Saint Petersburg – Window onto Europe

- Peter the Great (Peter I, 1672-1725; Tsar’ from 1682, ruling monarch from 1689, Emperor from 1721).

- Vladimir Putin, born 1952, Leningrad; since 2000 President of the Russian Federation, major sponsor of the city of St Petersburg.
Petersburg:
Чел выходит с трубкой из парадной и едет за булкой и курой на машине, припарковав ее на поребрике;

Moscow:
Человек выходит с мобильником из подъезда и едет за белым хлебом и курицей на машине, загнав ее на бордюр.

US:
“A guy walks out of his apartment building with his cell phone, and drives to the store to get bread and a chicken, parking at the curb”

UK:
“A bloke walks out of his block of flats with his mobile, and drives to the shop to get bread and a chicken, parking at the kerb”
Count Lev Tolstoi (1828-1910). Tolstoi’s *War and Peace* (1863-69) was intended, at least in part, to illustrate the positive role played by the Russian aristocracy and gentry in the establishment of moral and social values, as well, of course, as in the defence of the country in the Napoleonic wars. The opposition of Moscow/Petersburg is fundamental to the novel.
Joseph Brodsky (1940-1996)

Я родился и вырос в балтийских болотах, подле серых цинковых волн, всегда набегавших по две, и отсюда -- все рифмы, отсюда тот блеклый голос, выющийся между ними, как мокрый волос, если вьется вообще. Облокотясь на локоть, раковина ушная в них различит не рокот, но хлопки полотна, ставень, ладоней, чайник, кипящий на керосинке, максимум -- крики чек. В этих плоских краях то и хранит от фальши сердце, что скрыться негде и видно дальше. Это только для звука пространство всегда помеха: глаз не посетует на недостаток эха

1975

I was born and grew up in the Baltic marshland by zinc-gray breakers that always marched on in twos. Hence all rhymes, hence that wan flat voice that ripples between them like hair still moist, if it ripples at all. Propped on a pallid elbow, the helix picks out of them no sea rumble but a clap of canvas, of shutters, of hands, a kettle on the burner, boiling - lastly, the seagull's metal cry. What keeps hearts from falseness in this flat region is that there is nowhere to hide and plenty of room for vision. Only sounds needs echo and dreads its lack. A glance is accustomed to no glance back
Vsevolod Nekrasov (born 1934)
Translations by Gerry Janecek

Что-то я так хочу
В Ленинград
Так хочу в Ленинград
Только я так хочу
В Ленинград
И обратно

Какой я Пушкин
я кто
Некрасов
не тот Некрасов
и еще раз не тот
не хвастаюсь я
я хочу сказать
с вас
и такого хватит

Somehow I really want to go
to Leningrad
I really want to go to Leningrad
Only I really want to go
To Leningrad
And back

What kind of Pushkin am I
I’m who
Nekrasov
not that Nekrasov
and also not that one
I’m not bragging
but I only want to say
from you
even that is enough
Emperors and Empresses made St Petersburg; architects built it; but authors defined its character

- Pushkin
- Gogol’
- Dostoevsky
- Blok
Well into the twentieth century

- Belyi
- Akhmatova
- Brodsky
- Mandelstam
- Kharms

- Akhmatova
• Some of the classic literary statements of the city:
  • Pushkin, “The Queen of Spades”, The Bronze Horseman
  • Dostoevsky, Poor Folk, “The Double”, “White Nights”, “The Landlady”
    The Injured and the Insulted, “Notes from the Underground”
    Crime and Punishment, The Idiot
  • Gogol’, “The Nose”, “Nevsky Prospect”, “The Overcoat”, “The Diary of a Madman”
    • Bely, Petersburg
    • Blok, The Twelve
    • Kharms, “Incidents”
    • Brodsky, “I was born…”
The city’s early buildings, commissioned by Peter, are stern and simple.

The gigantic, sternly rectangular building of the Twelve Colleges, on Vasil’evsky Island. It now houses St Petersburg University.

