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St. Petersburg as the Cradle of Revolution and a Symbol of Russian Political Psychology

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Abstract

This article analyzes the city of St. Petersburg, Russia's imperial capital, as a psychocultural setting conducive for the upsurge of political extremism. The new type of radicalism, which emerged around the turn of the 20th century, targeted the existing sociopolitical establishment and cultural conventions, rather than specific political leaders or institutions; the revolutionaries' aim was to uproot the entire traditional way of life. The article scrutinizes the emergence of St. Petersburg as the embodiment of the country's historical and cultural inconsistencies and contradictions, as well as the city's uncanny development. Psychologically, its "as-if" setting and experience contributed to the undermining of the customary way of life not only in the capital, but also across the empire, for which St. Petersburg defined cultural trends and modes of behavior. The article examines the reasons why Russian radicals intentionally choose St. Petersburg to be the "cradle of the revolution." Few, if any of them, however, were conscious of the fact that, due to its impact on the inhabitants' mentality, the city was a genuine player in Russia's prerevolutionary politics and a potent subversive agent.

Keywords: St. Petersburg, Russia, revolution, terrorism, radicals, intelligentsia, Silver Age.

1. Introduction

People invest great cities with distinctive meanings. In various societies, selected architectural settings acquire significance as material manifestations of unique cultural designs, purposes, and messages. Yet, while many cities thus become endowed with profound inner life and accentuated individuality, very few of them impart as much mystery about their inherent meanings as Russia's "northern capital," St. Petersburg. So often a visitor, "having arrived in St. Petersburg, experienced ... a complex sensation of mental excitement and emotional oppression." (Tolstoi, 1922: 1). Still, while aware that the city was a very "special place" not solely because of its phenomenal beauty, the stranger could not quite grasp why. Nor could St. Petersburgers, but those who sought to express their sentiments about the city frequently referred to its irrational faculties, its cryptic and malignant impact on its inhabitants. "The spirit of the city was ruinous," its energy harmful. St. Petersburg "lived as though awaiting a fatal and terrible day" (Tolstoi, 1922: 1) of destruction and self-annihilation. For political extremists there could be a better setting than Russia's capital.

The ill-fated Decembrist uprising in 1825 inaugurated the Russian revolutionary tradition and established St. Petersburg as the hub of an iconoclastic break with the patriarchal culture and stead of political nonconformity. From then on and through the crisis of 1917, which finally toppled the old regime, the imperial capital was the stronghold of the antigovernment rebellion. Notably, St. Petersburg earned its designation as the "cradle of revolution" as much for its history of political protest as for its subtler, but no less critical psychological contribution to the all-Russian revolt.

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2. Materials and methodology

This article is based largely on research related to the general topic of political violence in prerevolutionary Russia. The body of sources cited in this work includes archival materials from the Arkhiv Zagranichnoi Agentury Departamenta Politsii (Okhrana Collection), located in the Hoover Institution, Stanford, California, and from the Arkhiv Partii Sotsialistov-Revoliutsionerov at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. Most sources, however, are published primary documents from the epoch discussed. These include correspondences, diaries, and memoirs which supplement secondary literature. Along with historical sources, the analysis relies on examples of poetry and fiction, as well as works on psychology, relevant to the chosen methodology.

Methodologically, the article is multidisciplinary. Historical and literary materials are analyzed through the prism of psychological insight about the primacy of emotional drives, which can be politicized and ideologically rationalized. The emphasis is also on inner states projected onto the environment. A key objective is to demonstrate how psychological conditions impact the setting, and how, in turn, individuals' perception of their setting affect their preexisting inner predicaments.

3. Discussion

It is hardly surprising that between the late 1860s and the early 1880s, St. Petersburg turned into a rich soil to cultivate the doctrines of Populism, Nihilism, Jacobinism, Tkachevinism, and other homegrown "isms." The fathers of revolutionary ideologies, for all their eloquence in defending the oppressed, could not expect the illiterate masses to understand convoluted arguments for toppling the autocracy and for building socialism. Hence, in their cliché-ridden, quasi-scientific rhetoric, the leaders of the inchoate Russian revolution appealed almost exclusively to the intelligentsia. For its part, the educated elite preferred cosmopolitan St. Petersburg to archaic, conservative Moscow.

