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Culture & Politics ❖ Literary Criticism ❖ Creative Writing ❖ Photography ❖ Translations

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THE MARINE FAÇADE AND THE PETERSBURG MYTH IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

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St. Petersburg has always been Russia's 'window to the West.' At the time of its construction in the 18th century, Peter the Great envisioned a city encompassing the greatest architectural achievements of Western Europe: the romantic island-canal systems of Venice and Amsterdam, luxurious baroque architecture, and a court rivaling that of the French in power and elegance. However, the city has not always lived up to its intended purpose: To prove that Russia could leave behind her backward ways and enter into modernity with the rest of Europe).¹ Thus the Petersburg myth was born — its foundations lay in the discrepancy between the idealized city and its real counterpart. The myth, which expresses Russia's complicated experience of modernity, continues to be prevalent in contemporary St. Petersburg. The Marine Façade development project embodies the Petersburg myth and the three-hundred-year-old dichotomy between dreams and reality that lies at the heart of the city.

The Marine Façade, launched in 2004, is the largest and most recent of Petersburg's urban development plans. A joint project between the St. Petersburg City Administration and several private firms, the plan involves a commercial passenger port, a new business district, and an expansion of the city's transportation system. In its planning phase, the port was the original justification for building the Marine Façade — until the port's construction, Petersburg stood as the only ma-

ior European city without a passenger seaport.²

Considering Peter the Great's intent to make St. Petersburg the owner of his empire's main commercial port, the Marine Façade immediately falls into line with Petersburg's cultural tradition. In order to render Petersburg a more prominent trading location, Peter increased the production of Russian ships and encouraged foreign merchants through trade concessions.³ Years later, a modern Petersburg facing the same challenge finds remedy in the new Marine Façade, which welcomes luxury cruises in place of freight liners.⁴ Until the Passenger Port was built, passenger ships had to share limited port space with cargo ships and oil tankers.⁵ In order to cope with the pressures of a modern city and popular tourist destination, Petersburg needed to create incentives for ships to utilize this new port. Thus the idea for the grandiose Marine Façade district was born: an ultra-modern contrast to the rest of the city that would provide comfort and leisure for tourists.

Even with this attempted innovation, the weight of the Petersburg myth still rests upon the city. The downtown area, now the historic center, was the pinnacle of modernity in the 18th century. It was also just as contrived as the Marine Façade. Dostoevsky critically called Petersburg "the most intentional city."⁶ The completed Marine Façade will be a sleek downtown area that caters to tourists, professionals,

and wealthy residents. It will cover 450 hectares of reclaimed land, nearly half the size of Vasilievsky Island as it exists today. The port, opened in 2008, consists of a rectangular bay in which international commercial cruise liners can dock at one of four terminals. Current predictions put completion of the business and residential areas near 2020, at which time they will be sold to private entities.⁷ The reclaimed land serving as the foundation of these areas, called the “pre-coat,” is currently under construction. The pre-coat resembles its host city in that any connection to its environment is forced, if present at all.

This artificiality is key to the Petersburg myth and the city’s history. The city is seductive with its beauty and symbolic modernity, but these qualities hide the city’s darker half—the unnatural and autocratic. The Marine Façade exhibits these same traits. By facilitating increased tourism, it will help the city, its economy, and infrastructure. However, these benefits come at the cost of the environment and the city’s residents.

The ideal result of the project is decidedly utopian, appropriate for St. Petersburg. Scale models in the Marine Façade Management Company’s office show a sophisticated district that looks more like Sydney, Australia than Petersburg, Russia. The new Western High Speed Diameter Highway will run horizontally through the district, alleviating Vasilievsky’s congestion issues by providing an alternative to the city’s famous bridges. There is also a plan to expand the metro system by adding two more stations in addition to the two that are currently on the Island.⁸ Just as Petersburg was extremely fashionable in the 1700s, the Marine Façade is designed to be the most contemporary district in all of Russia.

