

The Birth of a Public Secular Festival in Russia Under Peter the Great: a Military Triumph

Alla Aronova

State Institute of Art Studies

Moscow, Russia

E-mail: alla-aronova@yandex.ru

Abstract—The article is devoted to the study of the birth process in the Russian artistic culture of 1700-1720, the phenomenon of a secular public holiday. The reformation of all spheres of social and cultural life of society, which occurred during the reign of Peter I, was aimed at the formation in Russia of the principles of secular lifestyle and behavior. During the first 30 years of the century, both the court ritual and the city public holiday were successively changed. The main role in this reformation under Peter was played by military triumphs, which became the main type of citywide secular celebration.

Keywords—*military victory; military triumph; triumphal arch; fireworks; Peter I; procession*

I. INTRODUCTION

The era of Peter the Great saw the emergence of high society celebrations in Russian culture. For the monarch and his inner circle, opulent celebrations found a place in almost every event of governmental or personal significance and became vital elements of the newfound social order. They functioned within three frameworks: secular, court, and sacred. With this frequency came an inevitable and serious sequence of refinements to the practices for directing and designing such events. In subsequent reigns, within and beyond the eighteenth century, it was the secular celebration that became an indispensable (if not the most important) regular occurrence in Russian societal life.

The focus of celebratory dramatic arts of the era was the construction of the new mythology of societal power. First, this was expressed in the motif of classically-inspired triumphs, well developed in European post-Renaissance ceremonial practice [1]. However, the Russian version interpreted the precedent differently. The monarch was not the lead victor, but rather part of his people, who were the collective victors. This governmental myth-making, which turned to the rich arsenal of diverse media in temporary architecture and theatrical representations, bore witness to the unwavering transformation of Russian culture into baroque self-definition.

The image of the devout tsar, garbed in full-length and rigid robes embroidered with precious stones and infrequently appearing in public, was replaced by the carpenter-tsar, running around in a Dutch coat on the streets of St. Petersburg without guards and unashamed to share a

table with his sailors. The tsaritsa-mother transformed into the empress-lover, who commenced the post-banquet dancing. The daughters of the tsar no longer retired to the women's spaces and convents; they learned to flirt, dance, and wear high-waisted dresses with décolleté and wigs. The magnates removed their high hats and fur coats, and donned waistcoats and lace.

Facades of residential mansions, built according to “the rules of architecture” replaced urban street fences. Rustic mansions with their clusters of husbandry and agricultural structures gave way to straightened lanes, manicured bosquets, ornamental lawns, and sculptural ponds. Russians studied how to live in aristocratic spaces and, with each celebration, the set design played the role of a grandiose “spectacle,” which demonstrated a “transformed Russia.”

The perception of a celebration as a type of public “spectacle” with its own “dramaturgy” and “scenography” defines the approach to describing these events in this chapter. The first part identifies the main design solutions that emerged as the primary Petrine celebrations were established. The second part investigates the characteristic conventions of their scenography.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, royal festivals split into three distinct categories. Most festivals until this point belonged to one of two categories: folkloric and state events. The folkloric festivals, rooted in pagan traditions, continued with no apparent change. However, the relationship between state celebrations and liturgical rites underwent a dramatic transformation; by the 1710s they were on two different tracks. Church events became more public and incorporated secular elements. Meanwhile, state festivals largely eliminated any religious references.

II. THE MAIN STAGES OF THE NEW FESTIVAL TRADITION

The new festival tradition could be traced to the Russian victory at the battle of Azov in 1696, whose celebration established a standard practice for military triumphal processions, the most important among the period's popular festivals. The next crucial event in this process was the alignment of the Russian calendar to the European one. Both the day that marked the New Year and the year that marked the beginning of time were shifted.

Thus, the year 1699 no longer ended at the end of the summer, and the next year, 1700 AD, started in the winter, on January 1. The entirety of the clockwork was replaced. On this day, medieval Russia (Rus') woke up as a modern nation (Rossiia). The celebration of the New Year established this new type of public festival. Triumphant military celebrations had dominated the domestic political discourse of the first two decades of the century, and the contents and the orchestration of the New Year's festivities were also determined by these events.

