

## RESTORATION AND THE POLITICS OF THE HEROIC THE SOVIET RECONSTITUTION OF LENINGRAD'S IMPERIAL BAROQUE

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**THE FAMOUS PETERHOF PALACE OUTSIDE LENINGRAD, THROUGH WHOSE GROUNDS THE FRONT LINES RAN FOR ALMOST A YEAR, HAS BEEN DAMAGED BEYOND ALL HOPE OF REPAIR. ALL THE BEAUTIFUL LESSER BUILDINGS IN THE GARDEN, THE ARCHITECTURE OF WHICH INCLUDES SOME OF THE BEST WORK OF RASTRELLI AND LEBLANC, ARE ALSO IRREPARABLE. --NEW YORK TIMES, JUNE 20, 1943**

**...THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NATIONAL CULTURE OF THE PEOPLES IN THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES WAS A FUNDAMENTAL PART OF THE GENERAL PLAN FOR WORLD DOMINATION ESTABLISHED BY HITLER'S CONSPIRATORS. IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE WHETHER DESTRUCTION OR PLUNDER WAS THE PREVALENT FACTOR IN THESE PLANS. BUT THERE IS NO DISPUTING THE FACT THAT BOTH PLUNDER AND DESTRUCTION WERE AIMED AT ONLY ONE GOAL – EXTERMINATION... --ASSISTANT PROSECUTOR FOR THE USSR M.Y. RAGINSKY NUREMBURG TRIAL DAY 64 [1]**

In the 900 days Leningrad was held hostage, from 1941 to 1944, Nazi shelling inflicted catastrophic damage on the city's people and infrastructure. In addition to a million dead and 1.5 million evacuees, roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, apartments, and factories were destroyed, bringing city life to a halt. At the city's edge, the front lines had run through five of Leningrad's most prized architectural possessions, the imperial palaces of the “pearl necklace,” including Peterhof, Oranienbaum, Tsarskoe Selo, Pavlovsk, and Gatchina. Despite the need to concentrate post-war efforts on rebuilding necessary social services, Stalin prioritized restoration of these massive Imperialist monuments, which were generally thought to be beyond repair.

It seemed ironic to many that in a time of enormous social need, the Soviet government decided to devote significant resources to rebuilding these structures. But the restoration of the palaces of Leningrad operated ideologically as something more powerful than the mere resurrection of architectural history—restoration finalized the transformation of these structures from symbols of imperial hegemony to palaces of the People—concretizing Lenin's 1918 declaration that what had belonged to the tsars now belonged to all Russians. While their original construction was extorted by imperial right from the serfs, restoration was transformed through Soviet propaganda into a heroic mission of the people, reinterpreting an already powerful mythology surrounding the palaces, and consolidating Leningrader's communal bonds to them.

**THE PETRINE ERA: SIGNIFYING THE WEST** Since their first construction, the palaces had embodied the strong ideologies of their masters. Russia's 18th century rulers saw them (as they saw St. Petersburg itself) as contemporary symbols of Russia's new power as a Europeanized empire, and as extensions of Peter the Great's conception of St. Petersburg as a new kind of Russian capitol – what Pushkin called a “window cut through to Europe.” [2] By building in the grand, Western style, the tsars hoped to propel Russia into dialog with the West, creating the image that Russia was a modern European state par excellence. The palaces acted as sets on which the tsar and

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[1] The Avalon Project: Nuremberg Trial Proceedings Vol. 8, <http://www.yale.edu/avalon/imi/proc/02-21-46.htm> (accessed May 15, 2007).

[2] Shvidkovsky, Dmitri, *Russian Architecture and the West*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 196.

[3] St. Petersburg names have changed in response to Russia's shifting world view.

[4] It was renamed Petrograd in 1914 in order to sound more Slavic and less German, Leningrad in 1924 in response to the Lenin's death, and finally in 1991, returned to St. Petersburg by popular vote.

[5] The text of this travel guide can be found online at [www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/detskoye.html](http://www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/detskoye.html) (accessed June 1, 2007).

[6] Belyakova, Alla, “Beauty Reborn,” *Soviet Life*, no. 1 (Jan 1987), 57.

[7] *Ibid.*, 57.

[8] On day 64 of the Major War Criminals trial of the International Military Tribunal, the Soviet Prosecution read testimony into the record regarding Hitler's “Crimes Against Culture,” including specific mention of the damage to Leningrad's imperial palaces.

