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Bridges: Symbols of St. Petersburg

St. Petersburg is a place where the culture, lifestyle, and architecture are profoundly different from other Russian cities. To the casual observer St. Petersburg looks more European than Russian. The difference is no accident because St. Petersburg was designed that way. Strong European influences intermingled with Russian features are easily observed in the design of the numerous bridges that connect the city's forty-two islands. The bridges of St. Petersburg are complex. They were constructed to ease everyday travel problems the city's residents faced. As time passed, however, the bridges arguably became a symbol of the city. In St. Petersburg I had the opportunity to see first hand the cultural and symbolic value of these bridges. Although the city has many bridges, the focus of this paper is on three of the most popular bridges spanning the Neva River—Palace Bridge, Liteinii Bridge, and Trinity Bridge. These bridges illustrate the modern day symbolic and cultural importance attached to them through their use as commercial images, their perception by the city's residents, and their use in a variety of artistic endeavors. As recognizable symbols of St. Petersburg, the function of these bridges has become much more important than originally intended.

St. Petersburg: A Short History

Before one can begin to understand what the bridges represent in St. Petersburg society and culture today, one must examine the city's history. How and why did the city emerge and what effects did this have on the construction and

eventual importance of these structures. St. Petersburg was the undertaking of Peter the Great, an idealistic Russian tsar who wanted to create a Russian capital that mirrored the architecture and culture of the West. When Peter set out to accomplish this vision he chose a site along the Neva River. St. Petersburg, named after St. Peter, was to become Peter's proverbial "window to the West." The geography of the swampy area that Peter had chosen to settle would eventually determine the evolution and expansion of the city.

Peter had travelled abroad to study shipbuilding in the West and fancied himself a sailor. His studies and love of the water caused him to envision a city in which the people would commute via boat, as they did in Venice or Amsterdam. For this reason, he did not want bridges in the city. As time passed, however, the demand for bridges increased until it was too great to ignore. To alleviate this demand, the tsars of the mid-nineteenth century constructed the first bridge in St. Petersburg. After the first permanent bridge was completed, the flourishing city constructed more and eventually boasted the most bridges in the world. Today conservative estimates put the number in St. Petersburg at around 340, while other sources estimate the city has over 500 bridges. Of these 340 bridges, the most noteworthy and easily recognizable are Trinity Bridge, Palace Bridge, and Liteinii Bridge.

Arguably the most beautiful bridge in St. Petersburg, the Trinity Bridge was built in 1903. It connects Troitskaia Square with Kamennnoostrovskii Prospekt. The original design for Trinity was chosen in an international competition and belonged to the French architect Gustave Eiffel. However, his design was never implemented

and the committee in charge of constructing the bridge chose a different design by the French company Batignole. Many tours of St. Petersburg as well as many residents often mention that the famous French architect Eiffel designed the bridge, but this is incorrect. The ironwork of the railings and the decorative lamps adorned on the top with three lights complement its metal design and add to its overall beauty (Guzevich). These decorations, in conjunction with the symmetry of the bridge, have led to the claim that it is the most beautiful in St. Petersburg.

The Palace Bridge was constructed in 1916 and connects the road leading to Palace Square and Stock Market Square on Vasilevskii Island. The Palace Bridge replaced St. Isaac's pontoon bridge and has had numerous additions since it was built. In 1939, the metal and granite bridge was updated with an iron railing. In 1957 parapets were added and the bridge was completely overhauled in 1978. Due to the bridge's location, its height is restricted so that sites such as the Peter and Paul Fortress, the Winter Palace, and the Hermitage can be seen (Guzevich). It is the most popular commercial representation (as far as bridges are concerned) of St. Petersburg, most likely due to its surroundings.

Constructed in 1879, the Liteinii Bridge connects Liteinii Prospekt with Akedimik Lebedev Street. Like the Palace Bridge, Liteinii replaced a pontoon bridge. It was renamed in 1903 to commemorate the memory of Tsar Alexander II, who had been assassinated in 1881. Fifteen years later, however, the bridge would be once again known as the Liteinii Bridge. At first, Liteinii was illuminated using ornate lanterns and candles, whose design complemented its iron railings. Eventually, it became the first bridge to be lit with electrical power. The iron railings featuring the

coat of arms were removed during Liteinii's most recent renovation (Guzevich). This has made Liteinii one of the more plainly decorated bridges in the city's center.

As previously mentioned, Peter the Great desired a city full of citizens who were comfortable with the water. In order to make this dream a reality, he eschewed the building of bridges. Tsars after Peter the Great built bridges for several reasons: bridges made it easier to cross the Neva River (previously, residents had walked across the river when it was frozen or used pontoon bridges during the summer) and the architecture and granite facing, in conjunction with the city's granite embankments, provided St. Petersburg with a sense of continuity. One hundred and fifty years later, bridges have become a de facto symbol of the city.