Peter involved himself in event design and production much more actively than any other European post-Renaissance monarch, any of his Russian predecessors, or any of his successors¹. The importance that Peter accorded to the new festival tradition was epitomized in the publication of the official state calendar for the year 1725, which marked certain dates as nation-wide celebrations with standardized scenography [2]. The calendar established eighteen holidays, including the "solemn (torzhestvennye), festive (prazdnichnye), and triumphal (viktorial'nye) days." Six of them were civic events (New Year's Day and the anniversaries of five military victories). Ten were the royal family's name-days, birthdays, weddings, and anniversaries of coronations. The name day of the Emperor gradually gained the status of a public event, the rest were celebrated privately by the family and the royal court. The last two national events were festivals, which were nominally Church celebrations. One of them, the day of the Apostle Saint Andrew First-Called, the namesake of the first Russian military medal, became a court event. The other, the anniversary of the interment of Saint Alexander Nevsky's remains (in the St. Petersburg monastery dedicated to his cult), became a festival celebrated by the city's inhabitants. Peter's own funerary events quite literally became the last act in his transformation of Russia's festival culture.

Establishing the new festival calendar required the destruction of the old one. Among the tools of destruction, the most effective and the most bizarre was the "Most Comical All-Drunken Council," established by Peter in the beginning of 1690s. Eccentric street performances became its most popular manifestations².

III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF MILITARY CELEBRATIONS AND THEIR CORE ELEMENTS

As mentioned above, a radically new celebratory tradition started after the young Tsar's first military victory at Azov. Festivities continued for an extended period and included three major events. The first started immediately after the signing of the act of surrender by the Ottoman authorities, which took place outside the city walls on July 19, 1696, on the battlefield itself; the second celebration took place in Moscow, on September 30; and the third took place

in KrasnoeSelo, the Tsar's estate near the capital, on February 13, 1697.

The first phase, which lasted until August 18, consisted of feasts in commanders' tents (shatry) accompanied by a gun salute and fireworks in the nearby city of Cherkassk. In Moscow, prayers were offered and, in the Kremlin, on Cathedral Square, the people were offered treats. The second phase took place in Moscow and was choreographed as a military celebration à l'antique, with a temporary triumphal arch, pyramids, and pictorial representations of the battle³. The procession followed a carefully designed route culminating in the triumphal complex. It was set to music, poetry recitals, and a gun salute. The last phase consisted of two days of banquets culminating in fireworks around Shrovetide (maslenitsa). The fireworks were elaborate and grand, much more grandiose than necessary for the small audience of the Tsar's closest associates gathered on a private estate. The incongruity and scale of the celebrations reveal the experimental stage of the new festival tradition. Nonetheless, the Azov festivities introduced all the elements and scenographic techniques that were used in subsequent Petrine military celebrations during the first decade of the eighteenth century, the most active period of the Great Northern War. All of these celebrations would start with a party on the battlefield, subsequently rippling outward in circles, engaging an increasingly large swath of Russia's population and culminating in military parades and popular celebrations with fireworks.

The year 1701 witnessed two important victories, at Riapnina and Errestfer hamlets (myza's). As in the case of Azov, the first act consisted of feasts on the battlefield itself. The second phase, a parade accompanied by a gun salute and military banners flying over fortified walls, took place at the nearby Pechersky Monastery and in the city of Pskov. The third phase was the first instance of merging a celebration of military victory with that of the beginning of the New Year. The event also transformed from a private party into a public celebration. Firework launchers were placed along Moscow's central marketplace (torgovye riady) flanking the vast Red Square on its north-east side. Guests of honor watched the fireworks from across the square. The tsaritsa and tsarevnas were seated on a platform in the Nikol'skaia Tower. A temporary banquet hall and a two-story shed decorated with banners housed other audience members. The Spasskaia Tower, on their right, was illuminated for the event [3].

The capture of Nötenburg in 1702 provided the Russian navy with new waterways due to its strategic location at the source of the Neva River on Lake Ladoga. Finally, in 1703, the city of Nyenskans was taken, and the port-city of St. Petersburg was founded. The door to the Baltic Sea was now open[4]. Celebrations of both events followed the established tripartite scheme, with a small deviation at Nyenskans, where solemn prayers were offered on the battlefield with a gun salute in the background.