Russian revolutionary theorists, the Populists such as Herzen, Lavrov, and Mikhailovskii, to a greater or lesser extent all adhered to the European socialist views of the peasants as noble savages, invested with a rebellious spirit. The Russian *muzhiks* they revered "as the vessels of the Absolute." Indeed, their overall utopian "messianism was centered on the peasantry" (Marks), thus uniting the left-wing intelligentsia under a common credo. Urban intellectuals and students were to serve as liaisons between the ideologues and the people, so held the widespread view. The founding fathers of the Russian radicalism therefore sought adherents to their creed in the university halls. The University of St. Petersburg became a particularly attractive target (Naimark, 1983: 130-153).

The fiasco of the 1874 "Going to the People" movement amplified St. Petersburg's importance for the revolution. True to their inherent suspicion for the outsiders, the peasants exhibited resolute hostility to scores of university students on their ill-fated pilgrimage to the villages to convert "primitive communists" to "scientific socialists." The peasants' resistance to being liberated disappointed the radicals but did not prompt them to reevaluate their desire to build social paradise. Instead, they sought alternative means of igniting the revolution for the "sleepy Russian people" (Venturi, 1970: 505, 577; Venzhinskii, 1908: 25). The "inability of those who identify with the plight of the poor or the victims of discrimination to mobilize the support of those. ... most adversely affected by these circumstances ... has led radicals in various parts of the world to constitute themselves as terrorists (Weinberg, Eubank, 1990: 126). In Russia, since the late 1870s terrorism has become a preferred tactic of the subversives. From the countryside, they diverted attention to the cities, of which the most essential in their eyes was the empire's capital.

In January 1878, a young revolutionary vigilante, Vera Zasulich, shot and wounded the governor-general of St. Petersburg, initiating a wave of assassinations in the city. In the following months, the Land and Liberty (*Zemlia i volia*) organization became responsible for scores of attacks on St. Petersburg police officials (Venturi, 1970: 629-630, 655; Hardy, 1987: 70, 84). Yet, the main thrust of the terrorist campaign in the capital came after the 1879 Land and Liberty schism, when its extremist faction, the People's Will (*Narodnaia volia*), came to dominate the radical camp as the first modern terrorist organization. Its immediate objective was the assassination of Alexander II. St. Petersburg, the main residence of the tsars, thus became the prime location of the political extremists.

The People's Will staged several attempts against the tsar. Of them, perhaps most sensational was a bomb blast in the Winter Palace on February 5, 1880, which left eleven people dead and over fifty injured. Alexander II was not harmed, but on March 1, 1881, a long hunt for the "crowned game" was over, when a People's Will member detonated a homemade explosive device under the tsar's feet, mortally wounding the only liberal reformer on the Russian throne (Marks, 1983: 8).

In the 1880s and 1890s, Marxism dominated the antigovernment camp as the only "objective and scientific" creed, in the eyes of many socialists. Its upsurge ascribed greater importance to urban proletariat, as numerically negligible as it was at the time. Its significance stemmed from workers being clustered in several major industrial centers. St. Petersburg was the capital of large-scale mechanized manufacturing, home to the densely populated Vyborg district, where the Putilov Works and many smaller factories and assembly plants employed hundreds of thousands of workers.

Typically, these were young, predominantly single men from impoverished peasant families, who had migrated from the countryside with hopes for employment in budding industrial enterprises (Grant, 1999;

McKean, 1990). Grievous living and working conditions, characteristic of other manufacturing cities during the early industrialization stages, were exacerbated by St. Petersburg being the most polluted and unsanitary European capital, which had “evolved from a city of symmetry and imperial regularity into a metropolis of striking contrasts” (*Bater, 1986: 46, 52; Lincoln, 2000: 149*). Magnificent palaces, graceful public buildings, and fashionable avenues in the center represented regal grandeur and gentility, while ugly slums overwhelmed the capital’s growing industrial sectors. There, amid rampant poverty, drunkenness, and diseases, legions of laborers in the metallurgical, textile, and print industries were most susceptible to radical indoctrination.

Whereas in the 1870s and 1880s revolutionary circles consisted predominantly of men from privileged backgrounds, in the early 1900s most extremists were artisans, skilled, and unskilled workers. They performed between fifty and seventy percent of all terrorist acts (*Perrie, 1982: 68; Naimark, 1986: 5*). Hordes of former peasants who became the first-generation proletarians swarmed into the capital, in a decade roughly doubling its population (*Bater, 1986: 46-51*).

