

Face to Face With the Tsars' Capital: American Diplomats and Urban Spectatorship in Imperial St. Petersburg

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For most of the 20th century historians viewed urban spectatorship as a narrow concept, essentially equating it to *flânerie*. They concentrated efforts on studying *flâneurs* – the individuals who enjoyed taking walks in the city at their leisure, and recorded their observations for posterity. In recent decades, however, there has been growing recognition that urban spectatorship deserves a more detailed analysis; that this phenomenon is very complex, and can manifest itself in various forms. If one proceeds from the assumption that the goal of urban spectator is to immerse himself in the atmosphere of the city, feel the heartbeat of its streets, parks, and avenues, and observe its people, then one must admit that strolling through the city is not the only way to achieve this. A person can successfully gather impressions while playing sports at a park or holiday-shopping at an outdoor market. His explorations do not have to be limited to his leisure time. For many individuals, their professional occupations make it imperative to pay attention to what is happening in the city, how its inhabitants interact, what they do, how they dress, etc. These observations can be used both for work and personal purposes. They can be recorded in letters and memoirs, and shared with others, providing them with snapshots of life in a certain metropolis.

The experiences of an urban spectator depend on whether he is a native of the cultural environment that he is exploring, or a foreigner, an outsider. Foreign spectators, especially those who stay abroad for extended periods of time, present great interest to researchers because, as a rule, they make excellent observers. Upon arrival in a foreign country they face numerous challenges. They find themselves on unfamiliar cultural terrain and have to learn how to navigate it. Anthropologists argue that one of the main difficulties for the new arrivals in a foreign land is venturing out into the street: the streets of a city constitute a public arena where a myriad daily transactions is conducted. Foreigners wishing to negotiate all these “transactions” successfully have to subject their surroundings and the behavior of the locals to constant analysis. As a result, they notice many important details in their environment that tend to be ignored by the city natives, and their memoirs offer a valuable source of information about lifestyles in past eras.

An historian of 19th-century St. Petersburg cannot ignore the phenomenon of foreign urban spectatorship. Some of the more interesting foreign observers in

the city on the Neva were Americans, or, more specifically, US diplomats. Unlike occasional travelers, diplomats spent extended periods of time in the capital of the Tsars, and had abundant opportunities to explore it and form impressions that were not superficial. Serving as representatives of a republic in an autocratic state, they encountered many traditions that were alien to them. They observed them carefully, both in order to discharge their duties successfully and to satisfy their own curiosity. What did they experience in the process? How do their exploration efforts relate to the new broad concept of urban spectatorship? How do their memoirs enrich the existing knowledge about 19th-century Petersburg?

Americans traveling to Russia in the 19th century, sailed to England. After a brief stay that helped them to get acclimatized to Europe, they resumed their journey by land or sea. Memoir writers recorded impressions of their first encounter with the capital of the Tsars. The moment when the majestic spires of St. Petersburg caught the sight of passengers arriving by boat, or when the bustling atmosphere of the railway station engulfed the newcomers, often received a brief mention. By contrast, the first Russians that Americans saw when disembarking were described in most vivid terms. Americans scrutinized their appearance and clothing with great curiosity.

New arrivals in a foreign land always seek clues that would allow them to negotiate the unfamiliar environment and communicate with the locals. The clothing that the locals wear provides information about their financial situation, occupations, and marital status. It reflects social hierarchy, traditions associated with rank, and even political atmosphere in society. US diplomats came to St. Petersburg as representatives of the power that was quickly rising in the international arena, and they needed to look the part. In order to be able to do that, they had to figure out how the Russians viewed dress, and what attire they considered appropriate for such high-ranking officials as the members of the diplomatic corps. It became imperative for them to observe the inhabitants of St. Petersburg. Their first attempt to watch people in the streets of the city confused Americans. Katherine Breckinridge, the wife of the US Ambassador in 1894-97, recalled her effort to “read” the Russian crowd, resulting in complete failure. She mistook a footman for a high-ranking General:

As we stepped from the train I beheld a gorgeous individual standing on the platform. He was rather tall and very straight. He wore a blue uniform with gold stripes down the side of his trousers, gold epaulettes, and a patent leather band from his right shoulder to his left side, edged with gilt. There was a stag’s head on his breast, with gilt chains hanging from the antlers, and a sword at his side. On his head was a hat pointed front and back, the sides turned up and edged with gold braid; a red, white and blue cockade of the left side, and an enormous bunch of the brightest of bright blue cock’s plums on the top, falling all around. I thought to myself, surely this must be

the General of all the Russias. Imagine my surprise when he opened our carriage door for us and then mounted the box! He is the “Chasseur” or official footman.¹

Looking at the Russians made US diplomats feel that they had severely miscalculated when packing for their trip to the capital of the Tsars. They usually purchased attire that, in their estimate, would make them look “presentable” both at the palace receptions and during their official appearances in town. Louisa Adams, the wife of US Minister John Quincy Adams, reported buying - in Copenhagen - “immense” beaver hats for herself and her sister. Unfortunately, her plan to impress the Russians did not work. When the family of John Quincy Adams entered the Admirals House at the port, “elegantly dressed Ladies and Gentlemen stared aghast at the figures just introduced.”² Louisa Adams thought that the locals were taken aback by the size of hats that she and her sister were wearing. More likely, the Russians puzzled over the incongruity of the Adams’ family social status and appearance. The Adams traveling with several servants, as well as assistants, and treated with enormous respect by Russian officials, were obviously of high rank. Yet, their patriarch John Quincy was wearing neither military nor a civilian uniform.

