

On the 300th Anniversary of The Founding of St. Petersburg

by Konstantin Chermnykh

Beauty is no whim of some half-God;
It is the modest carpenter's grasping eye.
—Osip Mandelstam, *The Admiralty*

It has often been difficult for the leadership of post-Soviet Russia to invoke Russia's historical past. The 300th anniversary of the Russian Navy, marked in 1997, was reduced to a bureaucratic procedure, with a bit of phony pomp played out against a backdrop of the miserable devastation of that once glorious defense institution. That anniversary was intentionally downplayed, so as not to hurt the feelings of the many Navy men forced to retire, or continuing to serve under horrific social conditions for themselves and their families.

Unlike the restrained Navy jubilee, the 300th anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg has been regarded as a political priority since Vladimir Putin's inauguration as President of Russia in 2000—and not only because it is his native city. The date of the foundation of the capital of the modern Russian Empire, which St. Petersburg was from 1712 to 1918, is regarded as a matter of honor for the whole community known as “the St. Petersburg elite” or, by its enemies, “the St. Petersburg clan.” The splits and fissures within this community are supposed to be overcome by turning to the city's historical memory, thereby to inspire the thinking part of the community toward a new understanding of the mission of Russia.

“The window to Europe,” as the poetic genius Alexander Pushkin once formulated the intent of the genius of statecraft, Peter the Great, is now intended to serve as the fulcrum of a new foreign policy, inheriting the tradition of Russia sovereigns during the nation's modern history, which may be dated from May 27, 1703.

The tragic wreck of the *Kursk* submarine in August 2000, in the midst of what was supposed to be a proud demonstration of the capabilities and skills of the Russian Navy, recalled the first humiliating defeat of Peter I's army in the Battle of Narva (November 1700), which was supposed to have demonstrated the strength of Russia under its young and ambitious leader. The lessons derived from that episode—which was downplayed even in Soviet period, anti-Tsarist history books—served as an impetus to revise Russia's national strategy and the very design of its policies of state.

In recent months, when Vladimir Putin rejected the inten-

sive prompts from Moscow-based survivalists to cave in to the geopolitical line of Washington and London, in view of Russia's obvious weakness, he was definitely listening, not to a crowd of servile advisors, but to the voice of modern Russian history: particularly, to the behest of his native city's founder, who challenged the tide, literally and figuratively, at the moment of his decision to establish the new capital of Russia at the mouth of the Neva River on the Gulf of Finland.

Against the Rules of Chaos

From the standpoint of a Club of Rome ideologist, the place chosen for the founding of St. Petersburg would have been perfect for a wetlands park—an almost virgin area covered with damp forests and vast marshes. The ocean tide,



The bronze statue of Peter the Great in St. Petersburg's Senate Square. The poet Pushkin asked the famous question, which is once again posed to Russia: “Where art thou leaping, O proud horse. . . ?”

which regularly poured in and reversed the flow of the gently sloping Neva, once physically washed away a whole garrison of the Swedish army, based on an islet in the river, a place Swedes, probably ironically, called Pleasure Island. It was right on this place that Peter I chose to erect his stronghold, later known as the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul.

Traditionally in Russia, a large city was supposed to be centered on a strong and spacious Kremlin, atop a hill. At the mouth of the Neva, however, there was no place suitable for a traditional Kremlin. For Peter, that was not an obstacle. The fort on the isle was completed, along with huge, castle-like fortifications on a larger island. The area behind it, was later used as a field for military parades and exercises. The noblemen, who under Peter's civil service reforms were able to make a state career only through military service, settled at that time in the same area. A smaller new city was built on Kotlin Island in the Gulf of Finland, where the satellite town of Kronstadt served as a frontline military stronghold for nearly the next three centuries.

The swamps along the Gulf were developed into industrial areas, being the perfect place for shipyards. Shipbuilding became the chief industry in St. Petersburg throughout the imperial period, the Soviet period, and to this day. The current emblem of St. Petersburg, the image of a ship rotating on the spire of the Admiralty building, brings to mind the wooden sailboat Peter I carved with his own huge hands—the only sovereign of Russia remembered by his people as “The Carpenter.”

The supply of water, a vital precondition for industrial development, predetermined the location of the first metallurgical facilities on the banks of the Neva, originally directly opposite the Fortress of Peter and Paul, then later along the right bank, which remains a major industrial area today, in both metallurgy and machine-building. The former mansion of Count Kushelev looks lonely among the huge units of a machine-building plant. Much of the central part of the city developed from the outset rather as a workshop of national industry, than a trading place, as used to be the case in traditional Russian cities.

