The foundation myth of St. Petersburg in the city guidebooks: Creating heritage through mind and emotions

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ABSTRACT: The essay addresses the aspects of heritagization of St. Petersburg history, analyzing the myth of the city’s foundation from the perspective of the role of emotions and mind in the production of its urban space. I turn to the guidebooks published in St. Petersburg in the eighteenth- to early twentieth centuries to explore the paths that the heritagization took in order to construct the narrative and the image of the former Russian capital.

Keywords: City guidebooks, Emotions and mind, Heritage, Heritagization, St. Petersburg

1 INTRODUCTION: THE HERITAGIZATION OF HISTORY

History conversion into legacy happens in heritagization when certain historical episodes and moments are selected to construct a narrative commemorating and celebrating the past selected to be remembered in the present, which establishes continuity between the historical past and connections with its material artifacts. These artifacts may be art and literary works that belong to the period celebrated today or created for or about that time. They serve as illustrations and evidence of the celebrated past, filling unavoidable narrative gaps and bridging them over those historical episodes that fall out of the representative myth of the past, which is being produced through heritagization. The actual witnesses of the past, such as natural and architectural monuments, sometimes require explanation and preservation and sometimes need to be removed to conceal the past selected to be forgotten. In this essay, I turn to St. Petersburg guidebooks from the three centuries of St. Petersburg history to trace the paths of its heritagization into the most enigmatic and phantasmagoric city of the country.

2 THE FOUNDATION OF ST. PETERSBURG

St. Petersburg is a unique city in many ways, some of them originating in history and the myth of its foundation. The city was started in 1703 as the capital of the future Russian Empire, as the establishment of the country’s new political course, and as annoyance to the “arrogant neighbor,” as was articulated by the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin in his 1833 poem The Bronze Horseman: A St. Petersburg Story. This poetic novel created a narrative of the foundation of St. Petersburg as the “Window to the West” opened by Peter I not only to manifest the victory over Sweden but to declare the beginning of the new country and the new history.

The city lay at the mouth of the Neva River, flowing to the Finnish Gulf of the Baltic Sea, was built by the will of a single man. The landscapes were the least favorable to the establishment of a megapolis,
and St. Petersburg became one of the costliest personal caprices of the Russian Tsar not only by the unprecedented amount of financial investments but by the scale of the direct human sacrifice as well.

The dialectic between the rational and the irrational in the creation of St. Petersburg underlines the whole history of the city’s existence from its very beginning. Peter’s mindful understanding of the urgent need to protect the lands newly gained from Sweden on the one hand, and an obsessive drive to overcome the whole multiplicity of natural, political, and financial challenges in no time and without any hesitation on the other, resulted in a city, which became one of the world’s most fascinating and ambiguous creations of a genius dictator’s brilliant mind, which was driven, at the same time, by his unchained emotions.

Nikolay Karamzin, the Russian historian, and writer of the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, called St. Petersburg a brilliant mistake of Peter I (Karamzin, 1991, pp. 197-199), sharing similar impressions from the city expressed by the French philosopher Denis Diderot after his five-months stay in St. Petersburg in 1773-74 under the invitation of Empress Catherine II the Great. Diderot believed that the capital city, which he described as “unnatural,” should be moved deeper inland, and that its status was to be reduced to a regional sea-port, since keeping St. Petersburg the center of the Russian Empire was like living with a heart out on a fingertip (Mezin, 2012, pp. 70-78; Dzhhabbarov, 2018).

Ever since, St. Petersburg, collecting its wealth and nurturing its beauty, has been expelled to the constant threat from the West, if only to recall the devastation of the nine hundred nights-long Siege by Nazi Germany in the Second World War. The city remained an attractive bait for its enemies, and yet all their efforts to conquer it failed, as it was never defeated nor occupied by external enemies, only if by those raised within its own urban womb.