There are, however, several drawbacks to the project that residents of St. Petersburg do not fail to notice. Locals have major reservations about the motives behind the project, its implementation, and its possible effects on the city. Debate over the Marine Façade focuses on two sensitive sets of values: the aesthetic and the practical. Generally, proponents of the project are city authorities, corporate developers, and groups that will benefit economically from the project. Opponents include architects, residents of

Vasilievsky Island, ecological-advocacy groups, and political coalitions that oppose the authorities currently in office.

Those who feel that Petersburg’s aesthetic tradition should be preserved worry that the Marine Façade will change the city’s aura. The classic Petersburg style is characterized by a horizontal skyline, linear architecture, symmetry, and a strong contrast between water and stone. Architect, historical restoration expert, and city native Rafael Maratovich Dayanov considers the Marine Façade “upsetting” from an aesthetic point of view.⁹ He sees it as a question of forgetting Petersburg’s architectural identity and is afraid that the city will change beyond all recognition. The city’s distinctive style is a direct reflection of the Western architects Peter commissioned to build his city. Completely departing from traditional Russian form, the tsar ordered the Moscow nobility to build palaces in Petersburg. He forced thousands of peasants from across Russia to construct and inhabit the new city. The combined human toll of building accidents, disease, and flood-related deaths illustrates the autocratic nature of Peter’s project.¹⁰ In Dayanov’s words, the city was the dream of “one man.”¹¹ The commoners and nobles hated the location and the hardships it caused for them, “but Peter would not listen.”¹²

Similarly, the Marine Façade completely departs from the Baroque aesthetic of the city. The government and managing firms want it to look like a 21st-century business district, which is completely incongruous with the existing style of the city. Paralleling the city’s birth, the Marine Façade is a top-down execution; the residents of St. Petersburg and Vasilievsky Island have had little say in the project’s implementation, though it disrupts the lives of many as well as the surrounding environment.

In fact, Vasilievsky Island is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Because it is protected by UNESCO, the Petersburg government regulates the style of all new construction within the city limits. Within the City Administration there are two architectural committees that have jurisdiction over the city’s design. One, the Committee for Urban Planning and Architecture, passes all legislation concern-

ing new development in the historical area. However, the Marine Façade area lies under a different municipal authority, and is therefore not subject to the same set of architectural and structural regulations.¹³ This means that the 450 hectares of new development are not required to conform to the historical style.

Aside from aesthetic concerns, many see the Marine Façade as an impractical and harmful endeavor. Many argue that it is detrimental to not only the environment of the coastal area, but to the daily lives of those who reside there. Journalist Victoria Rabotnova, a resident of Vasilievsky Island, wonders why the port complex could not be built somewhere else along the coast. Before deciding on Vasilievsky, other options were being considered — such as Kanonersky Island, located to the south of Vasilievsky and far enough from the historical center that it would not be considered as controversial. Rabotnova’s theory is that Vasilievsky was chosen because placing the port near an existing residential district would have given the developers an excuse to build the new district.¹⁴

Ecological groups were furious at the lack of concern over the project’s environmental impact, as the land reclamation process causes extreme turbidity around the coast and where the Neva meets the bay.¹⁵ In 2010, the St. Petersburg People’s Democratic Union of Youth protested against the destruction of local fish populations.¹⁶ Other ecologists complain that the project will destroy the coast, reduce the number of green areas in the city, and make the Neva Bay unfit for wildlife.¹⁷

However, the government approved the Vasilievsky project for construction, and it passed all the necessary tests concerning environmental safety. Journalists Nadezhda Zaitseva and Alexander Medvedev quote an unnamed member of parliament

who took part in the Marine Façade meetings of the Standing Committee on Health and Environmental Legislative Assembly in 2005: “We asked the experts questions about the impact ... on the surrounding area, the impact ... on the water quality in the Gulf of Finland and came to the conclusion that ... it does not adversely affect either the health of the air or water.” The representative also said he believes Vasilievsky is the only place where a port like this could be located, although many experts are quick to note the contrary.

