental governmental edifices. As had often been the case, Russia emulated the example of its most powerful foe, in this case Napoleon. Architects adopted the style Ledoux, which dominated Napoleonic Paris. The style Ledoux reduced government buildings to the simple general principles that animated the Alexander's reforms--the "Platonic ideals of architectural form" that "were thought to partake of natural laws." The spacious squares and sweeping lines of the governmental buildings in St. Petersburg made forceful statements of the majesty and rational organization of power. Statues of military heroes, Russian or mythological, presented idealized statements of the exploits of Russian monarchy.

The two monumental cathedrals built in the first half of the nineteenth century in Petersburg, Kazan and St. Isaac's, expressed the monarchs' Providential destiny. The neo-classical forms, patterned on St. Peter's and the Pantheon, indicated Russia's assumption of the cause of universal Christianity, through the might of the Russian armies and the autocratic authority of the Russian emperors. The Alexandrine column on Palace Square expressed the lofty role of the ruler as the savior of humanity.

The Crimean War brought to an end this sense of invincibility. The age of monumental and symbolic construction came to an end. The statues to Nicholas I and Catherine the Great, erected in Petersburg during the reign of Alexander II, broke with the heroic manner and commemorated the rulers'

mundane accomplishments. With the rise of the revolutionary movement, culminating in the assassination of Alexander II, the emperors and the imperial family became disenchanted with the imperial capital. They regarded the murder as a profanation of the city and they tried to dissociate the monarchy from the city. The last two emperors, Alexander III and Nicholas II began to transform Petersburg to fit the new national myth that expressed the aspirations of Russian monarchy after 1881.

The final stage in the development of imperial Petersburg brought another sharp reversal. Petersburg was presented as a negative symbol of corrosive and alien western influences, a city badly in need of correction. Alexander III and Nicholas II sought to make Petersburg resemble Moscow. To chastise and edify the capital, they built pre-Petrine style churches at many prominent sites, creating Muscovite scenes in the midst of the European landscape of the capital. At this point, the meaning of Petersburg became uncertain. If Petersburg did not represent the monarchy, what did all these massive edifices and mythological figures stand for? The referent vanished, emptying the symbol of meaning. The gifted literary figures of the Silver Age sought new meanings in a city they saw as filled with omens of destruction and doom, prefiguring the coming apocalypse.