3 THE SPLIT BETWEEN THE RATIONAL AND THE IRRATIONAL

Fyodor Dostoevsky, engaging with St. Petersburg’s space in his literary works (“Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg,” - a famous literary cliché in Russia), revealed this dialectic between the rational and irrational, the mindful and the psychological in the city’s character calling it “the most fantastic” city, meaning it being the most distant from reality and reason on the one hand, and at the same time regarding it as the most “abstract and intentional city on entire globe” in his Notes from the Underground written in 1864. This ambiguity resulted in St. Petersburg’s specific dehumanizing effect on a “little man” living in the big city that Dostoevsky and other Russian writers, among them Nickolay Gogol’, stressed in their works.

This effect of what Dostoevsky calls “official” or “bureaucratic” St. Petersburg had severe and depressing impact on the state of minds and souls of his characters that were doomed to eternal sufferings and dark sides of human existence by the very urban conditions of the “yellow St. Petersburg,” a metaphor that Dostoevsky used in describing the maddening space of the deserted and soulless city in the hot summer days that had driven Raskolnikov to commit murder in Crime and Punishment (1866). This metaphor is intensified by the symbolic reference that the locals draw to one of the first St. Petersburg mental institutions built in the classical style in the late 1770s by Italian architects Giacomo Quarenghi and Luigi Rusca on the bank of the Fontanka River. The yellow color of its façades was characteristic of St. Petersburg classicism, giving locals associations not only to an architectural style but to the fear of ending up in this institution, as the “yellow house” still means the “madhouse.”

The intentionality of St. Petersburg is indeed one of its most distinguishing features. Unlike most cities that take decades and centuries to grow from a small fortress or a village to a capital, St. Petersburg was planned from the start. Even though the Emperor issued no special decree that transferred the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg, it happened de-facto in 1712, just nine years after its foundation, once all state and governmental institutions moved from Moscow or were newly re-established in St. Petersburg.

The city that was founded as a fortress to protect the lands from Sweden in the ongoing Northern war had to develop the whole complexity of its urban organism very fast, including the infrastructure of defense, the communication systems with a new sea-port at its core, the plants and factories that supplied the construction sites and provided for the city’s everyday life, and the gloss of the European capital. Peter the Great wanted to observe an immediate metamorphosis of these lands from a deserted swamp into a paradise of his own imagination in no time. He was creating his myth of Russia that had not existed before him and that neither existed after

![Figure 2. Benjamin Patersen. View to the spit of the Vasilevsky Island and the Stock exchange, 1807. From the Hermitage museum collection.](image)
him. The city of St. Petersburg was being created along with the myth of St. Petersburg.

4 THE PRACTICALITY OF MIND AND THE EMOTIONS OF PASSION

For Peter the Great, the city’s foundation did not mean merely the new outlay to the Baltic sea with convenient and well-developed military and trade routes. It was as much a practical step towards opening a window to Europe as an emotional gesture of breaking with the previous history of the country that he inherited and that he saw reflected in the image of Moscow, which was object of Peter’s personal disaffection due to some dramatic obstacles of his childhood.

By founding St. Petersburg, Peter wanted to start from scratch, leaving his city to the next generations as a record of his reforms, as a story of his personal success. The foundation of St. Petersburg began the new page of Russian history, and it required a new historical narrative to be developed immediately to transform the history of St. Petersburg into the new national heritage. It should have become the new point of reference, the new origin of Russian statehood inseparably connected to the Emperor’s name. The myth of St. Petersburg’s foundation initiated by Peter I, who came to an appropriated and conquered land to begin the new history of Russia, received its further development in Russian literary tradition, which in the nineteenth century was given a poetic form by Alexander Pushkin in “The Bronze Horseman,” bringing the myth of St. Petersburg’s foundation to the masses as a valuable and unquestionable legacy. The myth of the origins of St. Petersburg that was established on barren marshy soils as an act of Peter’s passionate will symbolize the beginning of the new country and the new history, and since the nineteenth century has become a celebrated national heritage.

