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# THE FACE OF RUSSIA



## *Anguish, Aspiration, and Achievement in Russian Culture*

**James H. Billington**

**TVBooks**  
New York

Chapter 2

# The Facade of Power: The Architecture of Rastrelli

The wooden architecture of Old Russia reached its greatest heights—both literally and figuratively—in churches and towers. From inside the protective walls of a monastery, kremlin, or fortress these silhouettes lifted up the gaze of ordinary Russians from the flatness of their daily lives. And if there were no fortified citadels where Russians lived and worked, they would often build a church in the shape of a tent-like tower—usually on a cleared high place where it could be seen from afar, carpeted by green in the summer and snow in the winter. In times of trouble, Russians sometimes assembled with axes at dawn in order to raise up a small church before sunset on the same day as an act of repentance and as a votive offering for God's protection.

To achieve a vertical thrust through horizontal log construction, hexagonal, rectangular, and (most often) octagonal shapes were piled atop each other. Where attainable, larch was used at the base, pine on top, and fir logs with strong roots to secure the roof. Shingles were cut by axe and sealed thereby (as sawed wood never could be) against the great enemy of moisture and rot.

Among the pagan Slavs on the exposed eastern frontier of Europe, the watchtower and alarm bell (striking a wooden board with a wooden mallet) came long before the bell tower and church bells of Christianity. Sheer survival depended on getting early warning of an impending attack. The oldest Slavic word for tower was *vezhi*: from *vedat*, to know. Knowledge was not theoretical in Old Russia; it was a practical matter of knowing whether they were about to be attacked by either of the two most dreaded forces on the wooded frontier: forest fire or foreign invaders. With the advent of gunpowder in the 14th century, Russians could rain down fields of fire on their human assailants; and the new word for towers became *strelitsi*: from *streltsi*, shooters.

Watchtowers and bell towers were covered with roofs that increasingly acquired the shape of tents. In the Russian North, this was a practical necessity for shedding snow—as was the stretching out of the hemispheric dome into the characteristic onion dome atop the church itself. But these, the two original shapes of Old Russian architecture, also had powerful symbolic meaning.

The word for tent roof (*shatyor*) was taken from Persian and retained an aura of mystery and majesty. As Russians journeyed ever deeper into Eurasia, they associated the shape with the original holy space that God had created for the people of Israel on their way to the Promised Land: the tented tabernacle of Moses.

Movement in Muscovy was always a form of pilgrimage fraught with risk—of moral pollution in “unclean lands” on the way to working in a field; of devilish temptations on the way to worshipping in church; and of imperfect purification for a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Jerusa-

lem or some great monastery. The tented tabernacles dotted across the countryside gave ordinary Russians reassurance that there were oases in the desert: sacred space even in remote places.

The word for onion dome (*lukavitsa*) suggests the vegetable itself. A popular Russian legend told of the Virgin Mary in her compassion lowering an onion down to pull a suffering sinner out of hell. As recounted in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, the sinner then fights off others who also grab on to the onion. It breaks and sends them all back into the flames.

Russians sought to avoid that fate by coming together on major feasts to worship in a cathedral topped at the center by a large onion dome. It was usually gilded, and glittered like the sun—reflecting rays of light downward through the forest even after the slanting northern sun seemed already to have set. Light was shining in the darkness—as it did when believers carried lighted candles out of church into the streets and countryside at Epiphany. This “feast of lights” tended to be more meaningful in the dark dead of a northern winter than Christmas itself. Ordinary people were carrying out into their own lives the “light of the world” that the wise men had first seen long ago in Bethlehem.

Carved images of the sun were everywhere in Old Russia. The sun was thought to go underground at night, but was symbolically greeted first at sunset and then at dawn by the little suns carved on the flat boards that covered the ends of logs under the gabled roofs at either end of a wooden dwelling. At noon, the sun shone on smaller flat boards carved with even bigger suns that hung straight down from the outside apex of both gables. These boards

represented “the purity of human intentions, intricately interwoven with the sunlit rapture of life itself and the victory of light over darkness.” Their name (*polotentsa*) came to be used for any textiles (and eventually for the towels) that were hung inside. Carved horses suggesting the pagan sun god often curled off the end of a gable. Circular suns were often placed on the prows of boats (see illustration 18), the boards of spinning wheels, and the window frames (*nalichniki*) even of humble wooden houses.