¹ See A. Panchenko, *Russian culture on the eve of Peter's reforms*(Leningrad: Science, 1984, pp. 112–137) for a detailed discussion of the transitional nature of Peter I's reign.

² Ernest Zitser translates this as "Unholy Council."(E. A. Zitser, *The Transfigured Kingdom: Sacred Parody and Charismatic Authority at the Court of Peter the Great*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004.)

³ The arch was attached to the gate of the All Saints Bridge.

To reflect the Northern War victories (as opposed to the victory at the southern city of Azov) the parade in Moscow followed a northern route. The troops marched along Tverskaia Street towards Red Square through the Voskresenskie Gates. In 1703, they immediately turned onto Nikol'skaia Street. This route brought the procession through the city center, but did not enter the Kremlin, the symbol of old Russia. It then followed Il'inskaia Street, exited Kitai-Gorod through the Il'inskie Gates, marched along Miasnitskaia Street, and ended at Preobrazhenskoye Village, four miles further north-east.

There were also some significant changes in the design and the location of celebratory arches. In 1702 they became free-standing rather than detached. They were placed at Kazan Cathedral on Nikol'skaia Street and at the beginning and the end of Miasnitskaia Street, i.e., on the stretch of the route where the troops would start moving away from the Kremlin, and eventually away from the city center. In 1703, another arch was added on Il'inskaia Street, at the Kitai-Gorod exit^[5]. By December 19, 1704, when celebrations were under way for the capture of Derpt' (present day Tartu, Estonia) and Narva, there were already seven arches ^[6]. The triumphal gala at each arch also became more elaborate. In 1704, these events included small orchestras, religious sermons, poetry recitals by schoolboys, and arias sung by maidens dressed in white robes ^[7]. New Year fireworks culminated all celebrations. In January 1704, the event was, for the first time, moved away from Red Square toward the nearby Tsaritsyn Meadows on the banks of the Moskva River. In addition to being a safer location, this also allowed for a larger audience and was called the "fireworks theater" (teatrum dlia feierverkov)⁴. It also incorporated a banquet hall with several rooms.

The Poltava victory of 1709 was the turning point in the war with Sweden and its celebration, while following the established protocol, surpassed its predecessors in scale and duration. The city of Poltava itself hosted a military parade. In Moscow, there were many more arches constructed, including a number outside of the city center (Bely Gorod). These were decorated, according to Danish ambassador Just Juel, with captured banners, drums, kettledrums, cannons, and other military paraphernalia. The procession lasted into the evening and culminated in night illuminations. It then continued for two more days, December 27 and 28, during which the captured Swedes were paraded through the streets of Moscow. The New Year finale took place, once again, on Tsaritsyn Meadows. There were prayers offered, a grandiose feast (with captured Swedish officers and the ladies of the court among the guests), and fireworks ^[8].

The victory at Poltava effectively ended the Great Northern War's land campaign. With operations continuing on the Baltic Sea, St. Petersburg, initially an inconsequential commercial port, became Russia's capital in 1712 and hosted

a new type of celebratio⁵. Naval victories were not celebrated on the battlefield, only in St. Petersburg. Additionally, starting in 1711, the New Year events ceased to function as the final act of a recent victory's celebrations. Each New Year festivity had its own unique contents, depending on the most current events.

Naval celebrations in the second decade of the eighteenth century lasted several days, each of them culminating in banquets and fireworks. The first of them took place on September 20, 1714, following the Russian navy's defeat of the Swedish fleet near the Hangöudd Peninsula on July 27 of the same year. The triumphant Russian ships and captured Swedish ships paraded down the Neva River. Two triumphal arches highlighted the procession's key points. One, placed in the water in front of Prince Aleksandr Menshikov's palace on Vasilievsky Island, was the first to greet the victors on their way towards Petersburg Island. It also marked the entrance to a small harbor next to the palace, where, in the evening, the main banquet took place⁶. Once they arrived at Petersburg Island, the victors continued their march on land, passing the second arch that stood next to the Senate on Troitskaya (Holy Trinity) Square.