5 CITY GUIDEBOOKS AS THE TOOLS OF HERITAGIZATION

The genre of guidebooks falls somewhere between the fiction literature, the fables, the memoirs, the travel notes, the statistical reports, the historical studies, and the advertising booklets, usually matching neither of these. Yet each edition pretends it provides with the trustworthy and mindful representation of the city it represents, at the same time promising an emotional experience and impressions, at the end inevitably failing to satisfy its reader’s expectations for the both.

However, to study the mythologization of a city’s history, guidebooks are valuable sources. They produced and recorded the heritage for the historical periods when they were published and, at the same time, once out in the hands of readers, they become the artifacts of the heritage they helped to construct. The authority of a guidebook to lead the reader before, during, and after her visit to an urban space is enormous as the guidebook directs readers’ minds and emotions towards a particular perception of the space, setting a historical perspective and adjusting an ideological optics on historical monuments. Every guidebook selects and processes the information it provides about the city, choosing the most important and representative of that space. Guidebooks draw our attention to some sites with selected stories and descriptions and articulate and propagate the ideology of spaces that we explore. While certain places are highlighted in a guidebook, other memory sites and their histories remain outside our reach simply because they are not mentioned.

There is usually no visible discrepancy between a story told and an object represented in a guidebook. A constructed narrative fills a historical object, and this infiltration turns it into an object of heritage. We usually overlook this manipulative and administrative moment of heritagization for the sake of the guilty pleasure of consuming the entertaining continuity uncritically that a good guidebook introduces, hence buying a spoiled history wrapped in the shiny tinsel of heritage.

The heritage is hence administrable, as long as it is distinguished from history, which is understood as a domain where some evidence of the truth resides, and the guidebooks surely offer to explore. David Lowenthal, a prominent scholar of heritage studies, outlined a ridge between the history and the heritage in his book The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History: (1998). Today, after two decades of pursuing the total commercialization of heritage into the tourist industry, various guidebooks are significant; distinguishing between history and heritage is considered no less than an axiomatic suggestion and a commonplace. Even though separation of heritage from history is subjected to marketing and instrumentalization, and while, to the note by Lowenthal, “these two routes to the past are habitually confused with each other,” his definition of the difference between the history and the heritage remains relevant.

In fact, heritage is not history at all; while it borrows from and enlivens historical study, heritage is not an inquiry into the past but a celebration of it, not an effort to know what actually happened but a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes (1998, p. X).

City guidebooks as the tools of heritagization of the past contribute to its mythologization and stereotypization. Heritagization in the popular literary form of a guidebook directs our attention to material objects that testify to specific historical moments that find themselves in compliance with the ‘present-day purposes.’ Even though such heritagization may
be distortive to history, the objects selected for observation link the ‘correct’ episodes of history, as in montage, to produce a continuity necessary for a historical narrative identified as representative of the city.

6 ST. PETERSBURG GUIDEBOOKS: FROM ACADEMIC STUDIES TO SENTIMENTAL JOURNEYS

What is said about the genre of tourist guidebooks is undoubtedly relevant to the hundreds of editions published on St. Petersburg in the city and beyond its borders. And yet, the paths of history that the city had to undertake produced a heritage of extremely high and intensive ambiguity, imprinted on the pages of St. Petersburg guidebooks of various epochs. Thus, the St. Petersburg guidebook study of s in their continuous and chronological sequence draws a fascinating timeline of the city’s representation and imagining, of heritagization of its past and the mythologization of its present.

