

Jessica Tiblin

A Tale of Two Parks: The Alexander Garden and Divo Ostrov

From tsardom to communism to the covert regime of today, Russia has suffered through a century of dramatic political, economic, and cultural changes. This turmoil is manifested in the city of St. Petersburg— full of visible representations of the changes that have occurred over the last century. In this paper I will discuss these changes as represented in two parks in St. Petersburg—the Alexander Garden and Divo Ostrov. At two extremes of the spectrum, the Alexander Garden is a historical and cultural fixture, while Divo Ostrov is a newly built amusement park. I posit that these two parks embody the duality and eternal conflict that has been present in St. Petersburg from its conception. St. Petersburg tries to live both in the past, as seen with the Alexander Garden, and the present, as with Divo Ostrov.

These parks can be viewed as a microcosm of St. Petersburg—and Russia, for that matter—and are polar opposites that exist within the same body. Geographical, etymological, and temporal contexts have shaped the parks and the public reception of them. While the Alexander Garden has been a fixture in St. Petersburg for over a century, Divo Ostrov is a new attraction. Divo Ostrov lies at the edge of St. Petersburg, while the Alexander Garden is in the heart of the city. Even the names of the two parks reveal their cultural context. In discussing these elements, I will draw upon my personal experiences as well as external sources.

The Alexander Garden, or Aleksandrovskii sad, lies behind the Admiralty, parallel to the Neva River. It was designed in 1805 and constructed from 1872-1874

over what had been Admiralty Square. The garden owes its name to Tsar Alexander II, whose aristocratic company frequently traversed the park and exchanged gossip before the Russian Revolution. At the close of the nineteenth century, statues of prominent Russian cultural figures, such as writers Mikhail Lermontov and Nikolai Gogol', were installed throughout the park ("Alexander Garden").

Divo Ostrov, which translates as "Island of Wonder," is located at the edge of St. Petersburg, on Krestovskii Island in Petrogradskii District. Officially opened in May 2003, the Western-style amusement park boasts attractions that appeal to all types of park-goers, particularly the most adventurous. In the same way that many architectural and cultural fixtures represent something greater than what they seem at face value, Divo Ostrov can be understood in terms of what it implies about Russian culture. Not only is Divo Ostrov truly an island of wonder, but also of fantasy.

Today Divo Ostrov has a greater presence in St. Petersburg. Google ratings for the Alexander Garden and Divo Ostrov tell a powerful story: both parks have received ratings of 4.7 out of 5 stars, yet Divo Ostrov has 167 reviews while Alexander Garden has a mere 32 reviews. Although this disparity results from several different causes, it can be seen more broadly as a phenomenon of cultural and economic collapse: "One concrete and immediate consequence [of the radical economic reforms introduced in early 1992] was the displacement of cultural objects by a wider range of consumer goods in the retail outlets that proliferated..." (Condee 130). Another scholar notes that "post-Soviet popular culture is less distinctive than Soviet popular culture was" (Edelman).

Location and Aesthetics



Figure 1: Alexander Garden and the Admiralty, Aerial View

The simplest starting point for analysis is geographic location. The Alexander Garden lies in the heart of St. Petersburg, behind the Admiralty and parallel to the Neva River. It is surrounded on all sides by buildings and monuments of historical and cultural significance: the

Admiralty building, the Bronze Horseman statue and Senate Square, and St. Isaac's Cathedral. The park's location ties it to the state.

Despite its central location, the Alexander Garden has been pushed to the wayside in recent years. When I walked through Alexander Garden this summer, it felt as though it were an ordinary park in St. Petersburg. Catriona Kelly describes what St. Petersburg style used to convey: "Among Westerners, the words 'Petersburg style' conjure up an existence of supreme refinement, perhaps in some

neo-

Past



Figure 2: Alexander Garden, Ground View

appeal

classical palace overlooking the Fontanka" (Kelly, *Shadows of the* 63). Although the statues and fountains adhere to this sense of refinement, the park loses its

when compared to the allures

of Western extravagance. The aesthetics of Divo Ostrov are as far from “Petersburg Style” as possible.

Divo Ostrov is situated on Krestovsii Island, far from the city’s historical core. Although this literal distance is an important factor, it has implicit consequences as well; the distance between Divo Ostrov and the heart of St. Petersburg translates to symbolic distance. Divo Ostrov is what it is precisely because it lies out of range from the cultural, state, and historical influence that comes with the city center of St. Petersburg. Much like in the Russian Empire, the periphery comes with a certain level of freedom. Divo Ostrov is a fantasy because it is away from the realities of St. Petersburg.

When I walked into Divo Ostrov this summer, I felt as though I had been transported to a different world. In contrast to the grey hues of much of central St. Petersburg, Divo Ostrov was swathed in colors. Instead of tall buildings, I was surrounded by tall attractions and rides, many of which were better than those at the amusement park near my home in Virginia. For a moment, I even forgot that I was in Russia—and this is precisely the point. Divo Ostrov does not feel Russian, but rather it feels Western. This might have been due to the architecture and rides, which differed so starkly from the rest of St. Petersburg and Russia, but it is more likely that Divo Ostrov emits this “Western” vibe because that is what its creators intended.