The construction of the Marine Façade again echoes Petersburg’s construction. The swampy mouth of the Neva was nearly uninhabitable. However, Peter desperately wanted a port, and it allowed him to move away from Moscow, a capital hated. Foreigners and nobles did not believe it would survive past Peter’s reign as the climate was so poor and the residents despised it. However, for Peter, “no obstacle was great enough to prevent his carrying out his design.”¹⁸

Economically, many Vasilievsky residents are upset about the Marine Façade’s potentially negative effect on apartment values. People who bought expensive waterfront property in the Primorskaya area are extremely angry and have formed lobbying coalitions to protest the construction of the Marine Façade. Not only will they lose their beautiful view of the Gulf, but they will also lose value on what was once considered prime real estate. One NGO, “Protecting the Island Vasilievsky” (ZOV), filed a lawsuit in 2006 attempting to stop development of the Western High Speed Diameter on the grounds that it would decimate the value of surrounding real estate.¹⁹

Although Peter’s nobles built the city’s original palaces, they too endured economic hardship because of construction. Having no choice but to move

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to the new capital, the costs of construction and food led many to estimate they had lost two-thirds of their wealth.²⁰ The people hated St. Petersburg, and they “suffered greatly but did not complain.”²¹ Today’s residents have no problems raising their voices against the Marine Façade, but they are no more effective than their 18th-century counterparts.

Public opinion goes unacknowledged in the implementation of the project. Groups such as ZOV and the St. Petersburg Youth League have tried laboriously to change the plans, but to no avail. ZOV has held rallies and written to both Presidents Medvedev and Putin during their terms in office.²² They have also petitioned the local Petersburg government.²³ Tatiana Sharagina, who owns an apartment next to the port, is a prominent member of ZOV and elected representative of Vasilievsky Island. She admits the group has not had much success with accomplishing its goals, given that the port is already functioning. Residents of an apartment building located on Morskaya Naberezhnaya, right next to the construction, wrote a petition expressing their grievances about the noise of the construction, which disrupts their everyday lives. With the estimated deadline of the project set at 2020, they will have to put up with the disturbances for a while to come.²⁴ But as long as the city can get its makeover, the people’s plight does not seem to be an obstacle.

American journalist David Greene published an article on St. Petersburg, in which he assesses it as Russia’s façade: “Peter the Great imagined a luxurious playground for the ruling elite ... [now some residents]

think Russia’s current leaders are using the city for the same purpose.”²⁵ Petersburg is a special city, as tour groups from cruise liners can enter without a Russian visa as long as they are accompanied at all times by a licensed tour guide. Greene argues that this, combined with the atmospheric discrepancy between Petersburg and the rest of Russia, gives the Russian government control over foreigners’ impressions of the country. Not only does the Marine Façade facilitate this superficial tourist experience of the country, but the surrounding areas will also send these types of visitors a different perception of the country than what really exists, purposefully disguising its negative attributes.

Petersburg was built to be, and remains to this day, Russia’s “window”—not “door”—to the West. As an image, it is “more constricted ... more subject to control.”²⁶ The Marine Façade facilitates this same control, just as the connection between Russia and tourists can be controlled. The front of modern business may hide the similarities between the Marine Façade and Peter’s vision, but they are both utopias of modernity. Both stem from the intent to put Russia on par with Western Europe, but both are, in actuality, monuments to Russia’s top-down power structure. The Petersburg myth lives on into the present, and the Marine Façade exemplifies the myth and shows that it is still an important part of the city and its culture. The conflicts between new and old, the powerful and powerless, and vision and reality can all be found under the surface of the Marine Façade.



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Your elbow’s close, but you can’t bite it. ❖ Don’t mention the rope in the house of a hanged person

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26 Munro, 266.

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1 Rancour-Laferrrière, Daniel. *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1995. P. 5.