[9] Morgan, Christopher and Irina Orlova, *Saving the Tsar's Palaces*, (Clifton-upon-Teme, Worcestershire, United Kingdom: Polipero Heritage Press, 2005), 69.

[10] Belyakova, Beauty Reborn, 57.

[11] Morgan, *Saving the Tsar's Palaces*, 72.

[12] See, for instance, Lawrence, W.H. “Huge Nazi Defenses at Leningrad Revealed to Allied Press on Tour,” *New York Times*, Feb 12, 1944.

court could act and entertain in an enclave of European taste and convention.

To this end, Peter and his successors looked to model their monumental work on the great royal palaces of Europe, which Peter had visited as part of his two year tour, 1697-1699. While abroad he acquired a deep knowledge of Western technology and style, and upon his return founded St. Petersburg in 1703, commissioning foreign architects and engineers to plan and construct the city. The opulent palaces begun at this time, and continued by Peter's successors, were designed by foreign masters, including Giacomo Quarenghi, Charles Cameron, Bartolomeo Rastrelli and Antonio Rinaldi in the Baroque and later Rococo styles.[3] They had gilded ceilings, frescoes, and inlaid parquet floors of rare woods to rival the great palaces of Europe. They were furnished by the most skilled cabinetmakers in the world, and surrounded by substantial grounds designed in the latest fashions of 18th century English and French landscape gardening. The grounds were particularly grand at Peterhof, where the upper garden had a cascade modeled on one built for Louix XIV at his Chateau du Marly, and where the lower garden had a series of formal French Parterres which lead dramatically out to the Baltic Sea.

**THE SOVIET SHIFT** While by the early 20th Century, St. Petersburg appeared to act like a modern Western metropolis akin to Paris, Vienna or London, Russia itself remained a largely rural, class-bound, and impoverished society. Increasing social unrest due to war and famine eventually resulted in revolution – first with the introduction of a constitutional monarchy in 1905, and finally in 1917 with the dispensation of the tsar altogether. On October 25, 1917, in what would become a defining moment in the mythology of revolution, Lenin and his Bolshevik guards stormed up the stairs of the Winter Palace in the heart of St. Petersburg (then renamed Petrograd) and took power. Civil war ensued, but by 1922, Lenin's Bolsheviks cemented their authority over Russia.

Part of Lenin's program of propaganda rested on convincing Russians of the reality of a redistribution of wealth. In this scheme, what had belonged to the tsar, aristocracy, and church, must now appear to belong to the proletariat, and so Lenin decreed that all royal palaces become public museums and parks. The act of giving over, the transference of the embodied meaning of these buildings, was carefully constructed by Lenin to reflect Russia's rapidly shifting world view from the Petrine epoch's West-ward looking liberalism to an inward looking Socialism.

While Lenin appears to have been satisfied with the simple shift of meaning accomplished through the opening of property that once belonged to the elite, Stalin's government seems to have become increasingly concerned over the meaning of remnants of the past. Stalin's government did not hesitate to use demolition as a primary means of expressing its ideology – many churches and cathedrals were demolished in an attempt to subvert the power of the Orthodox Church, including in 1931, the demolition of the central Russian Orthodox Cathedral, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, to make way for the new Palace of Soviets (the project never came to fruition). But despite the almost religious fervor

with which Stalin went about demolishing the past, his government decided to maintain the palace-parks around St. Petersburg. Numerous writers have credited curators and architects for continually lobbying Stalin to save the palaces on purely artistic grounds, but as the same group was unable to stop the demolition of many other monuments of architectural note, different factors must have been in play.