The characteristic old Russian church was divided into three parts—each symbolically representing an aspect of Solomon’s original temple in Jerusalem and a part of the Old Testament. There was the outer narthex (*trapeznaya*), the entry place for preliminary purification identified with the Book of Proverbs. Inside was the nave (*korabl*), where the congregation was enlightened spiritually as in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Finally, at the east, was the sanctuary (*sviatilishche*) behind the icon screen. The term “altar” was generally used to describe this entire sacred space and not merely the holy table where the priest celebrated the mystic union between Christ and His Church suggested in the Song of Songs. So central was a church to the entire life of a community that a fourth part was often added beyond the narthex to the west: a “winged” entrance porch (*kryltsa*) in which administrative and commercial matters could be conducted. All of this was generally built well above ground level in order both to rise over snowdrifts and to heighten the majesty of the church.

The walls and cathedrals of the Moscow Kremlin were permanently turned from wood into stone in the 15th cen-

tury; and the wooden forms of tent roofs and onion domes were frozen into stone and brick in the towers of St. Basil's Cathedral in nearby Red Square in the 16th.

Alongside the rapidly proliferating body of new stone churches, there also emerged a new type of purely functional and rectangular stone building that was larger than any of the churches. Though generally still called a *trapeznaya*, these buildings either overwhelmed or were altogether detached from churches. They were, in effect, secular dining, reception, and residential halls designed more for civil authorities than for monks and pilgrims. The victory of this new type of building was assured by the simultaneous construction within the Monastery of St. Sergius and the Holy Trinity in the late 17th century both of a large trapeznaya and of a giant imperial residence (known once again by a noun derived from the Persian as the *tsarskie chertogi*).

Under Peter the Great, at the turn of the 18th century, an altogether new type of construction was introduced when he turned to redesigning the ravaged seaports of Azov and Taganrog that he had just captured from the Turks, on the Black Sea. The new architecture was called *regulyarnaya*, meaning both "regular" and "regulated." It sought to impose rigid rectilinear order on nature as well as on the irregularities of previous construction and of unplanned urban development. When he subsequently captured a foothold on the Baltic from the Swedes, he began to lay out plans for a new seaport that was to be even more severely "regular" on terrain that was far more irregular than anything ever tried before.

Peter's initial model was the canal-laced port of Amsterdam; and both the name he first gave the city and the

style he initially imposed on it were Dutch. But Peter was at war for all but the last year of his 35-year rule, and he died before much was built that has survived. Floods replaced fire as the apocalyptic fear in Petersburg; and Peter died early in 1725 shortly before the first of the floods that seemed strangely to recur at hundred-year intervals, near the time of death of an innovative leader: Alexander I in 1825 and Lenin in 1924.

The new capital was Russia's first modern "crash project," forcibly imposed—like later Soviet ones—from the top down in order to "overtake and surpass the West." Peter's foe was Sweden, then the most advanced military power in Europe. But Peter followed the recurrent tendency of warring Russian leaders to take over the practices of a Western opponent. He reorganized the Russian government on the Swedish model with "colleges" rather than ministries for civil administration and a governmental "Over-Procurator" replacing a monastic Patriarch as the head of the Church.

In place of Moscow's chaotic, curvilinear streets and circular religious processions Petersburg built broad, straight boulevards or "prospects" suitable for military parades. And the new, Western-dressed regiments passed under triumphal arches replete with three-dimensional, often nude statues of mythological figures rather than the traditional ceremonial churches that stood over the entrance gate to a monastery and were adorned with icons of robed, two-dimensional saints. The embankments of the wide and threatening Neva River were lined with granite brought in from Finland, and Russians were for a time required to bring building stones with them when they came into the city.