From this standpoint, the design of St. Petersburg is also a challenge to the British imperial philosophy of free trade. A citizen of St. Petersburg will be puzzled, if asked which area in the city was designed for banking. Finally, you might be pointed to the modest old Classical building, now occupied by the University of Economy and Finances, tucked away behind the imposing Kazan Cathedral. The financial center, however, moved out of there a long time ago to a more remote area. Investigating this phenomenon, a decent researcher will soon realize that banking has never been regarded here as something important, since it is neither industry, nor education!

The tremendous human effort, invested in the construction of Russia's beautiful European city in a completely wild area, has nothing to do with classroom economics. It was based on the human will for self-perfection and the improve-

ment of human life, organized by the directing will of enlightened statesmen. This effort can't be measured in terms of banking and speculation. Its result remains today a surviving and impressive challenge to any “invisible hands.”

In 1976, I was told the story of Plato and three bricklayers, whom he asked the same question, “What are you doing?” One man said, “I am carrying these damned stones.” Another said, “I am working to feed my family.” The third one said, “I am building a beautiful cathedral.” This story was told in Leningrad (as St. Petersburg was called in the Soviet period) to a Marxist-Leninist University class for the political education of workers and students. As a matter of fact, the heritage of Peter I, based on the principle of beauty created for people for the sake of posterity, was absorbed, consciously or subconsciously, by anybody born and educated here—even professional Communist Party propagandists.

The Challenge of Peter's Bequest

It is clear from the above description that Peter the Great, like any talented warrior, drew the best lessons he could from Russia's adversary in that era, Sweden. He borrowed a number of strategic designs for the city from the design of Stockholm, which was also built at the mouth of a river and protected by fortifications on adjacent islands. On military engineering, Peter was advised primarily by German specialists, who at that time began to be adopted into the Russian nobility and greatly contributed to military industry, mining, and the medical sciences.

The architecture of St. Petersburg, however, is primarily an achievement of the Italian school, starting with the designer of the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul, Domenico Tresini. The same architect designed also the buildings to house the 12 collegiums of the Russian government (under the plan of organization recommended to Tsar Peter by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz), and the St. Petersburg State University building on Vasilyevsky Island, a place later associated with the great scientists Dmitri Mendeleyev and Vladimir Vernadsky.

During the reigns of Elizabeth I (1741-61), Catherine II (1762-96), Alexander I (1801-25) and Nicholas I (1825-55), new grand palaces added new features to the image of the city and its suburbs, contributing rather to the grandeur of the empire as such, than to its original mission. This excessive luxury greatly contrasted with the increasing ugliness of the quarters where the lower class lived, giving impetus to social protests, which later became fuel for revolutionary movements. The transformation of the Western stronghold of the country into the center of revolutionary activity cannot be explained only with the fact that the “window to Europe” was also a window for 19th-Century revolutionary theories. The transformed reality of the city, where palaces came to dominate over the design of Peter (who had lived in a small wooden house, during the construction), bred a strong desire for social change, lacking in sleepy patriarchal Moscow, or Nizhny Novgorod with its practical merchant class. The corruption

of the top Orthodox clergy, as well as the lechery of the administrative class, were most obvious and most intolerable for educated workers, descended from the families of those who built the city.

From this standpoint, the oppressed and desperate hero of Pushkin's long poem *The Bronze Horseman*—a warning addressed by the poet to the statesmen—should have blamed not Peter, but his royal descendants, for his misfortune. The same is true for the whole gallery of Petersburg characters in Dostoevsky's novels, living in dreadful poverty amid disgusting luxury. Those who transformed Peter's fortress into a jail for "nihilists," planted a powerful mine under Russian statehood.

Kronstadt, with its specific community living its own life, indivisible from the original mission of Peter's city, was the place of strongest resistance to the power of the Bolsheviks—and later, during World War II, the most powerful stronghold of the Red Army in resisting the Nazi invasion and siege of Leningrad. Anatoli Sobchak, the first post-Soviet governor of the city, yearned for a Western oligarchical way of life. He viewed St. Petersburg as "the Venice of the North," a term coined in Peter's time by the French architect Jean-Baptiste Leblond, whose design of criss-crossing Vasilyevich Island with canals—for merely decorative purposes—was rejected by Peter, who regarded this area as one of the main sites for large-scale industry.

The idea of St. Petersburg as primarily a tourist center, promoted by Sobchak, contradicted the very essence of the founder's design. No wonder that in 1996, even support from the giant firm Gazprom did not help Sobchak to stay in power for a second term. The legacy of Peter the Great is a real challenge for Russian state officials. Those who followed Peter's design, remain in the memory of the citizens and serve as an example which is not influenced by political changes. In the upcoming 2004 St. Petersburg gubernatorial elections, the candidates will have to measure up to the type of leaders represented by Sergei Kirov (the Communist Party chief in Leningrad, assassinated in 1934) and Grigori Romanov (Communist Party leader in the city in the 1970s and 1980s), who most followed the tradition of the city's founder, in that they promoted it as a center of industry and education.