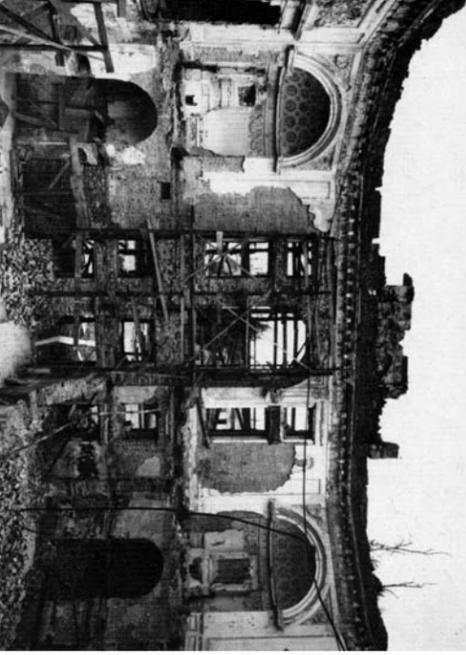
Instead of through demolition, the palaces' meanings began to be transformed through heroics – an English language guidebook to Tsarskoe Selo (“Tsar's Village,” a primary residence of the imperial family), published in 1934, states that, “The legacies of the tsars were for ever given by the October Revolution to the working masses. All that was valuable...was regarded as part of an historical museum.” The guide discusses new developments at Tsarskoe Selo, renamed by the government as Detskoe Selo (Children's Village), including a major health resort with “fourteen children's sanatoria and several prophylactic establishments as well as private ‘rest homes’ and sanatoria” for veterans of the revolution and important people within the Soviet government. Clearly, the addition of these programs to the town suggests the government was attempting to take hold of the former meaning of the compound through the heroic act of giving over the tsar's “legacy” to sick children, veterans and civil servants. The guide concludes, “The metamorphosis of the Tsarskoe Selo, residence of the tsars into a combinat (sic) of culture, a museum town, a town of rest and a children's settlement, is now complete. Detskoe Selo has become a link in the ring of verdure which surrounds Leningrad, the city of the proletariat.” [4]

**THE HEROIC: DESTRUCTION AND RECONSTITUTION** It took a different government to decide that the palaces should no longer exist. There can be little question as to the intentions of the retreating Nazi Wehrmacht, as in 1944 they planted 11 bombs under the foundations of the Catherine Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, stringing trip wires through the muck at the bottom of the Great Pond.[5] The Nazi army had occupied four of the five suburban palaces during the blockade of Leningrad, the terrible siege which lasted nearly 900 days, appropriating them as bases from which to command their troops. Disorganized looting began among the general ranks, and was soon institutionalized by the arrival of “cultural experts” from Germany whose job it was to catalog, pack, and ship home any and all treasures under the rhetoric of “safekeeping.” The Nazis had plans to “protect” paintings and sculptures from the palaces as well as from the state art museum – the Hermitage – but only works of foreign origin. Artworks of Russian origin were to be cleansed from the city.[6] At Nuremberg, these acts of violence were denounced as part of Hitler's greater project of cultural genocide.[7], [8]

Institutionalized theft was only the beginning—the German's treatment of the palaces themselves also showed disdain for Russian culture. At Petrodvorets, a ballroom was converted to a horse stable. At the Catherine Palace of Tsarskoe Selo, one wing became a motorcycle repair shop, complete with a ramp to the exterior punched through the existing ornamented wall. Seventeenth century tapestries that once hung in the galleries of the palace were used as rugs in the German dugouts, and exquisite furniture taken from the palace rooms furnished them. At all the palaces, trees in the landscape gardens (now finally mature) were cut down to provide tinder to get through the interminably cold winter of 1943. [9]

Shelling from both the German and Russian sides and hand-to-hand combat damaged the palaces and parks. But the most sinister acts of vandalism occurred as the Nazi army began their final retreat from Leningrad. The palaces were burned, exploded, defaced and vandalized, and the parks surrounding them rigged with minefields for the soon-to-return Russians. Messages were left scrawled on the walls, like one at Gatchina which read, “We were here. We will not come back. When Ivan comes, he will find nothing. Richard Wurf, Stettin, UHlandstrasse 2.” [10]

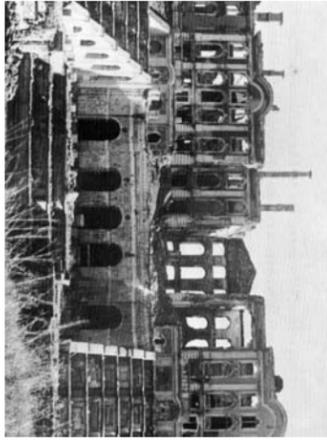
The damage to the suburban palaces was said by visitors—reporters, architects and curators alike—to be irreparable.[11] But the Soviet government, almost immediately after blockade was broken, decided to pursue a policy of complete restoration. Journalists over the years have commented on the intense irony in the Soviet government decision to spend vast sums of money, perhaps billions



[a]



[c]



[b]



[d]

- [a] Pavlovsk damaged
- [b] Ballroom restored
- [c] Great Cascade at Petrodvorets; Source: Peterhof State Museum
- [d] Great Cascade restored; Source: Peterhof State Museum

[12] One such argument is put forth by Igor Graber, one of the “greatest Soviet authorities on art history” in Graber, Igor. “The Restoration of Russian Architectural Monuments,” *American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 4, No. ½, (Aug., 1945), 182-184.