Petersburg soon became a city of monumental architectural ensembles. Aristocrats from the provinces built palaces there in order to secure or improve their position on the new Table of Ranks, which awarded privileges on the basis of proven military or civilian service to the state. On the one hand, the aristocracy was opened up for entry and advancement according to criteria of merit rather than heredity. (Those of non-aristocratic origin who attained the fifth step became aristocrats for life; those who reached the ninth level could pass the title to their children.) But the net effect of this complex 14-level system was to swell the central bureaucracy that kept the records and to introduce even more rigid and hierarchical divisions into Russian society.

Much attention was devoted in the palaces of the upwardly mobile Petersburg aristocrats to designing the facade which everyone could see. The rectilinear building behind the facade enclosed the courtyard or *dvor*—providing, in effect, an aristocrat (*dvorianin*) with closed secular space for people of his social rank. Only rarely on special feasts would he venture forth into the open, sacred space of a church to worship in a conglomerate congregation as his predecessors might more frequently have done in the Muscovite past.

Eyes were lifted up in Petersburg not by tent roofs and onion domes, but by two Western-type spires atop the Admiralty building and the Cathedral in the Peter and Paul fortress, on either side of the Neva. The city seemed as relentlessly horizontal as the wide river that ran through it. And, as the number and size of its aristocratic buildings grew, they tended to blend together into a kind of continuous, intimidating facade. Tsars were now called

emperors; and Petersburg seemed to be trying to enclose all Russian space into one giant imperial *dvor* for which Petersburg itself was the facade. As provincial centers imitated Petersburg, the imperial architecture of a city seemed to replace the icon screen in a church as the defining cultural symbol for the new Russia.

Yet Petersburg rapidly became something much more than a new center of power dominated by men in uniform and destined to become the crucible of revolution. It was transformed, in the half century after Peter the Great's death, into an open-air arena of dazzling beauty thanks largely to a remarkable architect, Rastrelli, about whose personal life—almost as much as in the case of Rublev—very little is known.

The culture of Muscovy had been exclusively masculine. The monasteries, fortresses, and frontier settlements of the Russian North—all were places where men lived without women and in virtual darkness for the long winter months. In contrast, the new aristocratic culture of Petersburg was essentially the creation of three women—Anna, Elizabeth, and Catherine—who ruled Russia for 66 years in almost uninterrupted succession from 1731 to 1796. They brought light into Russian buildings and enlightenment into Russian thinking. They turned Peter's still dark and wooden city into glittering gold—and at a latitude as far north as the middle of Hudson's Bay, where the sun was barely visible from late October through early March.

Consider the distance traveled from Russia's first large royal residence in the Moscow Kremlin under Ivan the Great to the ultimate imperial palace at Tsarskoe Selo outside Petersburg under Catherine the Great.

Women could not attend receptions in the late 15th-century Palace of Facets (*Granovitaya Palata*). They appear to have looked on only from a small viewing place cut out of the far wall just under the ceiling. In the nearby Terem Palace, where the Tsar formally resided, the Tsarina could enter only by a single, side door, and had access only to the small chapel and bedroom. The interior space was dark and cramped, and the exterior was jammed against a crowded jumble of churches and armories. Black-robed boyars could approach the Tsar's small and claustrophobic receiving room only through two even smaller rooms.

Ordinary Russians could only hope that someday their pitiful entreaties to their "little father Tsar," *Tsar-Batiushka*, might be placed in the basket that was occasionally hoisted up three stories to the distant "petition window." The words for this, the unique point of entry into the Tsar's court, *chelobitnoe okno*, literally meant "a window for beating one's head against the ground." This suggested both the prostration before God that believers made in church and the version of the oriental kow-tow that earlier Grand Dukes of Muscovy had themselves endured during their long years as collector of the annual Russian tribute to the Mongols.

In total contrast, by the mid-18th century, the royal receiving room at Tsarskoe Selo was a sea of light. Huge windows and mirrors lined two parallel enfilades more than 325 meters long, passing through glittering rooms that led to a dazzling, amber-lined waiting room and a throne room nearly 50 meters long at the very end.

On the throne sat not a Tsar weighed down with 80 pounds of dark robes, but an Empress in a white gown.

