

SAINT PETERSBURG – LENINGRAD – SAINT PETERSBURG

Mythization of the City

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Abstract: A characteristic feature of the contemporary language of popular culture is an attempt to present Saint Petersburg in the categories of the superlative and greatness. A popular history of the city is based on a few selected events: 1. Founded in 1703 by Tsar Peter the Great who subsequently appointed himself emperor, the city gave rise to a new Russia which was being built in opposition to the old Rus; 2. In the years 1712–1918, it was the capital of the Russian Empire and the seat of the Tsars of All-Russia; 3. It vaunts rich revolutionary traditions and above all the outbreak of the Great Socialist October Revolution of 1917 which initiated the era of communism in a sizable part of Europe and of the world; 4. It survived heroically the German blockade lasting nearly 900 days from September 1941 to January 1944; the blockade cost over a million human lives, yet the city was not vanquished.

The above four events create a framework and at the same time an important context within which the myth of St. Petersburg's-Leningrad's greatness develops and grows. This myth is composed of a few mutually interconnected concepts: 1. The idea of a new beginning and a doubly new one at that – as devised by Peter the Great and then the Soviet one which led to an avalanche of Socialist transformations all over the world; 2. The idea of a strong center which is expressed in the concept of the imperial capital, reinforced by the majesty of the authority of the tsars and the birthplace of the Great Revolution; 3. The idea of the might and power of the imperial All-Russia, the potential of the Great October and the indomitableness of Leningrad.

The contemporary ruler of Russia, Vladimir Putin, himself a citizen of St. Petersburg by birth, skillfully takes advantage of the myth of the great Peter: founder, builder, reformer and invincible ruler; this helps him build

his own political image. Vladimir Putin takes advantage of every possible opportunity to increase the significance of St. Petersburg and by doing so of his own person. Putin likes to emphasize his close ties with his native city. Paying great attention to his own publicity, he carefully chooses the occasions to visit the old capital. In the year 2003, Saint Petersburg celebrated the 300th anniversary of its foundation. In accordance with Putin's wish, the Jubilee was to be grand. On many occasions Putin declared publicly that it was an excellent opportunity to show Russia's might and its true source. In the manner of Peter the Great, Putin opened the imperial gates of Russia to the contemporary world. The myth of the greatness of the state and of its ruler continues to flourish on Petersburg soil and from time to time it reveals to the world its successive form.

Keywords: *Historic City, Mythization of the past, St. Petersburg*

Do you live in Paris? It's a nice city. It reminds me a little of Petersburg. But of course, it is smaller. It is with these words that the director of Petersburg's film studio "Len-film" addressed a correspondent of the Paris "L'Express," who had asked him for an interview on the occasion of the three hundredth anniversary of the city's foundation (Epstein, Szewielkina 2003: -). The language of the anecdote is concise, but extremely succinct; these few sentences describe very poignantly the picture of great Petersburg as it exists in the social memory. Undoubtedly, it is evoked by the sheer scale of the urban layout which merges harmoniously with the meanders of the river Neva; it is also evoked by the broad streets with far-reaching vistas, by spacious squares and parks, monumental architecture, by the facades of palaces and residences with a regular rhythm of hundreds of windows and columns stretching along the river banks. However what is important is not only the sheer spatial scale, but above all the ideological content the city is endowed with, which comes to light in various cultural publications and at its different levels.

A characteristic feature of the contemporary language of tourism is an attempt to present Saint Petersburg in the categories of the superlative. In popular book publications, guidebooks and travel brochures, as well as in the advertising materials of travel agencies and on their web sites, St. Petersburg looms as:

The biggest city in the world which is situated so far to the north; the biggest open-air museum. Its most famous symbols are the Hermitage – the biggest museum and collection of paintings in the world..., the team of the Mariinsky Theatre – which is among the best opera and ballet ensembles in the world .

In the information concerning the historical substance of the city, the factual and accurate description of style and ornamentation does not suffice; what prevails is the language of numbers which is to emphasize the grandeur and exuberance:

In the city center, we shall see 200 museums (or their branches), 8 emperor (tsarist) and a few dozen other palaces. In the suburbs...there are as many as 6 great palace-park complexes. They number 17 palaces and 23 park ensembles with several hundred fountains and other architectural monuments.