The first guidebooks on St. Petersburg appeared some decades after its foundation and served the city’s official descriptions and statistical reports, at the same time following the European tradition of a sentimental journey and travel writing of the era of Enlightenment. One of the founders of this genre was Laurence Sterne, who wrote A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy, first published in 1768, initiating the genre fashion. In St. Petersburg, the first publication that outlined the standards and criteria for guidebooks for many decades ahead appeared in 1779, during the reign of Empress Catherine II the Great. Andrey Ivanovich Bogdanov, a historian and bibliographer of the Russian Academy of Sciences, had collected and processed enormous data on the history of St. Petersburg and the various aspects of the capital’s life since its foundation in 1703 and till 1751. He created the encyclopedia of the city, giving equal attention to its historical background, the state of industries, governmental institutions, geographical features, descriptions of natural landscapes, weather, of the citizens’ characters, traditions of various classes, celebrations, and statistical information, medical institutions, and economy. The Historical, Geographical, and Topographical Description of St. Petersburg from its foundation in 1703 till 1751 (Bogdanov, 1779) was created with the pedantry of a bibliographer and archival researcher whose main goal was to introduce an objective and rational study that could be used as a source on the history of St. Petersburg for many decades ahead. At the same time, Bogdanov, a pioneer in the field that in some hundred years developed into a sustainable research area of “Peterburgology,” had no illusions on the urgency of his work when he finished it, admitting that “this historical description of mine, seemingly not very necessary, yet will be of a need to the next generation and will be called at their service” (Pukinsky, 1974, p. 224). Bogdanov’s fundamental study that was filled with love for the new heart of the Russian Empire and with fascination before the miracle of its unprecedented beauty that grew in a few decades in front of his eyes was first published nearly thirty years later, in 1779, long past the author’s death.

Bogdanov’s work set a high standard for further authors, and the following guidebook published by an academic historian, Doctor of Medicine, and scientist Johann Gottlieb Georgy, in 1794, was introduced to Empress Catherine already as a precious and appreciated gift. Georgy attracted the whole team of researchers and experts from various departments to collect data on all sides of St. Petersburg’s life.

Georgy engages with the history of the foundation of St. Petersburg that was outlined by the struggle with Sweden for the lands that Peter turned to Eldorado immediately after winning them. He describes the factories that were founded to supply the city and the institutions that were developed; he was proud of the beautiful palaces and architectural ensembles and provided with the detailed description of the treasures of the Hermitage – the world’s top collection of paintings, jewelry, and ancient rarities that was established by Catherine the Great in her Winter Palace in St. Petersburg.

Figure 3. View to the Royal winter palace and the spit of Vasilyevsky Island. Photo by Grigory Brazhnik. Courtesy of the photographer.

And yet Georgy, an experienced scientist of the Enlightenment, a celebrated member of Academies of Sciences of Russia and Prussia, a member of the Free Economic Society in St. Petersburg and The Berlin Society of Investigators of Nature places his main focus on his own impressions from the life in the city instead of a scientific data. He expresses his emotions freely when, being a world explorer, he finds St. Petersburg one of the most liberal places on Earth, where foreigners live together with the Russians.
enjoying the freedom of enterprise, starting their businesses and affairs and observing international industrialists growing rich while enjoying the benefits set by Peter I for the foreign merchants to attract international capital to the city and stimulate the economy (Georgy, 1794, p. 164).

He is fascinated by what he finds as the absolute freedom with compliance to the law that exists in St. Petersburg, characterizing citizens by their endless hospitality, the tendency towards constant changes and everything new, as well as by their passion for regalia and high social status (Georgy, 1794, p. 565). He notes that the foreigners benefit from the unlimited religious tolerance that Peter I stimulated by preserving the right of all non-Russian Orthodox permanent and temporary residents to worship their religions and build their churches (Georgy, 1794, p. 661).

Even though Georgy’s study is written in Russian in an entertaining style to all Russian society classes, his primary addressee was the Empress in a role of a voyager. Georgy imagined Catherine the Great came to the city from far away and needed to understand the nature of this brilliant environment; hence the shift towards an idealized image of the city and the focus on the benefits that were enjoyed mainly by the upper and middle classes of the Russian society, which, it should be noted, constituted a large part of the population of the capital at that time.