St. Petersburg also opened its gates to numerous other migrants from the periphery, including women. With the rapidly changing family relations, many young girls could no longer be confined to the conventionally prescribed role of a woman at home, yet, as a rule, found little opportunity to realize their ambitions in St. Petersburg (*Knight, 1979: 144-45*). The government’s rigid higher education policies and scarce career opportunities left the revolutionary milieu as the only one where females could feel almost equal to their male comrades, who gave them ample opportunity to assert themselves by partaking in dangerous operations. Women thus came to comprise about one-fourth of all Russian terrorists in the early 1900s and nearly one-third of the Socialist-Revolutionary Combat Organization, capital-base “party of terror” (*Laqueur, 1977: 121; Naimark, 1986*).

St. Petersburg thus became the epicenter of the revolution. Astonishing is the extent to which the city’s geographical, cultural, and psychological environment impacted the political processes. Its residents and visitors have often taken for granted St. Petersburg’s unsettling exceptionality, even if attempts to understand and delineate its uniqueness have not been rewarding. What follows is a psychohistorical perspective on the inimitable urban milieu and its bearing on radical politics.

4. Results

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” While referring to Ireland, this line from W. B. Yeats’ “Second Coming” describes perfectly Russia at the turn of the 20th century. There, intricate, long-term sociocultural transformations, such as post-1861 emancipation agricultural developments, industrialization, urbanization, and spread of education, undermined traditional ways of life.

Growing disregard not only for the official Orthodox church but also for the very fundamentals of Christian faith impeded time-honored customs and social practices. In essence, the country followed other European societies in renouncing religion, traditional, communal, and family ways of life and in espousing individualism as a social norm. Russia, too, was turning into a “modern society.”

As with other pivotal points in Russian history, the break with age-old communal traditions, based on cooperative land cultivation and on the Russian Orthodox adherence to *sobornost’* (conjoint God-worship), occurred too abruptly to allow a smooth transformation from collectivism to individualism. Scores of displaced and unsettled individuals experienced the new situation as arduous and disheartening. Concomitant to dejected economic circumstances, psychological adaptation to the urban milieu was exceedingly slow (*Geifman, 1993: 11*). Thousands severed physical ties with their indigenous communities, but only a few could function outside a collective.

Ordinarily, a “modern Russian” little experience as a separated self. The communal life spared him from angst-provoking attributes of individualistic existence: self-doubts and self-assertion; inner conflicts and their projections; the need for privacy and simultaneous fear of isolation. With the old defense mechanisms irrelevant outside of the commune, the individual lacked the means to deal with “anxiety over the loss of a cherished” accord with their familiar environment.

Anxiety went hand in hand with alienation. Increased competition which intensified interpersonal hostility in a stratified and mechanized environment reinforced agitation, confusion, and distress (*Searles, 1960: 39, 19-20*). Life turned harsh, discomfiting, and devoid of basic social security when traditional mores and ways of mutual assistance no longer provided protection. Fast-paced St. Petersburg, “in which factories replaced cathedrals as the great monuments of a new society” and “the instruments of technology had come between humankind and God” (*Lincoln, 2000: 212*) did not offer relief for the feelings of apprehension and helplessness. Gone was the age-old possibility to dissolve oneself in the village *sobornost*. In the modern city relief through self-abrogation by way of fusing with a larger whole was thwarted (*Horney, 1937: 278-79*).

The newcomers to the city made attempts to simulate a comforting communal life: workers of the same trade, for example, united in the *artels*, where labor was performed in common and the profits shared by the participants. Students and workers of common geographical origins joined the so-called *zemliachestva* (“associations of the land”). These, however, were inadequate substitutions for the economic and religious community and the traditional family structure. When forced by modern city life to face the challenges of individualism, many plunged into confusion, estrangement from their new milieu, and

frustration. Some engaged in extremist politics, since they “could not envision a satisfactory place for themselves... if Russia were to remain as it was” (Nay, 1999: 14). For others, destructive behavior in the form of political action became an outlet for inner tensions.

Psychologists refer to an advanced stage of personal development in connection with one’s “awareness of oneself as a living human *individual*, distinct from other human beings.” Conversely, individuals’ ego organization may be at a level “comparable with so very primitive” infantile ego states (Searles, 1960: 43-44, 73). Symbolically, the Russian capital was indeed “the cradle of revolution” because from the point of view of psychological development, many of its radical-minded residents were child-like: they exhibited discordant, incohesive personalities, which lacked distinct boundaries and ability to adjust. St. Petersburg was in fact their “cradle,” which could not provide the emotional comfort essential for overcoming various impediments on the way to becoming mature beings. Sadly, the proverbial “superfluous people” found their home in the environment that adversely affected their maladjusted, puerile, and often disturbed personalities.

