Urban Images and Representations in Europe and beyond during the 20th century

Representations of the Russian metropolises: St. Petersburg – Petrograd – Leningrad and Moscow in 1900 – 1930

Prof. Alexander Shevyrev

Moscow State University, Russia
alexshev@online.ru

By the beginning of the 20th century St. Petersburg and Moscow, two biggest Russian cities, had the formal status of the capitals of the Russian Empire. When in 1712 Peter the Great moved his court to a new city of St. Petersburg, Moscow got a title of a *Primothrone* capital and remained as a place of monarchs' coronation. Though St. Petersburg became a political and administrative centre, Moscow preserved a role of a big trade centre. In the 19th century it became a centre of the national railway system and thus turned into the most important commercial city of Russia.

On March 11, 1918 the Soviet government moved from Petrograd to Moscow, and the latter became the only capital of Russia and later, of the Soviet Union. Petrograd, which had got this Slavonic name just after the beginning of World War I, lost in 1918 the formal status of the capital. Renamed again after Lenin's death in 1924 as Leningrad, the city remained a big industrial city and a great cultural centre of the USSR.

During three centuries of the rivalry the two greatest cities of Russia had been presented in the national discourse as two great opponents: the Russian culture is full of comparative essays on St. Petersburg and Moscow. Each city had been developed different images which were presented in travel guides, city monuments and toponymy. The significant change of the metropolitan narrative took place in the period of 1900 – 1930 just because in the mid of this period the Russian capitals changed their roles while the state changed its ideology.

Travel guides

The image of St. Petersburg in pre-Revolutionary guides was the image of the capital of the greatest country and of the European city full of modern comfort and facilities. One of the most popular travel guides identified St. Petersburg as *"a capital*

of the greatest Empire in Europe, a permanent residence of the Emperor, a centre and a focus of the supreme government, the most important intellectual centre of the Empire, one of the biggest point of national trade and industry, the most populated city of Russia and one of the greatest cities in the world".

The guides also presented the capital as the pattern of the metropolitan comfort: *"Electricity, gas, telephone, water pipe, beautiful pavements, comfortable footways, grand bridges, granite embankments, improved sanitation and other numerous permanent signs of cultural life, which province dreams of, are the common phenomenon for a happy native of St. Petersburg".*

Pre-Revolutionary Moscow was presented in travel guides as a historical city and as centre of the Orthodoxy and of the Russian culture. The guides invite the travellers to visit the Kremlin and numerous monasteries with their old cathedrals, miracle-making icons, saints' relics. Life in Moscow is no less lively than in St. Petersburg, but Moscow fuss much resembles the noise of the Asiatic town. It *"fuses in such boom, which is impossible to hear in any other comfortable city and which gives Moscow immediately an image of "oriental" city in the eyes of foreigners".*

After the Revolution Moscow has got a position of a world capital as since 1918 it was *"a capital of the Soviet Union, an only state with a red banner, a banner of the future international revolution".* Moscow was proclaimed as headquarters of the world revolution and a travel guide pathetically wrote that *"revolutionary proletariats and peasants all over the world are waiting with hope for the news from Red Moscow, they feel a strong liaison with it".*

Soviet ideology was directed to future and was full of historical optimism. Moscow could show its visitors some samples of great social changes. The Soviet travel guides were proud to write about a giant city, and some their paragraphs remind the Guinness book: *"Muscovites eat daily 1 300 000 kilo of bread and if to bake a loaf of all quantity of flour Moscow has spent for last four years, its length will be enough to wrap the Globe along the equator".*

As for Leningrad it had no political significance in its present life, but became a city with great revolutionary past. One of the travel guides tried to give a new metaphor for a historical role of the city: *"Peter the Great cut through "a window to Europe" here, and two centuries later Lenin made a signal from this window for the world social revolution".*

Another attractive feature of city's past was its beauty which was much related with shameful Imperial past. Describing beautiful architecture of the central district on of the guides stressed that one could find in this district the features of the *"city of Emperors, officials, bureaucratism, profit, debauch, crimes"*.