Bridges as a Commercial Product

Walking along Nevskii Prospekt, St. Petersburg's main thoroughfare, one encounters a number of souvenir shops. Upon inspection of the items inside, it becomes clear that bridges are the commercial item for St. Petersburg. Shops sell pictures and paintings of the most beautiful bridges, like Trinity, or common scenes such as images of the spire of the Peter and Paul Cathedral between the open spans of the Palace Bridge. The icon atop the spire of the Peter and Paul Cathedral is an official symbol of St. Petersburg. Photographs of this emblem when the Palace Bridge is open are very common on calendars, paintings, and postcards. Images of the bridges can also be found on stamps and advertisements. Many shops also offer small trinkets, such as glass blowings of the most famous bridges when they are raised. Bridges featured in advertisements are especially popular during the White

Nights, a period during the summer months when the sun sets for only a few hours. For instance, when I attended the ballet at the Mariinskii Theater, the program announcing the performance times had an image of a raised St. Petersburg bridge superimposed on the background. In another instance, the advertisement for St. Petersburg on the back cover of a magazine containing the various train routes from St. Petersburg to Moscow was a picture of the open Palace Bridge. In fact, the open bridges are a symbol of the White Nights.

The tourism industry in St. Petersburg has also found a way to capitalize on the spectacle of the open bridges. During the White Nights, people come from all over Russia and the world to watch the bridges rise. Thousands line the embankments near the Winter Palace in order to watch the Palace Bridge open and admire the iconic image of St. Petersburg. A number of companies also offer tourists the opportunity to take a boat ride on the Neva and watch from the water as the bridges around the city open one by one. The timing of the event can be compared to that of a daily show at an amusement park. I went on this tour and the sights that can be seen from the water are absolutely breathtaking. It provides a different perspective and allows the viewer to watch from almost underneath. This commercialization of St. Petersburg's bridges provides tourists with a unique opinion that differs from the one held by the city's residents. Tourists see the artistically lit bridges at night and admire their beauty. In an interview, historian Yurii Mikhailovich notes that for tourists "this is exotic. Nowhere in Europe do the [famous] bridges open." Though aware of the bridges' beauty, St. Petersburg residents are intimately familiar with the problems associated with them. This

creates an interesting schism between feelings held by tourists and those held by residents.

Local Sentiment

Although proud of their bridges, St. Petersburg residents have become accustomed to certain inconveniences. I had the opportunity to interview two people concerning their feelings about the bridges. The first person I interviewed was Yurii Mikhailovich, a renowned historian in St. Petersburg. Yurii offers a unique perspective due to his profession. The second was Irina Valerievna Levental, who works in the philological department at St. Petersburg State University. Because she works on Vasilievskii Island, Irina witnesses the traffic problems associated with the bridges on a daily basis.

According to Yurii, the bridges are not really a symbol of St. Petersburg because they are a “young phenomenon.” In his opinion, the city’s symbols are water, sky, and stone. Yurii is right in that the bridges are a young phenomenon, but St. Petersburg is also young. It is different from all other Russian cities by design. Many of the bridges across the Neva River are faced in granite to match the embankments that Catherine the Great had constructed in an effort to bring continuity to the city. The embankments partially lined the Neva by 1787 (Dixon 265). And within sixty-five years, the first permanent bridge had been built across the Neva. Now the bridges act as the “relationships between the shores” and provide a beautiful view of the water, stone, and sky of St. Petersburg. Yurii also touches on the traffic problems caused by the bridges in the center of St. Petersburg. Such

bottlenecks are further compounded by the city's geography (E. Abner, personal communication, June 2014).

On the other hand, Irina views the bridges as a symbol of St. Petersburg because they are often sold as representations of the city. As mentioned earlier, the city's bridges are on numerous advertisements and souvenirs. Irina believes that although the bridges are sometimes inconvenient, the local residents are proud of the city's world renown.

Yurii and Irina are familiar with the traffic problems associated with the bridges in the city center. They both agree that attempting to cross the bridges at certain times of the day is a nightmare. Originally the bridges were intended to be more convenient than the pontoon bridges used during the summer or the frozen surface of the Neva during the winter. Initially, the bridges made it easier for people to move around the city. As the city grew into a metropolis with a population of over five million, the bridges became less convenient and more bothersome. Because she works on Vasilievskii Island, Irina is familiar with the congestion caused by the bridges. It is not uncommon for her to spend hours after work waiting to cross from Vasilievskii to the neighboring island. Such traffic jams and the raising of the bridges at night to allow ships through to the city have an interesting affect on everyday life in St. Petersburg. Locals must schedule their lives around the state of the bridges, dealing with traffic jams during the day and openings at night. Indeed, I encountered this problem twice during my stay in the city: once when I was returning from the city after watching a late night World Cup match, and another time when I was going to the airport. I had to leave my apartment seven hours before my scheduled

departure time to ensure that I would not miss my flight because of the open bridges. Irina also mentioned that husbands who come home late at night frequently use the raised bridges as an excuse. The number of vehicles, geography, and lack of bridges in the middle of the city exacerbate the traffic problems. Interestingly, Yurii and Irina seem to believe that restricting the number of cars in the city center would provide a better solution to the problem than constructing another bridge (Abner, personal communication, July 2014).