The local guides make frequent use of this style of narration:

The Issakievsky Cathedral (St. Isaac Cathedral) is decorated with 300 mosaics whose total surface area exceeds six and a half thousand square meters; its façade is decorated with 112 monolith granite columns. The biggest one weighs 114 tons. 140kg of gold were used to decorate the cathedral dome, whereas 400kg were used to decorate the interior of the cathedral. When visiting the Winter Palace, visitors have to go through 1100 chambers and climb 117 staircases – etc. (RGW 2008).

A fictionalized history of the city is based on a few selected events:

- 1) Founded in 1703 by Tsar Peter the Great who subsequently appointed himself emperor, the city gave rise to a new Russia which was being built in opposition to the old Rus.
- 2) In the years 1712–1918, it was the capital of the Russian Empire and the seat of the Tsars of All-Russia.
- 3) It vaunts rich revolutionary traditions and above all the outbreak of the Great Socialist October Revolution of 1917 which had initiated the era of communism in a sizable part of Europe and of the world.
- 4) It survived heroically the German blockade lasting nearly 900 days from September 1941 to January 1944; the blockade cost over a million human lives, yet the city was not vanquished.

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- 1) The idea of a new beginning and a doubly new one at that – as devised by Peter the Great and then the Soviet one which led to an avalanche of Socialist transformations all over the world.
- 2) The idea of a strong center which is expressed in the concept of the imperial capital, reinforced by the majesty of the authority of the tsars and the birthplace of the Great Revolution.
- 3) The idea of the might and power of the imperial All-Russia, the potential of the Great October and the indomitableness of Leningrad.

The past and its ideological senses may be detected in the changing names of the city. Saint Petersburg, the name given to the city by its founder, literally harked back to the Holy Prince of the Apostles and to ancient, imperial and apostolic Rome. Side by side, there also functioned the abridged versions of the city's name: Petersburg, Petergrad and Petropol – all of which referred directly to the Tsar Peter the Great. The documents from the time of the city's foundation clearly show that the analogy to Rome and the linking of the apostle with the tsar was a conscious device in Peter's ideology of the state (Łotman, Uspienski 1993: 162-163; Uspienski 1993: 180-184). Petergrad officially appeared in the year 1914 as the German-sounding name of Russia's capital was a sore point in the face of the war with Germany. The city ceased being the capital after the communists seized power. The new government had transferred its seat to Moscow. Soon, in the year 1924, Leningrad was born in honor of the victorious Revolution and its Leader who just died. The city recovered its original name in the spring of 1991. A few months before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, in a referendum, the inhabitants of Leningrad decided to return to the sources. Although for over half a century Petersburg was Leningrad, the inhabitants continued to use the name "Pit-ier" with its specific familiar-sounding semantics (Żyłko 2000:14). Besides the above appellation which is still very much alive, there currently operate the name Petersburg and more rarely Petergrad, but all of them refer to the person of the tsar – the founder, and not to the Holy patron of the city (RGW 2008).

The iconosphere of contemporary Petersburg creates a specific whole, in which its two main faces, the tsarist and the Soviet one, overlap and permeate each other. The historical names of many streets, squares, parks, palaces, residences and buildings, which had been renamed during the communist times in accordance with the then ruling ideology, been restored at the beginning of the nineties of the last century. But the underground continues to stop at the Majakowski, Proletariat, Pioneer or the Bolshevik Prospect stations. Concerts take place in the October Concert Hall at the corner of the 4th Soviet St. and the Greek Prospect. The “Aurora” battleship is permanently and “eternally” moored at the Newa embankment. There have remained the Dzierżyński monument, Kirow Square with its monumental statue and a few monuments of Lenin. One of them proudly rises above the square named after him, right next to the Finland Rail Station. This place is particularly closely associated with Vladimir Lenin. In 1917, after his return from exile, it was here on this square before the rail station that he delivered his triumphant speech to the cheering crowds.

The second monument stands before the former elitist school known by the name of Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens (*nota bene*: the name has recently returned to everyday usage!). In the year 1917, the school was overrun by the proletariat deputies to the Delegates’ Council. It was in the assembly hall of this school that Lenin declared that the power is handed over to the people.