Out the windows on either side, a visitor would see not the walls of another building within a cramped kremlin, but magnificent vistas suggesting the extended power of an enlightened despot. On one side was the "parade courtyard" where carriages entered an enclosed semi-circular space and drove half-way up and all the way back to the far end of the long palace in a kind of preliminary pass-in-review before entering the near side of the palace for a long march back to the throne room (see illustration 19). Out the windows on the other side lay a landscaped park that reached into the only partly cleared countryside beyond. The palace itself seemed to be extending its power over nature by stages.

Visitors saw Russia emerging from darkness into light—rather in the way that the long dark alleyways of vaulted linden trees in the park at Tsarskoe Selo suddenly opened up onto cleared spaces bathed in sunlight that reflected off nearby streams and ponds. Even the closed and darkened alleyways of trees had an enlightened purpose: to shelter small birds from hawks. The pavilions within the clearings—like the great palace itself—brought the swirling decorations of the European rococo out of interior space onto the sculptured and rusticated exterior facades of buildings. It all seemed to illustrate the subject of the monumental fresco that covered the ceiling of the palace's throne room: Russia Enjoying the Bounties of Civilization.

The Germanophile Empress Anna first hired as chief architect of the imperial court Bartolomeo Rastrelli, who built Tsarskoe Selo. The Francophile Empress Catherine the Great first lived in it, causing it to be known popularly as Catherine's Palace. But it was the Italianophile

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Empress Elizabeth who reigned between the two (1741–61) who conceived of this palace and gave free reign to Rastrelli to make St. Petersburg into the imperial city that still inspires awe today.

Elizabeth made the palace rather than the church the locus of legitimacy in Russia; the aristocratic court rather than the monastic compound the source of ritual and rhetoric for broader society. She turned Russia's westward gaze from the Germanic north that had fascinated Peter the Great's immediate successors to the Latin south, from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. She founded Russia's first university (in Moscow in 1755) and Academy of Arts (in Petersburg in 1757). She turned the face of Russia away from Christian icons in candlelit churches toward mythological statues in open gardens.

Elizabeth let the Russified Italian Rastrelli begin to transform the city that her father had founded into a kind of open-air theatrical setting for the aristocracy. There the masses would eventually enact the real-life drama of a two-act revolution in 1917. By then, the imperial family had long since retreated to the palace that Elizabeth had created but never lived in at Tsarskoe Selo. It deserved, far more than Rastrelli's more famous Winter Palace, to be renamed The Hermitage; because it was far away from the city and close to nature. The pavilions that dot its parks even today deserve the name "constellation" that Russia's first great scientist and polymath Mikhail Lomonosov bestowed on Tsarskoe Selo in his poetic tribute to the palace:

... Rome is being built in Russia  
The example is this home so glorious.

Now all who see it seem to say  
That Rome will soon be shamed before us.

Elizabeth's collaboration with Rastrelli was in a way part of the posthumous legacy of her father, Peter the Great. He had summoned the architect's father, the sculptor and metal-worker Bartolomeo Carlo Rastrelli, to come to Russia in 1716 after the death of Louis XIV. The older Rastrelli had been working on the great palace of the Sun King at Versailles. His 16-year-old son was to build equally extravagant palaces for Peter's daughter Elizabeth, who seemed to spend her entire life inside one and planning the next.

Elizabeth was born in the last great wooden palace of Moscow at Kolomenskoe and died in the last great wooden palace in Petersburg, a temporary one built for her on Nevsky Prospect while the Winter Palace was being reconstructed in stone for the first time. But she left behind the three greatest stone palaces in Russian history—all built by Rastrelli—the Winter Palace at the heart of Petersburg and the two palaces just outside at Peterhof and Tsarskoe Selo.

Not just the name of the architect but the substance of his vision was Italian, and the model city was Rome. But it was a composite image of the imperial city of classical antiquity and the Palladian palaces of the Renaissance. The "third Rome" of Moscow seemed to be ceding pride of place to the "new Rome" of Petersburg. A secular Peter was the new rock on whom the empire had been founded, and he had been crowned with the Latin title of Emperor rather than the Slavic Tsar. Summoned by the new Peter to help cast cannon for the war with Sweden, the

older Rastrelli cast the first equestrian statue of Peter the Great and Russia's first publicly displayed series of statues on a non-Christian, mythological theme. He scattered bronze figures from Aesop's fables along the left bank of the Neva, where his son Bartolomeo was eventually to raise up the mighty Winter Palace for the Emperesses who succeeded Russia's first Emperor.