The branding of Divo Ostrov is Western in style. Figure 3 (see page 5) depicts the logos of Divo Ostrov and Disney respectively. Despite Disney’s copyright on its logo and font, the two logos are identical. Figures 4 and 5 show a poster

advertisement and a map of the park respectively. These images depict the park as being upbeat and exciting, as a place where everyone has fun.

The issue of branding relates more directly to Divo Ostrov as a “Western” park, rather than a Russian institution. Birgit Beumers describes how Western advertising affected Post-Soviet Russia:

[Western] Advertising therefore showed a dream world; as such, it replaced the ideological propaganda of Soviet times with “propaganda” for Western consumer goods, replacing the socialist value system with a value system of achievement of a different type: consumerism and capitalism (“Consumer Culture”).

Thus Post-Soviet Russia actively prized Western goods over Russian goods. This emphasis on consumerism is what produced the Western-style amusement park, Dino Ostrov. Ultimately, Dino Ostrov embodies the part of St. Petersburg that is hurtling toward the future and disregarding the past.

Names

Though names can be easy to overlook, they act as reflections of the history and cultural context in which the subject was conceived. The two parks have very different names: Alexander Garden and Divo Ostrov. These names come with their own set of associations.

Alexander Garden is named in honor of Alexander II. This alone links the park to what St. Petersburg used to stand for—history, aristocracy, and the state. The Alexander Garden has ties to Soviet history as well. From 1918-1989, the park

was renamed the Maxim Gorkii Workers' Garden ("Alexander Garden"), in honor of one of the founders of Socialist Realism. Ultimately, the Alexander Garden epitomizes how St. Petersburg is hyper-concerned with its past.

By contrast, Divo Ostrov embodies the opposite ideals. The amusement park's title translates to "Island of Wonder" and it stands for everything that the Alexander Garden is not. Whereas the name "Alexander Garden" evokes regality and history, "Divo Ostrov" channels a Western vibe of fantasy and decadence. Compared to the Alexander Garden, Divo Ostrov seems hedonistic with its extravagant attractions and loud colors.

Most importantly, the Alexander Garden exemplifies a shift from public to private life. While Alexander Garden represents a St. Petersburg that remains stuck in a past and that is characterized by public life. Divo Ostrov represents a version different version of St. Petersburg, one that is hurtling toward the future and toward consumerism.

The Temporal Context

As mentioned earlier, the Alexander Garden and Divo Ostrov correspond to separate temporal frameworks. The Alexander Garden harkens back to nineteenth and twentieth century Russia, while Divo Ostrov revels in the present. The temporal contexts of these parks add yet another layer of meaning to the understanding of them in the broader context of the culture of St. Petersburg.

By its name and history, the Alexander Garden draws upon Tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia for substance and interpretation. The park is rooted in the

aristocracy, though the Soviet regime attempted to supplant it with workers' enterprise.

Divo Ostrov tells a much different story. Everything about Divo Ostrov, from its construction just over a decade ago to its founding as a private profit entity to its thrill-seeking nature hints at a new Russia. Furthermore, Divo Ostrov represents Russia moving forward heedlessly, in a similar fashion to the leaps and bounds that the country made during the eras of Peter the Great and Josef Stalin. Divo Ostrov represents Post-Soviet Russia, as it is eager to leave its past behind and forge ahead to the future. As Beumers notes, the collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound impact on the culture of Russia for several reasons. She writes:

The Soviet Union had neither a proper cultural industry nor a consumer market... When the Soviet system collapsed in 1991, a shift from the ideological to the commercial culture took place. Globalization fully hit the New Russia and exposed it to all the trash and commercial culture that people had known only through negative propaganda ("Introduction").

Thus Divo Ostrov fits among the greater arc of Russian history. With the collapse of the empire there was nothing to fall back on from Soviet culture and consequently Western fixtures and goods came to prominence.¹

¹ Western goods, services, and fixtures rose to prominence in post-Soviet Russia as a result of several pre-existing circumstances and processes, not simply due to a lack of viable Soviet or Russian culture.

Conclusion

In her reflections on the changes that took place in Russia from 1960-2000, scholar Naomi Collins notes:

In many ways, this was not the same country it had been seven years before, or even two to five years earlier. But traditions and cultures do not metamorphose as quickly as events: people feel disoriented and misplaced. Some people said they felt like immigrants in their own land, foreigners to the place in which they had been born (Collins 170).

This is reflective of the duality of St. Petersburg and Russia. Although Divo Ostrov and the Alexander Garden are only two parks, they are emblematic of the conflicting paths that St. Petersburg and Russia as a whole are trying to take. Only time will tell which path is ultimately chosen.

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- Figure 1: St. Petersburg Admiralty 1890-1900. Digital image. *Wikipedia.com*. Wikipedia, n.d. Web. 29 Sept. 2015. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/9c/SPB_Admiralty_1890-1900.jpg/600px-SPB_Admiralty_1890-1900.jpg>.
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