The next naval triumph took place six years later, in 1720. It celebrated the defeat of the Swedish navy at Granhamnsholm Island. The first round of fireworks had been launched on the day of the victory, July 27, but the main festivities took place on September 8⁷. The naval parade was similar to the previous one but it did not include arches. Instead, there was a giant triumphal pyramid on Troitskaya Square with a room inside, where soldiers and sailors were offered treats⁸.

With the decreasing intensity of military activities, a new tradition of celebrating anniversaries of past victories emerged. Among these, Poltava was viewed as the most important. The battle took place on June 27, two days prior to St. Peter's day⁹. During subsequent celebrations, Peter intentionally merged the two events, reducing the religious aspect, and transforming his private holiday into a state-wide event. Since its first anniversary in 1710, the holiday was celebrated annually in St. Petersburg, with a few notable

⁵ The last large celebration in Moscow took place in 1723. It was dedicated to the signing of the peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire, following the victory at Derbent. The celebration was staged according to the tripartite scenario described above.

⁶ The feasts, hosted by various noblemen, continued for the next three days. (F. Ch. Weber, Weber's Notes, Russian archive, n. 6. 1872, pp. 1095–1098, (In Russian), P. H. Bruce, *Memories // Petersburg Peter in foreign descriptions*. Leningrad: Science, 1991, pp. 170–173.)

⁷ They lasted for three more days, with feasts hosted by nobility and masquerades organized by the Most Comical All-Drunken Council. (Travel Journal of Peter I, 1720. St. Petersburg: Public Archive of the Ministry of the Imperial Court, 1855, p. 215.)

⁸ The pyramid remained at this location until 1725 and was described by Aubrey de la Montray. (A. de la Montray, *Travel to various provinces and localities of the ducal and royal Prussia, Russia, Poland, etc. // Petersburg Peter I in foreign descriptions*, Leningrad: Science, 1991, 214–215.)

⁹ It was Peter's intention to start it on his patron saint's day, but he was forced to act earlier.

⁴ It was called this by the fireworks' designer, artillery officer Vasilii Korchmin (Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts, fond 9, inv. II, part 2, sheets 512a–512b).

exceptions when Peter had to be absent from the capital¹⁰. Otherwise, every June 27 witnessed a near-identical reproduction of the first celebration. This was even true in 1718, when the holiday fell on the day following the death of Peter's son, Tsarevich Alex. The festivities would start with a service in Troitsky (Holy Trinity) Cathedral, followed by a public sermon on the cathedral square. A gun and cannon salute would then discharge from a giant pyramid constructed on the square, and from the Peter and Paul Fortress. The evening would culminate in banquets and fireworks.

Occasionally, small adjustments were made. In 1713, festivities included the arrival of the Persian ambassador along with his extravagant retinue, including elephants. In 1715, the launch of the "Moscow" battleship was incorporated. More extensive modifications were applied just once, in 1719, when the Poltava victory's tenth anniversary coincided with the fifth anniversary of the Hangöudd victory and the fifteenth anniversary of the capturing of Narva. Peter designed the celebrations to link the events as part of a continuous narrative. The festivities took place on June 7, the day of the Poltava anniversary, with a naval parade near Hangöudd, a gun salute, a festive gathering (assambleia), fireworks, and the entry of the battleship "Hangöudd." [9]. The celebrations of the Narva anniversary included prayers, a gun salute, and a banquet on a decorated battleship [10].

The year 1719 was also marked with three additional anniversaries: that of the victory at Lesnaia, which was celebrated with a banquet and fireworks; that of the capture of Shlisselburg, which was celebrated in the fortress itself; and that of the Kalisz Battle, with an ice-boat show (ekzertsitsianabuerakh)¹¹. The year also witnessed a parade of battleships decorated with banners (August 30) on the Neva River, followed by two weeks of banquets and illuminations. It was the first year that celebrations were covered in detail in "Vedomosti" (The News), the nation's first newspaper.

Two years later "Vedomosti" published the official rules for conducting celebrations honoring the Treaty of Nystad with Sweden [11]. The treaty culminated two decades of extraordinary military efforts, its celebration surpassed all previous ones in scale, and leveraged previously developed scenographic techniques. The resurrection of the nation was declared the main theme of the festivities, which took place in both capitals. The first three acts were staged in St. Petersburg:

- Masquerade-like buffooneries of the "prince-pope's" wedding (September 10–17).