From its inception in the 19th century, the “myth of Petersburg” became an important theme in Russian literature and public discussion and focused on conflicts that were seemingly intrinsic to the city’s existence. Pushkin, who has been called “in the same measure the creator of the *image* of Petersburg as Peter the Great was the builder of the city itself,” was the first to unveil its ambiguity in his *Bronze Horseman*. There, Peter I’s commanding ambition with regard the northern capital conflicts with the very lives of its inhabitants, and “the dazzling and graceful city beloved by the narrator is also a metaphysical landscape whose vast granite expanses and seething waters threaten... to overwhelm both human significance and sanity” (Leiter, 1983: 4-5). From Pushkin on, “the Petersburg cityscape” always evoked “a sense of the precariousness of human existence” (Leiter, 1983: 4-5).

In his short stories about St. Petersburg, Gogol juxtaposed the rational groundworks of the capital, regulated of its bureaucracy, with the irrational and even mystical forces driving the lives of St. Petersburg’s citizens. The writer specifically cautioned about the symbolic deception of the city’s main boulevard: “Oh, don’t believe this Nevsky Prospect!... All is fraud; all is a dream; all is not what it appears to be! ... It is lying all the time, this Nevsky Prospect, but especially” at night “when the devil himself kindles street lamps only to show everything not in its real light” (Gogol, 1977: 39). Perhaps more vividly than any other author, Dostoevsky portrayed “the gloomy charm of urbanistic Moloch on the Neva banks,” its “callousness and inhumanity” (Serdyuchenko) and its mysterious, dark nature, warped by unresolved contradictions, which drove its citizens to madness and violence.

Much ink has been spilt depicting St. Petersburg’s architectural landscape and its contribution to relentless melancholy, moral erosion and emotional privation of Dostoevsky’s various characters, such as Marmeladov and Raskol’nikov. Their “cramped, isolated environment molds them into grotesque” personalities “who seem to act not of their own will, but as though pulled through life by the forces of St. Petersburg” (Boyd, 2002). The city thus “plays a central role in their development and behavior;” they live in confined, smothering, dark quarters, “like coffins;” and “even when they are outside, shadowed by massive buildings and squares, they still feel the lonely, invisible walls of their rooms crowding in on them.” Dostoevsky’s Petersburg, with its shaft-like passages separating clusters of stony structures, is “a city of inherent isolation;” people no longer remember how to comport themselves in a community; “everyone lives by himself and for only himself.” This environment tears one’s psyche apart (Boyd, 2002), just as the city itself, situated on multiple islands, is barely able to maintain its cohesiveness with enervating effort of transparent bridges over the Neva and the canals. Incarcerated in this claustrophobic and disjointed universe, the individual becomes susceptible to irrational and often violent behavior, ruled by erratic impulses, ineffable thoughts, and dogged anxiety. Svidrigailov, a central character in *Crime and Punishment*, most candidly expresses Dostoevsky’s view on the virulent energy of St. Petersburg: “This is a city of half-crazy people. ... There are few places where there are so many gloomy, severe, and bizarre influences on the soul of man as in Petersburg. The climate alone has so much impact!” (Dostoevskii, 1973: 357).

Indeed, what hope is there for the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s *Double* (fittingly subtitled *St. Petersburg’s Poem*), if upon his awakening “a gray, autumn day, murky and muddy, peered into the room through a grimy dull window, so angrily and with such sour grimace...” (Dostoevskii, 1956: 209). A renowned passage depicts the “Petersburg weather” as a cause of mental disintegration:

Mr. Golyadkin, beside himself, ran out on the Fontanka Quay...fleeing from his foes, from persecution, from a hailstorm of nips and pinches aimed at him... Mr. Golyadkin was killed –killed...in the full sense of the word... It was an awful November night – wet, foggy, rainy, snowy, teeming with colds in the head, fevers, swollen faces, quinsys, inflammations of all kinds and descriptions – teeming, in fact, with all the gifts of a Petersburg November. The wind howled in the deserted streets, lifting up the black water of the canal above the rings on the bank, and irritably brushing against the lean lamp-posts which chimed in with its howling in a thin, shrill creak, keeping up the endless squeaky, jangling concert with which every inhabitant of Petersburg is so familiar. Snow and rain were falling both at once. Lashed by the wind, the streams of rainwater spurted almost horizontally, as though from a fireman’s hose, pricking and stinging the face of the luckless Mr. Golyadkin like a thousand pins and needles... Mr. Golyadkin, alone with his despair, was fleeing in terror along the pavement of Fontanka... the snow, the rain, and all the nameless horrors of a raging snowstorm and fog ... were attacking Mr. Golyadkin, already shattered by misfortunes, were showing him no

mercy, giving him no rest, drenching him to the bone, gluing up his eyelids, blowing right through him from all sides, baffling and perplexing him – though conspiring and combining with all his enemies (Dostoevsky, 1997: 32-33).