[13] Ilyin, Oleg, “The Catherine Palace: A Miracle of Restoration,” *Soviet Life*, no. 2 (Feb 1978), 49.

[14] Belyakova, Beauty Reborn, 58.

of Rubles, on the restoration of what were the playhouses of the tsars. In other contexts, Soviet propaganda celebrated the destruction of these kinds of projects. After all, the mythology of their construction was embedded in the story of the ruthlessness with which Peter I and his progeny pursued construction. “The city built on bones,” St. Petersburg is said to have claimed the lives of at least 10,000 forced laborers whose bodies were interred in the mud of the Petersburg Delta.

The language of restoration—language that appeared in both scientific and journalistic Soviet writings on the rebuilding of Leningrad’s historic monuments—suggests that restoration became a Soviet project through the use of the propaganda of proletariat heroics, a technique which had developed prominence during the War (known in Russian as “The Great Patriotic War”). Heroics transformed the project of restoration from a story about Russia’s history into a story which glorifies the act of restoration itself, and along with it the heroic worker. Here heroics operated on two different scales: both on the scale of the singular architect, artist, or artisan, and on the scale of the masses. The restorer’s difficult and tedious work—joining splinters of rare woods back into Baroque cherubs, re-gilding 18th century picture frames, and collecting, cataloging, sorting, and finally reincorporating miniscule shards of plaster molding, wood, bits of tapestry and fabric, and millions of pieces of wooden floor inlay became a story reiterated again and again in relation to the palaces. The restorer was joined by the masses, who flocked to the site on weekends as volunteers to clear debris, replant trees, and dig ditches.

Architects and planners debated whether the buildings and grounds should, or even could, be completely restored to their former condition, or whether the sites should be left as ruins. Proponents of restoration argued that the palaces were masterpieces and must be returned to mint condition in order for the public to get a complete vision of them, and that it was appropriate in the case of such complete destruction to simulate the original through the use of authentic techniques and materials.[12] On the other hand, those supporting conservation argued that the palaces should be left as ruins—ruins which would perpetuate the memory of losses suffered under Nazi aggression. Still other, more radical thinkers, believed the sites should be cleared and new housing built, filling an immediate social need. Though building housing might have seemed most in line with the politics of the Socialist government, this idea was quickly dispensed with. Despite the remaining conflicting viewpoints, planners agreed on one thing—whatever work needed to be done should commence immediately and be carried out during the lifetime of the curators and artisans that had lived with these buildings. Postponement meant an irreparable loss of architectural memory.[13]

The technique of restoration finally agreed upon suggested a mission that was heroic in scale. Termed “reconstitution,” the technique required that every remaining fragment of the buildings should be painstakingly put back into its rightful place.[14] In practice, this meant that shards of plaster, wood, fabric, glass, and metal be collected throughout the grounds of each palace, and reintroduced into the structure as reconstruction proceeded. At the Catherine Palace, a building locally called the “big morgue” was set up to receive these elements as they were collected around the site. Pieces that were missing or could not be recovered were replicated using original techniques, many of which no longer had practitioners. Vo-tech schools were set up in Leningrad to train a new class of working artisans for restoration. Thousands were trained at these schools, creating the largest and most sophisticated architectural restoration machine in the world. Lost techniques of marquetry and parquetry were reinvented to replace burned floors, sculptors studied the techniques of 18th century masters, and scouts were dispatched around the world to seek rare materials that had been used in the original construction.

A ban on new artistic production caused many artists to defect to restoration. In what was part of the “Leningrad Affair” of 1949, Stalin launched a campaign against art and culture in the city, fearing that solidarity among Siege survivors could threaten his power. Stalin’s government fabricated cases against Leningrad’s popular wartime leaders, eventually sentencing the highest level administrators to death and exiling the remaining members of the administration to Siberia. All artistic activities—painting, sculpting, and writing—were curtailed for fear that new art could provoke unrest. In the absence of a free creative outlet, artists flocked to restoration as the only remaining free avenue for artistic production.[15]