In the Decembrist Square (originally known as Piotrovski Square and, in the 19th century, the Senate Square), one finds a monument of Peter the Great, popularly known in the Polish translation as the Bronze Horseman Monument. It was founded in 1782 by Empress Catherine II to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the ascendance to the throne of her illustrious predecessor. The monument got its nickname of the Bronze Horseman in the 19th century from the poem of Alexander Pushkin; the poem tells of a powerful and omnipotent tsar who mounts his fiery stallion. Like a Demiurge, by creating Petersburg, Peter the Great had tamed Russia and had spurred it to the jump, like the bronze horse in the monument.

The Bronze Horseman has become inscribed in the local folklore with a legend – in all likelihood of 19th century origin, in accordance with which, as long as the Horseman is standing, the city will continue to exist (Toporov 2000: 179). The city tale says that during the German blockade of Leningrad, it was precisely for this reason that the monument was not evacuated and was protected against bombardment with a wooden-earthen shelter. The city

withstood a 900-day-long siege as the Bronze Horseman remained in its place (RGW 2008).

In the year 1992, the “Hymn of the Great City” was solemnly and officially introduced. The words were written by Oleg Czuprow to the music from the ballet “The Bronze Horseman,” composed by Reinhold M. Gliere. The hymn is in fact a solemn ode singing the praises of St. Petersburg which is referred to in it (in free translation) as: a city of might and power, immortal as Russia; a city whose soul is protected by the Bronze Horseman. Like a golden echo, St. Petersburg reverberates with the sacred music and lights up the path to destiny forever.” (translation RGW).

Let us note one more characteristic thing, namely that both in the legend and in the above-quoted ode, the character of the Emperor had supplanted St. Peter the Apostle in the role of the city’s patron. The “Hymn of the Great City” is sung on public holidays and on anniversaries associated with the city: on February 10, on Memory Day commemorating Peter the Great, on May 27, that is on St. Petersburg Day, and on Navy Day which is celebrated on the first Sunday following July 22. For the last few years, its melody has welcomed and bidden farewell to travelers embarking on a journey from the Finland Railway Station which is associated with Lenin; yet the “Hymn” discreetly does not mention him (RGW 2008).

The contemporary ruler of Russia, Vladimir Putin, himself a citizen of St. Petersburg by birth, skillfully takes advantage of the myth of the great Peter: founder, builder, reformer and invincible ruler; this helps him build his own political image. Rumor has it that earlier on at the time when he still held the post of deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, Peter the Great always accompanied him everywhere; he transferred his portrait to successive offices and always hung it in a place of honor. Apparently he then took it to the Kremlin (RGW 2008).

Vladimir Putin takes advantage of every possible opportunity to increase the significance of St. Petersburg and by doing so of his own person. It was precisely here, and not in the capital city of Moscow that in March 2000 the newly elected president of Russia had conducted his very first interview with a Western politician, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair. In accordance with the semantics of the “first time” Putin’s gesture was received as a harbinger of a new style in Russia’s foreign policy. The decisive role was played here by the place where the meeting between the two world leaders had taken place – namely, St. Petersburg, which in accordance with the intention of Peter the Great, was to symbolize a break with the former history of Russia and

starting it, as it were, anew (Łotman, Uspiensky 1993: 158-159, 169-170). During his two terms of office as president, and also during his current term of office as prime minister, Putin had received there heads of the most important world states many a time. Thanks to this, the city became a sort of Russian Camp David, at least in the opinion of Paul Smith, the American consul in St. Petersburg (Graczyk 2002: -). According to another commentator, there is a widespread conviction among some Western European diplomats that by paying a visit to the historical capital of Russia, one pleases the Russian leader (Łomanowski 2003).