Bartolomeo Rastrelli built for the Empress Anna (1731–41) two residences in Moscow and both a summer and winter palace in Petersburg—all in wood. His transformation of Petersburg from a bleak Dutch naval base into a glittering baroque city began with the coronation of the Empress Elizabeth in Moscow in 1742 and her triumphant return to Petersburg in solemn procession. She was surrounded by an ornate profusion of temporary architectural facades, triumphal arches, and fireworks illuminations. As she settled in to the new capital, she gave Rastrelli, in effect, *carte blanche* to turn Petersburg into a city of permanent decorative facades and perpetual parades.

The imperial style that Elizabeth's architect imposed on Petersburg was, in the first instance, a celebration of Russia's newfound proximity to—and power over—the sea. Already in his wooden Winter Palace by the Neva in 1735, Rastrelli had raised up a glittering building with more than 200 rooms including a magnificent amber room where an unprecedented combination of windows, mirrors and amber spread light over the waters that only a decade before had flooded the city. Now, for Elizabeth, he built a new wooden summer palace with more than 160 rooms at the intersection of the two major canals of the city: the Fontanka and the Moika. Concurrently, he built yet another imperial residence, the Anichkov

Palace, at the intersection of the Fontanka canal with the main boulevard of the city: the Nevsky Prospect. This palace made its central courtyard into a lake accessible to boats from the canal—suggesting to many that the New Rome might also be a New Venice.

Statues of Neptune proliferated in the new capital; and mastery over the sea became the theme of the first of Rastrelli's three great royal palaces: Peterhof on the Gulf of Finland just west of Petersburg. Here Rastrelli first applied his distinctive talent for extending an existing palace to an extraordinary length—creating in effect a facade of power and the facing for a parade. And the palace faced the sea through a terrace of fountains that descended from its high perch to the gulf below (see illustration 20). The waters swirled at the behest of the sovereign around the central statue of Samson, the symbol of strength whose name was the Hebrew word for sun. The play of sunlight on the brightly colored stucco facade and cascade of fountains suggested in the brief northern summer of the midnight sun that it might even be possible to recreate classical Rome in the frozen north.

Rastrelli built smaller, but similar palaces in Petersburg for Elizabeth's leading aristocratic courtiers. Fountains cascaded down to the Fontanka Canal for the Vorontsov family, and at the intersection of the Moika Canal with the Nevsky Prospect for the Stroganovs. Imperial power seemed to be watching over all the strategic points on the city's waterways. So it seems appropriate that Rastrelli built the greatest of all his palaces—the Winter Palace where it flows out into the Gulf of Finland, and on to the Baltic Sea and the Atlantic Ocean beyond.



This was the fourth such palace built on the same spot in Petersburg, but the tallest, largest, and first to be built out of stone. It towered over the nearby Admiralty Building of those days and dominated the Petersburg skyline. Its columns, pilasters, and bas reliefs spilled all the decorative techniques of interior architecture out into exterior decor. The palace faced the Neva on one side and huge open squares on the other three. In every direction it projected a colorful, but intimidating, facade of power. The 180 stone statues of classical gods and goddesses high up on the exposed roof-top seemed to defy nature itself with their tranquil nudity.

Rastrelli was creating a distinctive Russian architecture in order to validate imperial power. It differed from either the baroque or rococo in the West both by its distinctive, decorative use of the shapes of Russian church architecture and by its megalomaniac attempt to project power into and over space. In effect, Rastrelli sought to suggest that imperial power could both coopt history and conquer nature. In many ways the hubris of modern Russia begins with his architecture—which soon gave rise to the thought that the new imperial city might be, after all, a new Babylon rather than a new Rome.