The Peter and Paul Fortress, and Cathedral – the cradle of the city, and most un-Russian in design.
However, when Elizabeth came to the throne, she turned to the Italian Rastrelli, and his baroque buildings brought a completely different spirit to the city.

His remarkable and bold Smol’nyi Convent (turned by Catherine into a girls’ school) is not only innovative, but also very conscious of its Russian identity – it has many native motifs, and has an outer wall which is reminiscent of Russia’s northern fortified monasteries.
Even more famous is his Winter Palace, which now houses the Hermitage Museum.

While the “point” of Vasil’evsky Island is another defining place for the city.
Of the city’s many statues, the most famous is, without doubt, the Bronze Horseman – the equestrian statue of Peter the Great.

This dynamic and dramatic work by Falconet, presents Peter in a mythologized pose, and is the subject of Pushkin’s famous poem.
Equally famous are the huge out-of-town palaces built by the Imperial family.
Later members of the Imperial family much preferred those palaces to the city itself, and “their” buildings in and around the city are often expressive of a dissonant taste (this Cathedral in Tsarskoe Selo is from the early twentieth century).
• The Petersburg of literature and art combines the magnificence of the Imperial project with quite other elements:

• the city as place where the logic of design meets the fantastic, even the demonic; where imperial will fights with the nature that it aspired to conquer; the city as place of extreme alienation, where the “small man” is crushed; the city as place of madness; the city of outsiders and newcomers; the city as place of violence and crime; the city as trading place for people....
This Petersburg is emphatically not the grand city (although it is always presupposed)
But the more modest, cramped, back-street, edge-of-town city
Moscow, the new Petersburg?

Viktor Pelevin

Venedikt Erofeev
They were shooting from the bridge, the way they do these things in Moscow. The old T-80s only fired at long intervals, as though the sponsors, short of money for shells, were afraid it would all be over too quickly and so they wouldn't make the international news. There was apparently some unwritten minimal requirement for reports from Russia: there had to be at least three or maybe four tanks, a hundred dead and something else as well - Tatarsky couldn't remember what exactly. This time an exception must have been made because of the picturesque visual quality of the events: although there were only two tanks, the quayside was packed with television crews with their optical bazookas blasting out megatons of somnolent human attention along the river Moscow at the tanks, the bronze Peter the Great and the window behind which Tatarsky was concealed. The cannon of one of the tanks standing on the bridge roared and the same instant Tatarsky was struck by an interesting idea: he could offer the people in the Bridge image-service the silhouette of a tank as a promising logo to replace that incomprehensible eagle of theirs. In a split second -less time than it took for the shell to reach its target - Tatarsky's conscious mind had weighed up the possibilities ('the image of the tank symbolises the aggressive power of the group and at the same time introduces a traditional Russian note into the context of cosmopolitical finance') and immediately the idea was rejected. "They'd piss themselves," Tatarsky decided. 'Pity, though.' A shell caught Peter the Great in the head, but it didn't explode, passing straight on through and continuing its flight roughly in the direction of Gorky Park. A tall plume of steam shot up into the air. Tatarsky remembered that the head of the monument contained a small restaurant complete with full services and facilities, and he decided the blank must have severed a pipe in the heating system. He heard the TV crews yelling in delight. The swirling plume made Peter look like some monster knight out of Steven King. Remembering how the rotting brains of the monster in *The Talisman* had dribbled down over its shoulders, Tatarsky thought the resemblance would be complete if the next shell severed a sewage pipe. Peter's head was defended by the Defence of Sebastopol committee. They said in the news that didn't mean the city, but the hotel, which was being fought over by two mafia groups, the Chechens and the Solntsevo mob. They also said the Solntsevo mob had hired stuntmen from Mosfilm and set up this strange shoot-out in order to attract TV coverage and generally inflame anti-Caucasian feeling (if the abundance of pyrotechnics and special effects was anything to go by, it had to be true). The simple-minded Chechens, who weren't too well versed in the protocol of PR campaigns, hadn't figured out what was going on, and they'd hired the two tanks somewhere outside Moscow.
For more information, write to mlmakin@umich.edu or look at the St Petersburg program site: http://www.umich.edu/stpetersburg/index2.html