Putin likes to emphasize his close ties with his native city. Paying great attention to his own publicity, he carefully chooses the occasions when to visit to the old capital. On Saturday December 27, 2008, the Polish RMF FM Radio informed its listeners that Russia's prime minister had traveled to his roots with the mayor of St. Petersburg and that he had paid a visit to the Christmas fair and taken part in the painting of pictures for the traditional Petersburg charity auction. Earlier on, in October last year, some Internet news sites (WWW.) reported that Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin had celebrated his 56 birthday in Petersburg together with the Russian cinematography which was then celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of its birth. What is significant is that he did not visit the Len-film studio which was more appropriate in the context of the jubilee celebrations of Russian cinema, as it has existed from the very beginning of the Soviet Union, whereas he took part in the conference organized on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Russian World Studio – a young but lively film and TV studio. In an occasional speech, Putin emphasized the role of Petersburg in the development of native cinematography and he recalled the thought of Lenin: "It was right here, in St. Petersburg, 100 years ago when people watched the first Russian feature film ever. The attitude towards cinema has undergone several changes. Firstly it was perceived as a wonder, then it became a propaganda instrument of enormous power – there is even a famous saying of Lenin that cinematography is the most important of all the arts." These words of Lenin acquired an additional significance in the context of the subsequent part of the celebrations associated with the prime minister's birthday. A ceremonial premiere of the film "Let Us Learn Judo with V. V. Putin" took place in the former tsarist Constantinovsky Palace in Strelna near Petersburg. In the film, the premier talks about his passion for this martial art and shows some of its secrets, performing a few holds and throws onto the mat. He is building an image of a tough man.

In the year 2003, Saint Petersburg celebrated the 300th anniversary of its foundation. In accordance with Putin's wish, the Jubilee was to be grand. On many occasions Putin declared publicly that it was an excellent opportunity to show Russia's might and its true source. The city, whose former splendor had been restored for a few years, played a fundamental role here. The suburban residences of Peter the Great, as well as of his successors, had also been restored. The renovation of St. Petersburg had become a national priority. Immense sums of money, amounting to billions of roubles flowed out of the state budget. Already the very appearance of the city and its surroundings was to have dazzled the invited guests. The celebrations lasted all year round whereas the most spectacular ones took place at the turn of May and June. They were marked by two important dates: May 27 – the location of the city, and May 30 – Peter the Great's birthday. The celebrations were attended by the leaders of forty-five countries from all over the world as well as by delegations of a few dozen international organizations – all of whom were accommodated in the interiors of the former tsarist palaces in and around St. Petersburg. The celebrations began with a spectacular display of fireworks and each subsequent event overshadowed the previous one; among them there were: a laser show of scenes from the history of the city, a light and music spectacle, in which there danced the fountains of the Great Cascade in Peterhof, a concert of the New York Metropolitan Opera orchestra. The organizers also did not forget to manifest Russia's military might in a street army parade. Putin, at that time president of the Russian Federation, had held a few official dinners in the representative tsarist palaces for the luminaries of world politics, art and culture as well as business. He had carefully directed the several-day-long spectacle, so as to demonstrate the pro-Western face of Russia, but, at the same time, a Russia which was deeply rooted in the native tradition of an autocratic state. In the manner of Peter the Great, Putin had opened the imperial gates of Russia to the contemporary world.

The jubilee celebrations had come to an end and with them the spectacle of Russian glory and of its Byzantine splendor, but the myth of the greatness of the state and of its ruler continues to flourish on Petersburg soil and from time to time it reveals to the world its successive form. In July 2006, president Putin played host to the leaders of the Great Eight (G-8), the group of the most developed world states. For the first time since the creation of this organization, the Russian Federation presided over the G-8 sessions and was the organizer of its annual meeting. It is significant that Andrew Illarionov's

dramatic appeal, published in the *Washington Post* of April 18, 2006, had remained without a reply. This former aide and advisor of Putin for economic affairs stated that by accepting Russia's invitation, the leaders of the Western states legitimize its anti-democratic and imperial policy. The Petersburg convention went according to plan. The noisy demonstrations of the anti-globalists, which have constituted a part of the political ritual for many years, did not disturb its course. The host had seen to it that his guests and practically the whole city would be effectively separated from the rest of the world (Bulletin 2006; Gradziuk 2006).

In accordance with the custom established over the years, the participants of the sessions debated on the big issues of world politics. The sessions and the banquets in the palaces and parks were accompanied by wonderful weather, as rumor has it – thanks to spraying from airplanes chemicals that effectively scattered the clouds. The myth of Russia's greatness, as well as of the might of its president and of St. Petersburg itself had strengthened and is going strong.

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