Dostoevsky's infrequent praise for the city contributes to his off-putting vision of the environment: "I love the March sun in Petersburg... All the houses seem suddenly, as it were, to sparkle. Their gray, yellow, and dirty-green hues for an instant lose all their gloominess... It is wonderful what one ray of sunshine can do for the soul of man! But the ray of sunshine had died away..." (Dostoevsky, 2018). Significantly, shades of yellow – the color of illness and especially mental illness (as in "yellow house" [*zheltyi dom*] or madhouse), in the Russian frame of reference – punctuated Dostoevsky's vision of St. Petersburg (Dostoevskii, 1972: 103; Dostoevskii, 1973: 394). Not surprisingly, Dostoevsky referred to it as "the city of the half-crazy" (Sal'nikova, 2021).

"As it frequently happens with a person in front of a mirror, the city began to be dependent on its ... reflection in literature," noted Joseph Brodsky. "By the mid-nineteenth century, the reflected and the reflection merge into one: the Russian literature became equivalent to reality to such an extent that when one now thinks of St. Petersburg, it is impossible to distinguish the contrived from the truly existing" (Brodsky, 1986: 61-62). Its corporeal residents felt as though they were victims of Petersburg's "quagmire climate" and of unbearable isolation, aggravated by the capital's architectural panorama, exactly as Dostoevsky's characters had felt in "the most detached and the most intentional city" ("*samyi otvlechennyi i samyi umyshlennyi gorod*") (Sal'nikova, 2021).

Struck by St. Petersburg's powerful irrational forces, writer Aleksei Tolstoi reproduced a bizarre sensation that the city was "but a dream, a chimera, a figment" of one's brain. "Faces pale and careworn, with eyes as sombre as the city itself" (Tolstoi, 1953: 27), the Peterburgers barely held onto reality. Likewise, Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* depicted the city's surreal, dreamlike feature: "An enormous crimson sun raced above the Neva ... and the buildings of Petersburg seemed to be melting away, turning into the lightest of smoky amethyst lace." The ethereal city devitalized tenuous personalities, poorly equipped to sustain their integrity. As Bely put it: "Petersburg streets possess one indubitable quality: they transform passersby into shadows" (Bely, 1978: 22).

Contemporaries personified the city's pernicious nature (Reavey, 1959) and claimed that St. Petersburg could "reduce" people, detract from them, and undermine their identities much more than other early twentieth-century urban environments, including Russia's second capital of Moscow or large provincial centers, like Kiev. Traumatized and confused as they were by their psychologically impairing experiences outside the traditional communal life, the newcomers had great trouble surviving in the ephemeral, mirage-like St. Petersburg, epitomized by the "non-Russian, piercing height of the Peter and Paul Cathedral" (Tolstoi, 1922). The "ancient Moscow" still connected the Russians-at least symbolically-with their roots, and "the mother of Russian cities" Kiev had the same soothing effect on its Russian and Ukrainian inhabitants. Gogol's metaphor for Moscow was the traditional Russian beard or "an old stay-at-home woman," making pancakes (Gogol', 1978: 171). In sharp contrast, the cosmopolitan St. Petersburg was a "foreign place," its alien nature apparent even in its nicknames: "Venice of the North," "Northern Palmyra," and "Babylon of the Snows." The geometry of Petersburg accounted for much of its inner contradiction, scholars argued, since the city was built in accordance with a meticulous Western design; yet, underneath there was "a seething, atavistic Asiatic turmoil," threatening "to upset the established order" (Reavey, 1959: vii).

The "un-Russian-but nonetheless-capital city" (Biely, 1959) was an historical accident, which could link the modern Russians with their forsaken past no more effectively than to establish bonds among its estranged inhabitants. Historically, St. Petersburg was associated with a radical break with the national tradition-Peter I's revolt against the Muscovite culture – for the sake of anything original, so long as it contributed to the tsar's war against the convention. From the outset, an act of brutality against old Russia, Petersburg's subsequent history was invariably a "challenge to the national psyche" (Brodsky, 1986). Literally "built on bones" of the two hundred thousand-strong workforce mobilized and sacrificed to the tsar's whimsical ingenuity, St. Petersburg embodied a perpetual clash of contradictory drives and a mixture of inspiration, brutality, and anxiety.