¹⁰ Thus in 1717 Peter celebrated the event in the French (present day, Belgian) city of Spa. He personally bought all the necessary equipment and designed the sitting arrangement for the audience. (Journey and Travel Journal of Peter I. St. Petersburg; Public Archive of the Ministry of the Imperial Court, 1913, pp. 22–23.)

¹¹ Buier (or ice-boats) — from the Dutch boeier. In the early eighteenth century, at wo-mast boat, mainly for a costal navigation. Sometimes, buiers were placed on metal blades to slide on ice-covered rivers during the winter.

- Our Lady of Kazan feast, which included Peter accepting the titles of Emperor and Pater Patriae (Father of the Fatherland) and fireworks (October 22).
- Masquerade parties (October 24~30).

The festivities resumed in Moscow on December 18 with a procession that passed under five triumphal arches. The first of these replaced the old Tver Gate in the Bely Gorod walls [12]. Tver Street terminated the road connecting Moscow and Petersburg and the route symbolized the relationship between the two capitals. A banquet was held on New Year's day in the Kremlin, yet the grand finale did not take place until Shrovetide Week (January 29~February 4). It was also preceded by three family holidays: Princess Elizaveta and Princess Anna's birthdays (January 28), and the name day of Herzog (Duke) Karl Friedrich von-Holstein-Gottorf. These events were closely related as they also marked Princess Anna's official status as an adult and the Duke's status as her future husband. These were celebrated by a banquet in a temporary hall and culminated in grandiose fireworks.

The grand finale lasted six days and its climax fell on January 31. The masquerade procession followed the same route as the procession on December 18. However, it was staged as a naval parade, with sleighs carrying ships and giant seashells. The famous botik (small boat), an element of Peter's adolescent games, during which he had first discovered his penchant for military and naval arts, was "accidentally" found in a Kremlin warehouse, and became the parade's centerpiece. The rest of the festivities included masquerades that started at the triumphal arch on Miasnitskaia Street and later moved to one of the nearby squares. Participants performed tours à la mode¹², feasted, and, in the evening, watched fireworks [13].

IV. CONCLUSION

To summarize the evolution of the new triumphal tradition: two major periods can be identified within the twenty-nine years of Peter's rule. The celebrations that took place between Azov and Poltava occurred as the immediate results of military campaign victories. These created a foundation on which celebrations were built in the second period. These were less reliant on current events, and more entrenched in tradition. The second period can be identified as the years between the first anniversary of Poltava in 1710 and Peter's death in 1725. The aforementioned transformation of the New Year celebration is a salient example of the ethos of the second period. Originally, the holiday was the grand finale of the annual cycle of military triumphs. By 1725, however, it became the state's preeminent civilian holiday. Festival choreography sometimes took into account current political events, but

¹² This is the term used in the accounts of Friedrich Wilhelm von Berholtz, an eye-witness of many of Petrine festivals. The term means, most likely, a festive costumed reenactment of chivalrous carousel-tournaments. For the carousels at various European courts see H. Watanabe-O'Kelly, *Triumphal Shews: Tournaments at German Speaking Courts in their European Context, 1560–1730*, Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1992.

always followed the narrative of the transformation of ancient Rus' into modern Russia [14].

The celebration of the Treaty of Nystad went through a transformation of a different sort. It merged the three events described above:

- The signing of the Treaty of Nystad;
- The re-interment of Alexander Nevsky's remains; and
- The “discovery” of the botik — often dubbed the “grandfather of Russiannavy.”

By Peter's decree of August 30, 1721, the day of the signing of the treaty was to be celebrated annually. In 1723, however, he chose the same day to move Nevsky's remains from Shlisselburg to the new monastery in St. Petersburg and appointed it the feast day of Saint Alexander Nevsky (replacing November 23)¹³. On August 30, 1723, the celebration also included delivering the botik from the Alexander Nevsky Monastery (where it was stored after 1721) to the wharf of Petersburg Island for a public display. Peter's decree of September 2, 1724, declared this to also be an annual event. The decree also ordered the day to incorporate a masquerade and a naval parade on the Neva River ending in front of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery [15].

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¹³ Decree of May 29. It also became the saint's day—instead of November 23 when it had been celebrated before.