In the present era, declared on the global level to be "post-industrial," the real economic elite of St. Petersburg is still dominated not by banking figures, but rather—even with the deterioration of entire strategic sectors of industry—by a number of former directors of construction trusts, transformed into private companies, and their close partners in the scientific community, as well as in the administration. In April, the Economic Development Committee of City Hall assembled to discuss a new strategic plan for the city's development. The media reported that the discussion was actually concentrated on the future mission of the city, with regard to an accurate calculation of the city's demography, the quality of infrastructure, and the strategy of the Russian

economy as a whole.

Each of the designers, however, will have to start from the original project of Peter the Great.

The Bridge to the Future

The choice of St. Petersburg's future, by eerie coincidence, will be made simultaneously with the strategic decision about Russia's mission in the world. In numerous meetings with foreign leaders, currently being held in St. Petersburg, the leadership of Russia is today focussed on the choice confronting not only Russia, but all of Christian civilization, and the rest of the world. To yield to the tide, or not? To allow oneself to be humiliated and manipulated by the

Pushkin on St. Petersburg

"[T]he Tsar . . . has taken me into service—i.e., has given me a salary and permitted me to burrow in the archives, to compile a history of Peter I. God grant the Tsar health!" The Russian poet Alexander Pushkin was jubilant, as in this 1831 letter, about the possibility of serious work on the history of Russia. Being the successor to Karamzin, whom he called "our first historian and last chronicler," he considered it a vital part of his identity and a matter of civic duty.

Never letting go of the ideals of freedom expressed in his early poems, Pushkin delved into the complex relationship between Russia's people and its Tsars. He wanted to look at what had happened, when the Romanov Tsars launched reforms, without being able to recruit the politically active layers of the population, never mind the peasantry, to support a workable idea for the betterment of the nation. In surviving notes for his history of Peter I, covering the year 1721, Pushkin observed:

"There is an amazing difference between Peter the Great's state institutions and his ukazes of the moment. The former are the fruits of a broad mind, full of benevolence and wisdom, while the latter are *not infrequently cruel, capricious, and seemingly written with a knout*. The former were for eternity, or at least for the future,—the latter were the outbursts of an *impatient*, autocratic land-owner" (Pushkin's emphasis).

He added a note to himself: "N.B. (Think this through and put it in the *History of Peter*)."

Pushkin's notes for his *History of Peter* are the assembled raw materials for a great chronicle, spiced with the sort of pungent insight, noted above, with respect to the contrast between Peter's institutional designs and his pragmatic cruelty. Pushkin recorded Peter's development of

world's only empire—or to mobilize the partisans of national-statehood, from historical neighbor-countries, for a joint strategic mission of the future, elevating the role of this city as the world's strategic crossroads?

Actually, since the second half of the 19th Century, St. Petersburg, regarded as Russia's most European city, acquired the role of a window not only to the West, but also to the East. For a century and a half, the city developed a tradition of scholarship in oriental studies, especially the study of Islamic countries and China. In January 2003, the President of Iran presented a special award to Prof. Yefim Rezvan from the St. Petersburg Institute of Oriental Studies, for his research on the history of Islamic theology. In February, Gov. Vladimir

Yakovlev spent two weeks in China, negotiating on several of the most advanced Russian-Chinese economic cooperation projects. Despite wrinkles introduced by infighting among economic clans, the main line of Russia's foreign economic strategy in the East is concentrated on the development of natural resources and infrastructure in the Far East. The most energetic young economic leaders from St. Petersburg are involved—people like Alexander Nesis, whose company owns the major stake in the Baltic Shipyard, but also in Polymetall Group, the major metal-mining company working in the Far East. The board of Polymetall is headed today by Alexei A. Bolshakov, deputy mayor of Leningrad in the late Soviet years, author of the project for a high-speed railroad

the economy, from the mapping of Siberia, to silver prospecting, to the establishment of iron foundries and shipbuilding. He detailed the purchases of scientific instruments, made during Peter's travels to Germany, Holland, and England, and the founding of the Academy of Sciences, as well as the Russian Senate, according to designs from Leibniz.