This tendency towards addressing a stroller, a stranger, whether she comes from provincial Russia or a foreign land, started prevailing in the city guidebooks since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The existence of the eighteenth-century literature corpus on the history and highlights of St. Petersburg that had set the guidelines for this kind of edition continued in the format of multi-hundred-pages encyclopedias for travelers and locals that could be used for decades. Yet, the targeted audience was not exclusively the royal court and the nobility anymore, but the people of all classes, as guidebooks started giving tips for the variety of places to eat, stay, and spend free time depending on the reader’s budget and the class without offending those of the ‘humble financial generosity.’

The 1843 Guidebook on St. Petersburg and Its Suburbs by Ivan Pushkaryov already represents the classical edition that fully employed idealized stereotypes on the freedoms, tolerance, and hospitality of St. Petersburg citizens, the happy life of the foreigners, and the luxury of the capital’s dolce vita. The accent shifts from the statistical data on health, industrial production, and historical background to the contemporary urban space in all its complexity. However, the St. Petersburg foundation myth, born on the empty marshy soils by the will of Peter the Great, was already well incarnated into the city’s legacy.

These trends remained and developed throughout the nineteenth century, adjusting to the growing flow of business travelers and tourists from various regions of the Russian Empire and the world, which increased dramatically at the turn of the century due to modern communication means.

At the beginning of the twentieth century and until the 1917 Revolutions, tourism was a well-established industry in St. Petersburg and many other parts of the Russian Empire. A publisher, a tour guide, and entrepreneur Grigory Moskvich produced a series of guidebooks on different Russian cities and regions, offering package tours around the country for various classes and budgets. In the last year before the Revolution, he wrote and published a guidebook with a classical title Petrograd and Its Environs (Moskvich, 1916) as St. Petersburg was renamed into Petrograd, which was a mere translation of its German name into Russian in response to the break of the World War I. Along with providing the detailed information on where to stay and dine, on how to negotiate the cost of a cab and save on the tips to servants, he throws his readers on to the Nevsky prospect — the main street and the face of the city right upon their arrival to the central train station. In a lively and emotional manner, Moskvich describes the move, the drive, and the noise on the Nevsky, letting his readers fill the pulse of Petrograd, the main nerve of the country (Moskvich, 1916, p. III).

Figure 4. View to the Nevsky prospect. Photo by Irina Seits.

7 CONCLUSION: GONE WITH THE WIND OF CHANGE

Nevertheless, what fascinates me the most in all guidebooks of this time is that none of them felt a breeze of a catastrophe that in a matter of months grew on the wild wind of the Bolshevik Revolution, that stormed away the image of the city that was created through the minds and emotions, blowing the
city’s memory of itself down to the ashes. After the October Revolution of 1917, the paradigm change was so enormous that it burnt down all bridges between the new city of Leningrad and the old glorious St. Peters­burg-Petrograd. Between 1917 and up until the end of the civil war in 1922, guidebooks were not published. The history of St. Petersburg was at large prohibited, and its heritage was destroyed to the ground as it was flesh and blood of the defeated Imperialism. The new foundation myth of Leningrad was fabricated in the 1920s, which required building an entirely new vocabulary and finding the new points of reference to rest the new heritage upon. In the following decades of the Soviet power, the re-appropriation of the Leningrad’s heritage revealed the very complex and challenging nature of ‘the most unnatural city’ that, despite all its ambiguity, remained a brilliant creation of mind and emotions, resurrecting its heritage from oblivion once again at the end of the twentieth century. However, that is yet a different story and a different myth.

At present, the St. Petersburg foundation myth formed in the first two centuries of its existence is well protected, maintained, and administrated. It is itself a heritage. Even though this myth is distinguished from the historical truth, it is nonetheless valuable on its own account. If to cite Lowenthal again, “heritage and history are closely linked but they serve quite different purposes.” (1998, p. 104). The purpose of the guidebooks of all times is to introduce a city’s highlights and lifestyles and to glorify an appropriate and relevant past, which itself serves as an introduction and the beginning to the glorious present, establishing time bridges between then and now, and providing with material evidence to the continuity or inherited legacy of present affairs, addressing both minds and emotions of their possessors.

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