The stories of individual heroic restorers at the palaces were carried in the pages of newspapers and journals of the time, and presented in the west in the New York Times, and later in the English language journal Soviet Life published in the U.S.S.R. for American audiences. At Pavlovsk, Anna Zelenova, the director, embodied the heroic worker. Suzanne Massie, in Pavlovsk: The Life of a Russian Palace, described Zelenova's first visit back to Pavlovsk on February 1, 1944. Travel there was fraught with danger—ditches, streams, remnants of war, and minefields all lay in her path, and her colleagues struggled to convince her it was too dangerous to go on. Anna persevered, making it to the palace in time to watch beams collapse and crush a valuable fresco. Impatient to return and without a vehicle, Anna later walked back to the site from Leningrad—26 kilometers through wreckage, barbed wire, snow, and even the stray dead body.<sup>[16]</sup> Zelenova was 31 that year, and would spend the rest of her life pursuing the restoration of the palace, arguing for additional resources, funding, and manpower. It would be 26 years before the final eight restored rooms were opened to the public.<sup>[17]</sup>

Soviet Life recorded the lives of others who restored the palaces on the occasion of their receipt of the Lenin Prize, highest honor given by the Soviet government, in 1986.<sup>[18]</sup> These include the stories of individuals like Alexei Kochuyev, a wood-carver who spent thirty years learning to recreate Baroque picture frames. Nadezhda Ode, a sculptor, recreated plaster moldings in over thirty palaces in Leningrad. She says of Rastrelli's designs that "Not a single volute was identical to another one." Then there's Yakov Kazakov, a painter whose job involves more re-creation than restoration of the original murals at Petrodvorets. All these individuals began restoring in the 1950's with no background in restoration or decorative arts. They are described as ordinary people who became restorers because of their passion to rebuild.

**PALACE AS PLAYLAND** Beyond the individual heroic stories of restorers, the mythology of the restoration was itself reinforced by a stark contrast with the conditions of housing that plagued Leningrad for the rest of the century. The loss of 3 million square meters of housing during the war caused a serious and long-lasting crisis, forcing the expansion of the communal apartment system.<sup>[19]</sup> By 1951, every apartment in the historic core of Leningrad had an average of 3.3 families living in it.<sup>[20]</sup>

Where new housing was being built, it was built on the periphery of the city using simplified construction techniques developed for new factory towns in the east, resulting in mundane concrete or brick slab buildings with low ceilings. Residential choices were thus limited to cramped communal quarters in the center city, or poor quality new space on the peripheries. These conditions created a culture of escapism—a need to leave the city and find relief in the country. The imperial residences thus began to act like amusement parks for the masses. This contrast between the shabby domestic realm and the exquisite and fanciful palaces emphasized their importance as elements of the communal public realm.<sup>[21]</sup> This contrast also enhanced the perceived importance of the laborious work of the restorers.

**CONCLUSION** While the tsars of Petrine Russia envisioned St. Petersburg's Imperial Baroque architecture to act as a great Westernizing force in Russia, the Soviet régimes of the 20th century subverted their meanings through proletariat heroics. Destruction of the palaces at foreign hands opened the possibility of a complete reinterpretation of meaning for them through the deification of the restorative process. Through the construction of the heroic artisan, a war hero, blockade survivor, and who dedicated his life's work to rebuilding this architecture (nearly from scratch), the palaces came to be products of the people. This transformation embedded the communal memory of war in every restored metope and cherub, and completed an ideological transformation of their meanings.

The restoration of Petrodvorets, Pavlovsk, Pushkin, and Oranienbaum allowed Leningraders to find true communal ownership of buildings which were once symbols of imperial re-

pression. Even today, in the rooms of the Catherine Palace, visitors will find small photographs in the corners of each room which serve as reminders of what the place looked like after its destruction – emphasizing the expertness with which they had been restored. In this, the mythology of the heroic restorer continues to persist, even as the generation that survived the blockade passes on, and even after the political system which created it has ceased to exist. This persistence is a testimony to the power of the heroic.

[15] Lincoln, Bruce W., *Sunlight at Midnight*. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 312.

[16] Massie, Suzanne, *Pavlovsk: The Life of a Russian Palace*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1990), 270.

[17] *Ibid.*, 348.

[18] Beiyakova, Beauty Reborn, 55–65.

[19] Lincoln, *Sunlight at Midnight*, 315.

[20] *Ibid.*, 64.

[21] Ruble, Blair A, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 50.



RUINS OF GRAND PETERHOFF PALACE NEAR LENINGRAD AFTER NAZI RETREAT