Rastrelli placed a huge sculpture of a two-headed eagle, the imperial insignia, over the cupola at one end of Peterhof; and, at the other end, a small cruciform church with five onion domes. These characteristically Muscovite bulbs no longer enclosed holy space for worshippers inside a church at the center of a kremlin. They now provided a sculptured silhouette for promenaders to admire while passing by a decorative end piece on the far side of a lengthy palace.

In his new Winter Palace, Rastrelli marginalized the church as he had at Peterhof. It was only one of the three functional rooms off the main staircase in the middle. The other two were the small theatre and the throne room, itself a kind of theatre. The so-called “parade” or “Jordan” staircase led up majestically from the Neva (the new “Jordan River”) through a string of “parade rooms” with a view of the Neva into the great throne room. The parquet floor used the cruciform image of five circles taken from Russian church architecture as a decorative motif. But in the center of the overall, square building itself was simply a vast open space. It was the ultimate courtyard, the *dvorianstvo* all wanted to penetrate—and at the same time, it symbolized the expanded space of an expanding Russia that imperial Petersburg was seeking to control.

The Winter Palace acquired an even more intimidating elongation as it added and then absorbed an adjacent “Hermitage” (the present name for the entire complex) which in turn later blended into other adjoining structures stretching out along the Neva into a seemingly unending monolithic facade. In the vast square on the opposite side, imperial Russia mounted its largest and longest military parades.

The palace that most fully embodied the imperial attempt to mount parades and control space was Rastrelli’s last and largest palace at Tsarskoe Selo. As with Peterhof and the Winter Palace, a preexistent building was elongated. But at Tsarskoe Selo an entire story was added; an unusually decorative five-domed church was raised up over the end point; and the gilding and coloring was the brightest of all his palaces.

Rastrelli also created three works of sculptured church architecture that were strikingly original. Each in its own way also projected imperial power out further—and up higher—than ever before.

In Kiev, he created perhaps the most beautiful baroque church in all the Russian empire in the wake of Elizabeth's triumphal visit to the "mother of Russian cities." This five-domed Church of St. Andrew was raised up atop a three-story pedestal on the side of the hill overlooking the Dnieper River where Prince Vladimir had allegedly brought Christianity to the Eastern Slavs. The church was named for the Apostle Andrew, who according to Slavic legend had come to Kiev even in biblical times just as Peter had gone to Rome. The four outlying domes are raised up on free-standing Corinthian columns rather than on drums, and the large central dome provides vertical uplift even in today's bustling Ukrainian capital.

Rastrelli sought to leave his stamp on Moscow as well—and continued his thrust upward by giving a baroque twist to the old Russian form of the tent roof. A century earlier, the authoritarian Patriarch Nikon had tried to regularize and control church architecture by outlawing tent roofs; and he had created a small model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem inside the main church of his own Monastery of the New Jerusalem at Istra just outside Moscow. Rastrelli tried to complete this project, and ended up embellishing and stretching out the central dome, punctuated with many windows, into an unusually broad tent roof.

This idea of asserting and augmenting authority by creating a vast central dome that will dominate all other

buildings was realized a century later in a more classical style by two other foreign architects: Constantine Ton who built the Church of Christ the Savior which dominated the Moscow skyline, and Auguste Montferrand who designed the equally dominant St. Isaac's Cathedral in Petersburg.

Elizabeth's passion and Rastrelli's talent were perfectly fused in the Smolny Convent, the greatest creation of the distinctive Russian architectural style perfected by Rastrelli. It is usually characterized as imperial baroque, but would perhaps better be described as monumental rococo.

Superficially at least, Smolny was conceived as a traditional religious convent. It was given the name Resurrection-New Maiden along with protective, exterior walls and a central cathedral that Elizabeth had specified to be modeled on the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Moscow Kremlin. But Rastrelli made the central, five-domed church so compact and vertical that it seemed to have only one dome with a few rococo flourishes attached. Far more noticeable were the four single domes over the four corners of the outer walls. And those walls were used not for protection, but for the living quarters of the young noble ladies who were to be educated there.

Elizabeth made an enlightened school for women rather than a dark monastery for men the crowning ensemble in her city of light. Smolny was not just another facade of power and backdrop for military parades. It was the feminine face of Russia: a finishing school with a rococo tiara.