2 Berdyaev, Nikolai. "Definition of the Russian National Type." In *The Russian Idea*, trans. R. M. French. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962. 1-33. P. 26

3 Chekhov, Anton. *The Cherry Orchard*, trans. L. Senelink. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010. P. 116

4 Szamuely, Tibor. "Chapter 10: The Intelligentsia" In *The Russian Tradition*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1974. 143-171. Pp. 160-161

5 Chekhov, 124

6 Ibid. 123

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8 Ibid. 107

9 Ibid. 133

10 Ibid. 111

11 Ibid. 135

12 Ibid. 135

13 Ibid., 93

14 Rancour-Laferrrière, 127.

15 Chekhov, 105.

16 Ibid. 104; 141.

17 Rancour-Laferrrière, 128.

18 Chekhov, 92.

19 Gorky, Maksim. *Childhood*, trans. G. Hettlinger. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010. P. 204.

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22 in: Elton, Oliver. "Chekhov: The Taylorian Lecture 1929." In *Studies in European Literature*, ed. E. Gosse. Oxford: Taylor Institution Press, 1930. P. 23

23 Grossmann, I., & Kross, E. "The impact of culture on adaptive versus maladaptive self-reflection." *Psychological Science*, 21 (2010), 1150–1157.

The Mongol Cause

1 Though a more proper transliteration of Андрей Белый is Andrey Byeliy (or Bielyi or Biely), I have kept the convention followed by most in transliterating his name as Bely.

2 Andrey Bely, Petersburg, trans. Maguire and Malmstad (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 166.

3 Thomas E.S. Bamforth, "Bely and the Mongols: Geopolitical Visions in Andrey Bely's Petersburg" in *The University of Melbourne CERC Working Papers Series*, No. 3 (2005), 6.

4 The Ableukhovs' ancestor, one "Ab-Lai-Ukhov" (3) probably was inspired by the historical Ablai-qan of the Western Kazakhs. Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 400.

5 Bely, 64.

6 Maguire and Malmstad, "Notes" in Petersburg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 324.

7 Bely, 65.

8 Ibid, 65. That is, the Battle of Kalka (1223)

in which Cinggis-qan defeated the Russians at the Volga, and the Battle of Tsushima (1905) in which the Japanese inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Russian Imperial Navy.

9 Bely, 65.

10 Ibid, 65. Kulikovo Field meaning the Battle of Kulikovo Polye (1380), which has been interpreted as the final blow by the Muscovites against their former overlords, the Mongol Kipchak qanate (Golden Horde), representing the freedom of Russia from Mongol sovereignty.

11 Bamforth, 41.

12 Bely, 165.

13 Nikolai is first a primordial being, then a cohort of the emperor of China (Apollon), one of Tamerlane's soldiers (Tamerlane supposedly also Apollon), and now a Russian nobleman.

14 Ibid, 166.

15 Ibid, 166.

16 Ibid, 167.

17 Ibid, 166.

18 Bamforth, 39.

19 Maguire and Malmstad, 325.

20 Bamforth, 6-7.

21 Bely, 2.

22 In reference to Nikolai Apollonovich; the metaphor is fitting, as Russia is embodied by the color of Nikolai's foolish uniform and Russia's role in European politics and as a 'Western' Empire.

23 Andrew Wachtel and Ilya Vinitzky, *Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 80.

24 Perdue, 75.

25 Bely, 65.

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3 Ibid. p. 13

4 Ibid. p. 13

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6 Ibid. p. 87

7 Ibid. p. 103

8 Ibid. p. 57

9 Ibid. p. 58

10 Ibid. p. 46

11 Ibid. p. 176

12 Ibid. p. 31

13 Ibid. p. 91

14 Ibid. p. 185

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16 Ibid. p. 67

17 Ibid. p. 67

18 Ibid. p. 72

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24 Ibid. p. 164

25 Ibid. p. 1

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1 Shrayner, Maxim. *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007, p.237. (Anthology)

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3 Mandelstam, p.244.

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10 Kirsanov, p. 373.

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12 Aizman, 120.

13 Aizman, 123.

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15 Aizman, 128.

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3 Ibid, 134.

4 Ibid, 23.

5 Saint-Exupéry, 58.

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