Bridges in Literature, Film, and Culture

Although the original purpose of the bridges was to connect St. Petersburg's forty-two islands and bring the city together, artists quickly capitalized on the bridges and used them symbolically to represent their own ideals.

Literary works by a number of authors mention the bridges, such as Nikolai Gogol' and Fyodor Dostoevskii. For instance, Gogol's St. Petersburg tales focus on daily life in the city while melding realism with mystical events. The characters are often aware of supernatural events occurring yet seem indifferent to them. This focus on reality with interludes of mysticism extends from the myth of Petersburg itself—it is said that St. Petersburg was a city that fell from the sky. Gogol' capitalized on the mystical nature of the city's creation and utilizes it in many of his short stories. It is not uncommon to find the city's bridges mentioned in Gogol's stories. Not only do they provide a familiar setting for his audience, but they also act as a powerful literary symbol. For example, in "The Nose," Gogol' uses the pontoon bridge that Palace Bridge replaced as an early setting in the story. When the barber

who finds Kovalev's nose attempts to throw it into the Neva from the bridge, he is stopped by a police officer (Gogol'). It is important that this scene occurs on the bridge and not on the embankment or the shore. The bridge represents the supernatural connection between the real city and the absurd, mystical events that occur in the story. This is just one of the instances in which a Russian author symbolically uses the bridges of St. Petersburg.

Bridges are utilized in a number of Russian films as well, providing an important symbol for the audience. For instance, Sergei Eisenstein used the Palace Bridge in his 1927 film *October: 10 Days that Shook the World (Oktiabr')*. The scene depicts the decision by the Tsarist government to raise the Palace Bridge during the unrest in 1917 to prevent peasants from crossing into Palace Square and furthering their revolutionary aims. Eisenstein's focus on the open Palace Bridge is not a mere portrayal of the event that occurred; it acts as an important cinematic symbol for the audience that watched this propaganda film a decade after the October Revolution. The open Palace Bridge symbolizes the detachment between the Russian revolutionaries and the inattentive aristocratic classes (Eisenstein). The lasting effect of this symbol can be seen in the Soviet-era film *The Unbelievable Adventures of Italians in Russia (Neveroiatnye prikliucheniia ital'iantsev v Rossii, dir. El'dar Riazanov and Franco Prosperi, 1973)*, in which the same image of an open Palace Bridge is showcased during a chase scene. This scene pays homage to Eisenstein's original use of the bridge. Its use fifty years later demonstrates the lasting effects of the symbol. It may also be that the use of this symbol in 1974 symbolized the disconnection between the Soviet Union and the West.

The bridges of St. Petersburg have also been the center of a number of cultural events. In 2013 a film festival was held at Trinity Bridge called GraFFFest 2013. A number of animated shorts were shown at the festival “showcasing life in the big city (Rutlan and Gazdyuk). The films were projected onto a screen on the raised span of Trinity Bridge. Simultaneously, the films and audience in St. Petersburg were broadcast onto a bridge in Amsterdam. Thousands of people turned out in both cities. Thus the Trinity Bridge, already one of the most beautiful bridges in the world, became much more than a connection between two shores. Not only did Trinity Bridge act a screen, but the festival itself was also a proverbial bridge between two different places and markedly diverse cultures.

In another instance, the self-proclaimed radical street-art group Voina, whose goal is to protest the Russian government through provocative art, also used Liteinii Bridge. In 2010 the group whitewashed a phallic symbol onto Liteinii Bridge in twenty-three seconds (Bown). The group drew the symbol as the bridge was opening and it remained erect, facing the local Federal Security Office (FSB) headquarters for hours. The artists made use of a popular and practical bridge in downtown St. Petersburg to convey their point. Though the bridge’s location was obviously convenient for Voina’s purposes, perhaps there is a deeper symbolic meaning. Just as Eisenstein used the open bridge to symbolize the disconnection between the revolutionaries and the aristocracy, it is possible that Voina’s stunt with the bridge had the added effect of representing a more current divide—between the citizens and the “oppressive” security services. In a rather interesting

turn, an organization supported by the Russian Culture Ministry awarded this piece of art a large sum of prize money.

The bridges of St. Petersburg are architectural wonders recognized across the globe. Originally admired for their beauty, the bridges have come to encompass more than just their functional aspects. With time, they have become symbols of the city itself—as well known as the spire atop the Peter and Paul Fortress. The bridges are commercial symbols for the city, painted on a variety of souvenirs. The bridges also permeate the daily lives of the city's residents as they face a number of inconveniences that cause schedule changes. Finally, the bridges are cultural symbols used by all kinds of artists. It is for this reason that I believe the bridges of St. Petersburg, though not officially, are symbols of the city.

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