The *History of Peter* being unfinished, Pushkin's strongest statements on the central figure of Peter the Great are in his poetry. Pushkin could look at Russian history through the prism of his own family, as he did in the poem "*Moya rodoslovnaya*" ("My Genealogy") (1830). Its refrain is "I am simply a Russian bourgeois," a status that Pushkin traced, in verse, from the noble roots of the Pushkins, through the conflicts around the accession of Catherine II:

Then the Orlovs fell into favor,
And into jail my grandpa fell, . . .

In a postscript to this poem, Pushkin replied to sniping by his literary adversaries, by bringing the matter back to Peter the Great:

Figlyarin from his armchair judges,
That my black grandpa Hannibal
Was purchased for a bottle of rum—
Into the skipper's hands he fell.

That skipper was the famous skipper,
By whom our native land was moved,
Onto a course of power and greatness,
With might, the helm of state he hove.

Pushkin's great-grandfather Ibrahim Hannibal, here also called "the Tsar's confidant, not his slave," was the subject of his unfinished novella *Arap Petra Velikogo*

(*The Moor of Peter the Great*).

In *The Bronze Horseman*, Pushkin captured the tragedy of Peter by setting a "sad story" of little people, in St. Petersburg, the gloriously conceived northern capital he founded. First, Peter the Great brings the city into being by the power of his thought:

By nature we are destined here
To cut a window through to Europe.
To stand with firm foot by the sea.
Hither, across waves new to them
All flags will visit as our guests,
And we shall feast on the expanse. . . .

The poet rejoices at the new city:

I love thee well, Peter's creation,
I love thy strict and well-built look,
The river Neva's stately current,
The guardian granite of her banks.

The clerk Yevgeni, who loses his fiancée in the great St. Petersburg flood of 1824, goes mad and imagines that Falconet's bronze statue of Peter the Great (it stands in the Senate Square, the place of the Decembrist revolt) pursues him through the streets of the city. As Yevgeni looks in horror at the statue, the poet-narrator asks:

Where art thou leaping, O proud horse,
Where will thy hooves come down again?
O mighty master of destiny!
Just so, didst thou not o'er th' abyss,
On high, with iron bit in hand,
Rear Russia up on its hind legs?

Excerpted from Rachel Douglas, "The Living Memory of Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin," Fidelio, Fall 1999.

between St. Petersburg and Moscow, and a person who played a decisive role in Putin's Moscow career. The Baltic Shipyard, birthplace of the Soviet Union's nuclear icebreakers, builds ships for India and China today.

On April 13, a St. Petersburg Channel 5 TV program on the 300th anniversary of the city was focussed on the role of another great statesman, Sergei Witte, who became Russia's Finance Minister in 1892. The presenters emphasized that in Witte's period in office, Russia turned to both Europe and to Asia. By driving home the historical connection between the founder of the city and his glorious late-19th-Century successors, and recalling that the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad started from the Chinese Eastern Railroad (Chita-Harbin-Dalyang), today's historians and journalists gave tribute to the half-forgotten names of engineers and specialists involved in the Trans-Siberian project, such as Anatoliy Kulamzin, head of the state commission for construction of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, and Prof. Lavr Proskuryakov, a European-trained engineer who designed most of the railroad bridges on the route across the almost virgin wilderness of Siberia.

Witte and his colleagues emphasized, as this TV program reported, that the construction of the great railroad was to be carried out by Russians and with Russian materials. The most outstanding contributors to the historic economic efforts of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries were European-educated Russians.

Even in Peter I's time, when Russian specialists obviously lacked the necessary education, the planning of the city was carried out by domestic cadres, not by the invited foreigners. Architects Pyotr Yeropkin, Mikhail Zemtsov, Ivan Korobov, Andrey Zakharov, and Vasily Bazhenov represent only a part of the list of talented Russians, who took lessons from Peter's colleagues and friends, such as Franz Lefort, Andrei Osterman, Domenico Tresini, and other foreigners who served Peter as devoted Russian citizens.

The new Russia, which has gotten rid of its humiliating dependence on the International Monetary Fund, which has completed construction of the Baltic and Caspian pipelines, as well as the Baikal-Amur Railroad, has a huge potential of natural resources, industrial facilities, and educated personnel, to take up the strategic line of the founder of St. Petersburg—"a city built on intention," as Fyodor Dostoevsky, not an admirer of Peter I, once confessed.

The bridge to the better future world can be paved only in this way—with intention, and despite resistance from wild forces in nature and in the human soul. The best advice for a person who has lost confidence in the future is simple: Visit St. Petersburg, and seeing the masterpieces of Tresini, Zakharov, Voronikhin, Rossi, Stackenschneider, and Stasov will inspire you, giving powerful evidence of beauty based on the exceptional virtue of Man, as well as the great task of building a bridge between the West and the East, which the human race faces today.