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Nathan Lin

Historic Symbolism in the Present



We were taking a day trip to Catherine Palace in a small village called Pushkin outside of Saint Petersburg. We were traveling as a group and decided to meet up in the outskirts of the city, where there was a lot of construction during the Soviet period. We waited on dreary Moscow Square in front of the House of Soviets. The building was dark and heavy and had a sinister feeling to it. The massive concrete block was topped off with hammers and sickles, and the frieze of the building was decorated with socialist realist style reliefs of factories and workers. It seemed so strange to me to see this building in a city that I felt like I knew like the back of my hand. I had spent most of my time in the city center where the tsarist symbols reigned supreme. All over the historic center of the city, you could see the double headed eagle of the tsars decorating palaces, bridges, gates, and just about everything else. Those symbols were comforting to me because they were bright and gilded and made the city glitter at night. Walking along the canals of Petersburg, and seeing the double headed eagle meant that I was in a nice part of town. The hammers and sickles had a very different effect. To me, they represented something sinister that I should question. They made me uncomfortable because they seemed to be antithetical to what I knew about history and being an American. There was also a massive statue of Lenin towering over the square. I knew nothing bad was going to happen, but I had begun to associate Soviet symbols with being unsafe because they tended to be located on the outskirts of the city where there was more crime and poverty. Waiting on the square for the bus being surrounded by these imposing communist monuments was a feeling that I had not experienced before.

Once our bus reached the Pushkin, we saw the massive Catherine Palace. Even though the weather was gloomy, we could see the golden domes topping the ends of the Palace. Catherine Palace was light blue and cream. The gardens were in full bloom and the pavilions

around the gardens were similarly painted in pastel colors. Around the gates of the Palace were Catherine the Great's royal monogram as well as the double headed eagle. These symbols made the Palace seem so much more familiar to me even though it was my first time there because I was so used to seeing those symbols around Petersburg. I had always treated Petersburg as kind of a playground city because of how grand and lavish it is. Seeing the outskirts of the city really shattered that illusion for me but being at Catherine Palace kind of restored how I originally felt. It was more representative of the Petersburg I knew and was familiar with.

The House of Soviets was intended to be used as the seat of the city government, but this plan was interrupted by the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Since then, it has been sold off to private investors who have rented it out to local businesses. There were major renovations to Moscow Square which added foundations to it, but little has been done to fully restore the House of Soviets. As for Catherine Palace, during World War II, the entire palace complex was destroyed, and the amber room stolen. The entire site was recently rebuilt, and the amber room was reconstructed as well, with part of the money coming from Germany as reparations for the war. Even though I knew that nothing I was seeing was original, I still felt a sense of history was preserved. The Soviet building also has history, but it is not the same warm and inviting history. To me, that history has been left behind and ignored. The House of Soviets played an important role in the Siege of Leningrad as well as in developing military technology, but that history is not showcased the same way Catherine Palace showcases its history. The government spent tons of money to rebuild Catherine Palace so that it could show the world the landmarks of Russian heritage, while the House of Soviets was sold off. This represents the uneasy legacy of the Soviet Union in Russia today. During the Russian Revolution, the double headed eagle was removed from many buildings and replaced with the hammer and sickle. With the fall of the Soviet Union,

many of these tsarist symbols were returned, but now they represent the autocratic and authoritarian state of modern Russia rather than the old empire. Similarly, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the hammer and sickle was removed from many public areas, but are also experiencing a revival as souring relations with the West have pushed many ordinary Russians to romanticize the Soviet Union when Russia was still considered a superpower in the world. What started as two opposing symbols representing the old empire and the new communist regime have been on a converging path where they are both being used to represent the new Russian state which is conservative and autocratic like its old empire and a global superpower like the Soviet Union.