Psychologist Karen Horney has noted the general principle of ameliorating anxiety "by losing the self in something greater, by dissolving the individuality, by getting rid of the self with its doubts, conflicts, pains, limitations and isolation" (Horney, 1937: 270). In St. Petersburg, where the environment itself aggravated disquietude in the period prior to the outbreak of WWI, "it was as if something was in the air hovering over each and every one of us," poetess Zinaida Gippius remembered: "People ... rushed about, never understanding why they did so, nor knowing what to do with themselves" (Lincoln, 2000: 212). Numerous unsettled personalities abandoned themselves to experimenting with "alternative life-styles." These experimentations entailed attempts to rescind their tormented psyche, to dissolve them in alcohol or in drug-induced nirvana, in the hitherto unthinkable (and often blatantly perverse) "uninhibited sexuality," in toying with the occult and with superficial components of exotic cultures (Bely, 1978: 39). These fads were an essential feature of the Russian Silver Age, a period of cultural turmoil, intellectual quest, and aesthetic decadence.

In this era, some of Russia's great minds demonstrated extraordinary inspiration. They too faced the challenges of modernization yet found them invigorating rather than stifling. "Elegant, tattered, rock solid, yet built on shifting sands, St. Petersburg seemed to hold equal measure of exaltation and despair" (Lincoln,

2000: 198). While experiencing the capital's eerie intensity, the most gifted figures of the Silver Age transmuted the city's injurious powers into sources of creativity. This feast of refinement manifested itself in a corpus of musical, artistic, and literary masterpieces.

This, however, was the road of only the few who have found the requisite inner resources to withstand the pressures of individualization and to preserve their "spiritual autonomy" (Brotsky). Poetess Anna Akhmatova called "the dark city on the terrible river" her "blessed cradle" (Leiter, 1983: 54), which had nurtured and sent her off on her path of creative self-activation. Yet, for scores of vulnerable, "undefined personalities," for the "half-cracked" (Belyi, 1966: 5) decadence became a way of life: "Petersburg led a nocturnal existence – wild, frigid, sated... sleepless... card tables and the clink of gold ... clashing three-horse sleighs, gypsies, duels at dawn ... frenzied exhibitions of fantasy." The delirium of the capital" (Tolstoi, 1953: 28), the extravagant and erratic diversions aimed to fill the inner void but also had a characteristic ulterior purpose. Adherents of the Petersburg nonconformist community reasserted the new collective "we" over the maladjusted and dejected "I."

The newborn culture yielded its own archetype for admiration and emulation. The "beau ideal" in the decadent community was a neurotic burdened by inner contradictions, the "bizarre type." Many applauded "everything 'abnormal,' 'odd,' 'sick,'" and antisocial (Belyi, 1933: 3). "These were the days when love, and all sane and kindly emotions were regarded as commonplace and old-fashioned ... People invented vices and perversions for themselves" - anything rather than appear banal. "Destructiveness was considered a sign of good taste" (Tolstoi, 1953: 29-30).

Fascinated with a symbiosis of destructive energy and artistic ecstasy, people looked for and found "poetry in death." (Venozhinskii, 1908: 28). Around 1905, there was a catastrophic increase in suicides in Russia in general and a real "suicide epidemic" in St. Petersburg (Kaplan, 1988: 32; Tolstoi, 1922; Lincoln, 2000: 208). Concurrently, while seeking a "different spirituality" and an ideology to supply new meanings, many came to embrace the revolution as a new faith. Like the revolution in the arts, the all-out rebellion against the traditional establishment was an integral feature of the Silver Age: "Circumstances were ideal. ... the boiling pot ... Everything that declared itself as a protest was received with sympathy and curiosity." (Karabchievskii, 1985: 86). A contemporary remembered: "In a certain sense, we were the revolution before the revolution – so profoundly, mercilessly, and fatally did we destroy the old tradition" (Lincoln, 2000: 210).

"Revolution was becoming the fashion" (Chernov, 1953: 169). As always in Russia, the fashion originated in the capital. There, affirmed a renowned poet, Aleksandr Blok, "one could already begin to sense the smell of burning, blood, and iron in the air" (Lincoln, 2000: 212).