Monuments

By 1900 St. Petersburg had in its squares, gardens, embankments and streets more than 20 sculptural monuments. Seven of them were devoted to the monarchs, seven monuments – to military commanders and state officials and nine – to scientists, writers, poets and a composer. Moscow by the end of the 19th century had only five sculptural monuments and only one of them was devoted to a monarch, while three – to scientists and a poet.

The first 17 years of the 20th century were marked in St. Petersburg with 11 sculptural monuments. Four of them were monarch's monuments and three – of military heroes and commanders. Moscow streets and squares had got during the same period six monuments and only one among them was to a monarch and one – to a military commander.

St. Petersburg celebrated the state memory par excellence. Moscow was in this respect much more linked with the national culture and city history: all the state figures had special relations with Moscow. The difference between the sculptural images of two capitals is well seen in the difference between their sculptural symbols: the Bronze Horseman, Peter the Great, in St. Petersburg and Alexander Pushkin, a national poet, in Moscow.

The Revolution significantly changed the monumental image of both cities. In April of 1918 Vladimir Lenin issued a Decree which ordered to demolish *"the monuments erected in honour of tsars and their servants"* and to develop *"the projects of the monuments which were to celebrate the great days of the Russian socialist revolution"*. A special commission was establish to define which monuments had *"no interest neither from historical, nor from aesthetical point of view"* and deserve to be demolished.

Moscow very soon lost the monuments to both tsars while in Petrograd near all the monuments were preserved. Some were demolished, but monuments to Catherine II, Nicholas I and Alexander III had been considered to be valuable. The losses of other state figures were not too big in Petrograd too.

New revolutionary monuments were erected in both cities. Their number is difficult to count as most of them were made of nondurable materials, such as plaster, cement, wood. But Moscow was a doubtless leader in innovation of its monumental image.

The city got the monuments to German socialists and French revolutionaries, to Russian liberal thinkers and political emigrants, to terrorists and anarchists, etc. The monumental propaganda plan provided cultural enlightenment too, and several new monuments were devoted to Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, to Heinrich Heine and a Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, and others. And in 1925 the first monument to Lenin was erected in Moscow and it remained the only statue of Lenin in the city for several years.

But the main monument to Lenin in Moscow was not a statue, but his Mausoleum. It was constructed in the heart of the city and became a part of a great memorial which was founded just after the Revolution. Since 1925 party leaders, high officials, military commanders were buried either in tombs near the Mausoleum or immured in the Kremlin wall behind it.

Petrograd and then Leningrad has got numerous new monuments too. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, socialists George Plekhanov and Friedrich Lassal, a Russian poet Nicholas Nekrasov and a German scientist Wilhelm Roentgen, and many others were memorised in sculpture. And in 1927 two monuments to Lenin were erected in Leningrad.

Just like Moscow, Leningrad had the memorial of the Revolution too. The Field of Mars became a cemetery for those who perished in the February Revolution, then in the October Revolution and later in the Civil War. In 1919 a great memorial was created in the Field of Mars and it occupied one of the most beautiful sites of the city.

The monumental image of two cities had been developing in the first third of the 20th century in different ways. St. Petersburg strengthened its image of the Imperial centre before the Revolution and preserved the memory of its Imperial past after this turning point in history. With the exception of the memorial in the Field of Mars and some short-life monuments, the city centre had in its streets and squares predominantly old Imperial monuments. Moscow in the early 20th century opposed to St. Petersburg and presented itself as a centre of the Russian culture and as a city with long and great history. The Revolution radically changed the monumental image of

Moscow. Its Imperial past was removed from the memory and Moscow got more cosmopolitan image of the capital of the world revolution.

Toponymy

By the end of the 19th century both St. Petersburg and Moscow had traditional toponymy of quarters, streets, squares, lanes, embankments, bridges, gardens, etc. In St. Petersburg many toponyms were related to the city's military past and present. Specific of Moscow toponymy was frequent usage of church names and of geographical objects (hills, rivers, swamps). Nominations in honour of famous people were still rather rare in both cities.