Elizabeth's palaces had turned wood into stone; her convent now turned tar (the literal meaning of *smolny*)

into gold. In the process, she turned aristocratic living inside out. She not only feminized the face of the convent, spreading interior decorative motifs all over its exterior facings. On the very spot where her father, Peter the Great, had processed tar for a brutalized navy, Elizabeth created a playful confection for a feminized aristocracy. Even today a visitor can not help but experience some measure of refining delight in contemplating Smolny's swirling ensemble of blue stucco and white decor capped by a five-domed polyphony of gold.

But Smolny was—like imperial Petersburg itself—a monument to aristocratic exclusiveness, and its architecture an embodiment of the imperial illusion of controlling space. The five largest domes of Rastrelli's great ensemble, in effect, enclosed outdoor space for promenades rather than an indoor place of worship. The central cathedral appeared to be one soaring, single central dome; the large, outlying bulbs on the four corners of the walls seemed from afar to represent the other four domes of a very wide and overextended version of a traditional pentacupolar and cruciform church.

Rastrelli had sought to expand the reach of Smolny up to the heavens as well as out to the countryside. He built an elaborate model for a bell tower designed to stand in front of the Cathedral at twice the height of the Bell Tower of Ivan the Great in the Moscow Kremlin. It was never built, but Rastrelli left behind a legacy of unfettered extravagance and artistic megalomania. Subsequent artists were infected by the dream that they too might create something equally grand and glorious—perhaps in some other medium, in some other way, or in some other place. Elizabeth died in 1761 in the temporary wooden palace

on the Nevsky Prospect that Rastrelli had built for her while awaiting the completion of Tsarskoe Selo and the Winter Palace. Her successor, after the usual brief and turbulent interregnum, was Catherine the Great (1762–96). She was the last woman to rule Russia; and she proceeded to overlay Petersburg with even more great architectural ensembles. Her new style was more simple and classical, but the scale was equally monumental—and her attempts to conquer and control space even more ambitious.

Catherine systematically superimposed the artificial geometric grid patterns of Petersburg on provincial cities, confiscated monastic property, and dreamt of replicating Greek as well as Roman glory on Russian soil. After freeing Crimea from the Tatars, she gave a Greek name, Sevastopol (meaning both “august” and “imperial city”), to the new naval base she built on the site of an old Greek settlement, and considered renaming Tsarskoe Selo Constantigrad. She named the greatest of her monumental new classical palaces in Petersburg Taurida, the Greek name for Crimea; and the lover for whom she built it, Gregory Potemkin, “the Prince of Tauris.”

He is, of course, best known as the alleged architect of “Potemkin villages,” the portable facades that were designed to hide the misery of the people from her eyes during triumphal tours throughout the Empire. Facades were now protecting rather than projecting power; and a better-educated aristocracy was beginning to discover the human suffering that lay behind the facings on the palaces. They began to think about it, talk about it, and eventually write about it. The passion for great accomplishment was moving from architecture to books.

French became the language of aristocratic discourse

after Russia allied itself with France in 1756; and Catherine promoted the values of the French Enlightenment by corresponding extensively and publicly with the lions of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire and Diderot. She made the former the official historian of the Russian empire and bought the library of the latter. And she ordered from the French sculptor Etienne Falconet the bronze statue that was to become the symbol of imperial Petersburg, showing Peter the Great mounted on a rearing horse. It was placed in 1782 in the open Senate Square on the other side of the Admiralty from the Winter Palace.

The monumental Empire Style was added to Petersburg architecture during the reign of Tsar Alexander I (1801–25). The spire of the Admiralty was raised up even higher; and the entrance to the great Palace Square before the Winter Palace was adorned with the greatest of all Russian triumphal arches. Hopes for reform were raised when Russia defeated Napoleon—but were dashed when the aristocratic Decembrist movement was repressed in 1825 after an abortive demonstration in Senate Square. The failed uprising in the sight of the statue and a subsequent flood in Petersburg gave birth to one of the greatest of all Russian poems, *The Bronze Horseman*. Its author was Alexander Pushkin, who almost overnight and single-handedly made literature the dominant new art form of the early 19th century—and the new arena in which to pursue Russia's restless search for greatness.