The inflexibility of the autocratic regime encouraged subversion. Grievous economic conditions during the initial phases of the country's industrialization seemed to validate the revolutionaries' claim that exploitation, competition, and alienation of the individual would disappear only after the overthrow of capitalism. Yet, most importantly, the radical movement and its adherents acted in harmony with the flagrantly explosive atmosphere in the capital. The wayward "spirit of destruction pervaded everything ... the sullen rancour of the steel-plant worker, the disjointed aspirations of the fashionable poetess ... The law courts were thronged with hysterical women, greedily imbibing the gory details of sensational trials. ... The country was being drained of its lifeblood to feed the insatiable spectres haunting Petersburg (Tolstoi, 1953: 28-29).

"We went insane from living indulgently," wrote poet Osip Mandelshtam. "Wine before noon, by evening a heavy head. How can we sustain your feverish red, o drunken plague, and your vain revelry?" (Tracy, 191: 131). For the seekers of "larger than life" experiences, who had already experimented with various fads, the revolution offered instant gratification. Radical politics for them might have been analogous to narcotics or perhaps cheap-thrill entertainment. As one revolutionary declared, "I cannot live peacefully. I like danger, so as to feel the thrill. (Gefiman, 1993: 156). For his comrade, political violence was another "very interesting game" (Geifman, 1999: 8; PSR, 5-508).

The thrill of subversive action had one essential advantage over all other forms of marginal behaviors aimed at self-annulment. Unlike with other diversions, in which the individual must cope with nadirs between peaks of excitement, the radicals could pursue their visionary ideals forever. Having submerged themselves in the revolutionary struggle, the proselytes behaved "selflessly" indeed – in the strictly morphological sense of the word. Simultaneously, they claimed greatness and even sanctity for themselves as part of a movement fighting for a holy cause – the "true bearers of Russia's revolutionary cross" (PSR, 5-508; Knight, 1979: 147). They were the guardians of the border, which separated "the pure from the impure," the saints from the villains (Glass, 1995: 129).

They could sustain the delusion only in total isolation from life beyond their clandestine community, as if, in the words of one revolutionary, the outside "world did not exist" (Knight, 1979: 152-53).

People tend "unwittingly to arrange their nonhuman surroundings in accordance with their inner conflicts and attitudes" (Searles, 1960: 80). The revolutionaries' choice to reside in St. Petersburg was hardly accidental. A beautiful aberration, a mirage, a mysterious oasis of "something else" amidst the age-old Russian indolence, the city was a hint, a possibility of a different world; painstakingly artificial, its very image suggested of "otherness." The rebels against the present, where they felt alienated, superfluous, frustrated, and anxious, were drawn to St. Petersburg as an alternative to their dejected "here and now." To devalue the present, they lauded

utopian ideals (Adler, 1997). For them, St. Petersburg was “a city in the grip of nervous expectation, cataclysmic foreboding and a fatal urge to destruction” (Reavey, 1959: vii; Aleksandrov, 1985: 101).

The capital’s “yellowishly sick,” confined environment might have also suited the revolutionaries’ psychological circumstances. St. Petersburg could be attractive indeed, legitimizing the neurotic (and sometimes psychotic) states of those who lacked self-regulating mechanisms and the requisite vigor to ensure individual boundaries and autonomy from the outer world. The city, in fact, contributed to the radicals’ distressed psyche; their environment was “subjectively *part of the ego*, and ... infringing upon the functioning of the ego” (Searles, 1960: 73). Some revolutionaries therefore might have subconsciously chosen to live in St. Petersburg the way people chose hairstyles and clothing, as outlets for expression of inner traits. The “special ‘Petersburger’ dimension of life” cannot perhaps be defined in any rational way (Serdyuchenko), but the grim impact of the city’s neurosis on its inhabitants intensified their own, developing “a combustible energy, ultimately nihilistic, and wholly destructive—it might be said, mutually destructive” (Cournos, 1959: xiii).

5. Conclusion

Researchers illuminate the relationship between internal psychological criteria of “badness” and “the need to have enemies.” The tendency is to relocate a sense of worthlessness to the “outside,” to some hated other (Volkan, 1988: 33; Kristeva, 1991). At the root of relentless political extremism was often all-pervading and equally relentless self-hatred—displaced and projected onto designated political enemies (Knight, 1979: 153; PSR, 1-2; Okhrana, XXIVi-1B). The revolutionary personalities thus externalized intrinsic hostility, displacing and projecting it onto their leaders designated as enemies, oppressors and exploiters (Post, 1990: 31; Geifman, 1993: 21, 39-40).