In St. Petersburg the name of its founder, Peter I, was rather popular and was given to several city objects. The names of two other Emperors and of two Empresses were memorized in the names of streets and squares, bridges and canals. The other persons who were memorized in city's toponyms were two Generals, a poet, a composer and two doctors.

As for Moscow its toponyms by the end of the 19th century had very little relations with famous people. A name of one of the Russian Emperors was memorized in the garden near the Kremlin wall and a popular General-Governor of Moscow gave his name to one of Moscow streets

In the early 20th century the practice of giving names to streets in honour of famous people became more and more widespread. In 1900-1917 St. Petersburg had memorized in its toponymy the names of Peter the Great, many of his officials, famous writers and poets. Moscow was not so fast in memorizing of its heroes. One General and one writer – these were the rare persons who gave their names to a Moscow square and a boulevard.

The Revolution of 1917 resulted in a revolution in cities toponymy. The Bolsheviks decided to radically change the language of toponymy. In the same decree that prescribed to destroy the old monuments it was proposed to give city streets and squares new names which *"reflected ideas and feelings of revolutionary and working Russia"*.

In Petrograd in October 1918, by the first anniversary of the Revolution several streets got names linked with revolutions in history: the Nevsky avenue, a high street, was renamed in the Avenue of the 25th October memorizing the Great October Socialist Revolution, some streets and squares got names of the Russian

revolutionaries, foreign socialists and of abstract concepts (the streets of the Rural Poor).

The next wave of renaming in Petrograd fell on October 1923. The result was the total change of the city toponymy. But there was an innovation in the renaming policy in 1923: it served not only for communist propaganda, but for cultural enlightenment as well. Famous Russian writers, composers, architects were memorised and the enlightened aim of these renaming was obvious: in the name of the streets the profession was indicated (the Writer Chekhov or the Composer Tchaikovsky streets).

In Moscow the majority of the main streets and numerous little streets and lanes preserved their old names. Five central squares got the names of the Revolution, of the Soviets and of the Communist Party officials, several central streets were renamed in honour of the Soviet state leaders as well as of socialists and revolutionaries of the past, but they were not as numerous as in Petrograd. By the end of the 1920-ties Moscow was much less renamed than Leningrad and other cities.

These specific features of the renovation of Moscow toponymy preserved the new Soviet capital much more related with its past than Leningrad. Moscow kept a lot of specific Moscow toponyms and, in the process of the unification of city toponyms all over the country, specific Moscow language still could be heard in the streets of the city. And Leningrad lost a lot of its city image in its toponymy and that was so obvious that in 1944, just after the deblockade of Leningrad, the reversal renaming of the main streets and squares was the award for the heroic city.

Conclusions

The images of St. Petersburg and Moscow much depended on the state power and its ideology. In pre-revolutionary times St. Petersburg was presented as an Imperial capital, as a creation of the Russian Emperors, as a city with splendid past and with the modern European luster. Moscow pretended to be an old capital, a national and religious centre, a city with great history and with genuine Russian spirit.

The Communist ideology much increased the significance of metropolitanism: the capital of the Soviet Union was presented as the world capital, a centre of the world revolution and a leader of social progress. Moscow pretended to be the city of future, but it couldn't find its historical image. As a capital of ancient Russia it had no value for the new ideology. But as a city with multicultural, semi-peasant, semi-

proletarian population, as a semi-European, semi-Oriental city it had developed the image of a people's capital. The monuments of the Imperial past were destroyed, but the new ones created in vanguard style, without links with city history were erected in the environment of a historical city, in the decorations of trade and religious centre. The toponymical text of Moscow in the 1920-ties was rather eclectic too.

And Leningrad was turned into a historical city and developed an image of the cradle of the Revolution. It tried, but couldn't get rid of its Imperial past, because the aesthetical value of its signs was too high. The only text which was easy to convert from Petersburg to Leningrad was toponymy.

By the end of the 1920-ties two Russian capitals stood at the threshold of two opposite processes: Moscow was ready to become the capital of the Soviet Empire and Leningrad was ready to play a role of the historical pattern for Moscow's transformation.