Educated in the lycée at Tsarskoe Selo, Pushkin considered its gardens his home; and he made the heroic statue of Peter, the symbol of Russian power, rise up amidst the flood and pursue a beaten-down clerk. The suffering little man in the big city become one of the

stock characters in Russia's belated explosion of a humanistic literature. Pushkin's poem soon attracted more attention than Falconet's statue. Pushkin more than any other person invented both the vernacular language and the distinctive literary forms of modern Russia.

Pushkin was a high aristocrat who, between two periods of public service in Petersburg, wrote a romantic poem on a folkloristic Russian theme (*Ruslan and Lyudmila* in 1820), narrative poems on exotic themes while in exile in the south (*The Prisoner of the Caucasus* in 1822, *The Fountain of Bakhchisaray* in 1824, and *The Gypsies in 1827*), then brought Shakespearean-type objectivity and grandeur to troubled episodes of Russian history through his epic poem *Poltava* of 1828, his dramatic tragedy of 1831, *Boris Godunov*, and his historical novel of the Pugachev rebellion against Catherine the Great, *The Captain's Daughter* in 1836.

Perhaps Pushkin's two most beloved and influential works were written in forms different from all of those mentioned above. His "novel in verse" *Eugene Onegin* provided a panoramic portrayal of provincial aristocratic life and created in the figure of Onegin, the original "superfluous man" of Russian literature. He and the idealized Tatyana were, in the words of the literary historian D. S. Mirsky, "the authentic Adam and Eve of the Mankind that inhabits Russian fiction." And, in the category of prose fiction, Pushkin produced an unforgettable short story, *The Queen of Spades*, which anticipated the psychological depth and fascination with gambling of Dostoevsky.

Pushkin died at age 37 in a senseless duel—as did the other great romantic poet of the era, Mikhail Lermontov,

four years later at age 27. These tragedies ended prematurely the Golden Age of Russian poetry. But Russians of all persuasions ever since have generally placed Pushkin on an unreachable pedestal—and given poetry a special status in Russian culture. The musicality of Pushkin's verse was to inspire many of the greatest Russian operas. His passionate love of freedom and ability to empathize with all his variegated literary creations made Pushkin a belated conveyor of the kind of renaissance humanism that Russia had missed during its long cultural isolation.

Pushkin, in his great poem *The Prophet*, seems to have foreseen the more anguished type of art that was to become endemic in Russia after his death—and would deeply influence subsequent Russian history. Writing in 1826 at a time of sadness over the repression of the Decembrists, Pushkin describes how an angel of the Lord placed a living coal in the place where his "trembling heart" had been and bade him speak prophetic words that would burn "the hearts of people." This was the task essentially taken on by Pushkin's chosen successor as the literary leader of Russia: Nicholas Gogol. Through him, we can see an essential new art medium for Russia—prose fiction—go through the same cycle of first imitating foreign models, then doing something completely original, and finally being broken up altogether.

## Chapter 3

# Speech after Silence: The Literature of Gogol

Authoritarian rule was confirmed in Russia—seeming forever—by the ascent to the throne in 1825 of the Prussophile Tsar Nicholas I. He wiped out the Decembrists, the last gasp of the aristocratic reform impulse that his Francophile predecessors had indulged at times. He crushed the Polish echo of the French Revolution of 1831 and absorbed what was left of an independent Poland into the Russian empire. And he formally proclaimed in 1833 that his empire was radically different from those of the West and based squarely on an ideology of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality.

The "Official Nationalism" of Nicholas and his government was protected by censorship and by a new force of Secret Police (the so-called Third Section). It was celebrated by a seemingly endless series of parades in Petersburg. It was said that the Emperor viewed them as rehearsals for the Last Judgment, which would take the form of a final pass-in-review before God himself.

The Tsar was accountable to no one on earth. He was literally, self-empowered (the meaning of autocrat, Russian *samoderzhets*). His awesome authority seemed