Still, “if we analyze the psychic reality of these men, we find that they were destroyers and not revolutionaries. They hated not only their enemies, they hated life itself” (Fromm, 1973: 279). Psychologists and fiction writers further noted the process of “projection of various unendurable emotions onto nonhuman things” (Searles, 1960: 79-80). The scarcity of personal autonomy, characteristic of destructionist personalities, precluded adequate self-differentiation from the exterior and its stimuli (bid.). As a result, they propelled their emotional states not only onto their enemies,” but also to their nonhuman environment, projecting their inner turmoil, their “civil war,” their “psychological landscape: barren, paranoiac, tormented...” Gradually, they transformed all around them into replicas of their personality structures (Vaknin). Milan Kundera’s character reverberates:

[Y]ou are always living below the level of true existence, ... you anthropomorphized vat of vinegar! You’re full of acid ... Your highest wish is to be able to see all around you the same ugliness you carry inside yourself. That’s the only way you can feel for a few moments some kind of peace between yourself and the world. That’s because the world, which is beautiful, seems horrible to you, torments you and excludes you (Kundera, 1977: 142).

One of the finest capitals in the world seemed a dismal and threatening place to individuals at war with their milieu: “From over there rose Petersburg... There, it seemed, hovered someone spiteful, cold. From over there, out of the howling chaos someone stared with stony gaze, skull and ears protruding into the fog” (Bely, 1978: 13). Invoking Dostoevsky’s pathetic Goliadkin, prominent British psychiatrist R. D. Laing demonstrates that a person may be prone to project externally as aggression its own self-destructive attributes (Laing, 1961: 132-33), as does also Bely’s radically-minded protagonist: “Petersburg, Petersburg! Precipitating out as fog, you have pursued me ... Cruel-hearted tormentor! Restless specter! For years you have attacked me” (Bely, 1978: 148).

Familiarity with the revolutionary milieu confirms the impression that the radicals participated in a well-staged theatrical dramatization, performing in accordance with prearranged scenarios. It was as though they rehearsed and mastered their every step, lest they depart from prescribed stage recital. Revolutionaries loved ostentatious symbolism and gestures permeated with radical pathos, such as kissing irons on their chained legs upon apprehension (Gershuni, 1908: 17).

No setting suited and supported such dramaturgy more than that of St. Petersburg. Its illusory and elusive features evinced themselves especially distinctly during the “white” summer nights, when the colonnade of “mirthless palaces” (Tolstoi, 1922) and mansions along the Neva embankments seemed to be theater decorations. With make-believe silhouettes in the oily waters and the ever-dawn sky, reality melted away and reinforced the “as if” existence of the radicals. Nothing was unthinkable on this spacious stage, not even a fantastic transformation of the majestic imperial capital into a hub of nationwide violence. Yet, bloodshed and destruction, as key themes in the script of this grotesque play, were conspicuous in the “utopian character of the city” (Brodsky, 1986: 60).

Simultaneously destructive and self-destructive, the radicals were an integral part of their insufferable world. The compounded hatred culminated in an unbearable situation, which called for immediate direct action, aggression, and annihilation of the obnoxious environment. In the nerve-wrecking atmosphere before the revolution, the smallest spark could start a conflagration of bottled-up rage when external circumstances came to provide auxiliary impetus to the inner ones. These immediate socioeconomic, political, and military circumstances, such as bread riots in the capital in 1917, took the form of a political revolt. Yet – and this bears repeating—the fury that turned St. Petersburg into a revolutionary boiling pot had first smoldered in the souls of its inhabitants.

Writers have employed esoteric lingo to depict ideology-driven extremists. Dostoevsky portrayed them as “devils,” seeking annihilation. True to his penchant for paradox, Milan Kundera designated them as would-be “angels” (Kundera, 1981: 61-62). “Shadows,” Bely called them in his prophetic novel depicting the northern capital as the cradle of the Russian revolution, which “understandably could occur only in ... St. Petersburg” (Serdyuchenko). Amidst the city’s magnificence and restlessness, there developed “a sense of impending Apocalypse,” (Lindcoln, 2000: 212), impelled by accumulated urge of the disaffected “to deliver a crashing blow and shatter all this petrified magic into smithereens” (Tolstoi, 1953: 27). Frightened by such frenzied passion for destruction, Bely implored: “[O]h, Russian people, oh, Russian people! Don’t let the crowd of shadows in from the islands! Black and damp bridges are already thrown across the waters of Lethe. If only they could be dismantled... Too late... the shadows thronged across the bridge” (Bely, 1978: 13). Soon they would assault, aiming to shatter to pieces the world to which they did but could not belong. Their first ruthless strike was at their own home, their granite cradle, St. Petersburg.

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