In the 19th century, the empire of the Tsars was “manically obsessed” with uniform. Premier historian of Russian dress Olga Khoroshilova suggested that the origins of this phenomenon lay in the autocratic nature of the Russian state.³ The monarch’s autocratic power rests upon strict hierarchy in society, upon its division into ranks. Subjects are supposed to fit like “cogs” into this mechanism, promoting discipline and obedience among them. In 1722, Peter the Great introduced The Table of Ranks that created fourteen grades in the military and civil service. The Table and the following legislation not only determined the responsibilities of each grade, but also assigned uniform designs - specific down to the last button. The uniform was not just a disciplining device. The glorious look of superior ranks inspired uniform envy, causing people in the lower ranks to seek promotions, and enticing commoners to earn the fourteenth rank that granted personal nobility.

To our contemporaries, imperial Petersburg would have looked like a war camp: military uniforms mixed in the street with those of office clerks. Even liveried lackeys, street cleaners (*dvorniki*), and cabbies wore clothing resembling military style. In the 19th century, uniform was so deeply entrenched in the Russian psyche, that it became ubiquitous:

¹ Katherine Breckinridge, “Letter to Susan Lees, October 29, 1894,” in: Katherine Breckinridge’s Papers, Private Collection, Magnolia, Arkansas, in the author’s possession. Heretofore cited as K.B. and the date when the letter was written.

² Louisa Catherine Adams “The Adventures of a Nobody,” in: Judith Graham et al, ed., *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams. Vol. I, 1778-1815*. (Cambridge: Massachusetts, 2013), p. 291.

³ Olga Khoroshilova, *Kostium i moda Rossiiskoi Imperii. Epokha Aleksandra II i Aleksandra III* (Moscow: Eterna, 2015), p. 51.

Russia was born and died in a uniform. Fathers' service caps and grandfathers' tricorns were a part of boys' games. Later these boys stood, snuffling, at attention, on a stool at a tailor shop while the tailor... took measurements for their first real uniform. Boys turned into military cadets or students. At their school desk they learned to understand uniforms that they loved since childhood. And even those whose family lineage did not entitle them to wear uniform, received caftans... with engraved buttons as gifts from rulers. In Russia, there was not a single person without uniform. Even the paupers in state-sponsored shelters shuffled their feet through life dressed in darned soldier pants and a service cap with a cracked bill.⁴

In the USA, uniform represented service to the republic, and was not meant to support the institutions of autocratic hierarchy and aristocratic privilege. The State Department prided itself on republican austerity, and required that US diplomats on duty wear regular civilian clothes. Dispatched to St. Petersburg diplomats were not prepared to see a city of uniform-clad people. After initial surprise at their appearance, Americans realized that their own plain black attire was a disadvantage.

Americans discovered that the Russians started scrutinizing every detail of their dress well before they reached the palace, at the moment when diplomats stepped from their carriages onto the street. When royal receptions or balls happened in St. Petersburg, onlookers gathered in the street to catch a glimpse of the glamorous attendees. And from the palace windows, numerous eyes followed their progress from carriage to the entrance. Katherine Breckinridge overheard two Masters of Ceremony standing by the window discuss the arriving foreigners: "They were speaking in French, and I was amused at overhearing one of them say: "Who are they? English, of course. Look at the feet!"⁵ Edward Wright witnessed an identical situation. Maids of honor stationed at the palace entrance giggled at the appearance of a Scottish Duke, and the American saw "a smile creep over the sober faces of Alexander's veteran guard, and their grey moustaches twist, as they gazed on the man from the Highlands."⁶ US representatives hoped not to cause this kind of merriment.

The more enterprising among them resorted to the one exception in the State Department no-uniform rules. According to it, if a US diplomat had served in the army, he might wear the uniform of his last rank. Cassius Marcellus Clay who had fought in the Mexican war, for instance, dazzled the Russians with epaulets, and a bejeweled sword by Tiffany presented to him by the people of Kentucky.⁷

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ K.B., December 14, 1894.

⁶ Edward H. Wright, "Letters from St. Petersburg, 1850-1851," in *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, v. LXXX, No. 2, April 1964, p. 246.

⁷ Cassius Marcellus Clay, *Memoirs, Writings and Speeches*, V. I. (Cincinnati: J. Fletcher Brennan & Co., 1886), p. 329.

Andrew Gregg Curtin, who had been Commander-in-Chief of the military forces of Pennsylvania, considered a uniform, but decided against it for fear that the locals would ask “what battles he had fought in.” Not wishing to look like a waiter, though, he came up with an alternative plan, declaring: “I’ll get a blue swallow-tail coat and trousers, with gilt buttons with a big eagle on them, like the one on John Heilman’s certificate of bankruptcy.”⁸

The impression that diplomats produced was also based on their carriage. Upon their arrival in town, Americans learned to take notice of the conveyances passing them in the street. The most opulent ones belonged to the Tsar, but the ones used by the ambassadors were supposed to be grand as well – complete with embroidered draperies, national emblem on the doors, and magnificently dressed coachman and footman. Diplomats that ignored local expectations invited sarcastic comments. John Q. Adams learned this from the example of Austrian minister Count St. Julien. The eccentric elderly Count was a man of habit. Instead of getting himself a new equipage in a Russian-style, he brought his old one from Vienna. This oddly-designed phaeton, according to Adams, was “ludicrously fantastical.” St. Julien asked the Tsar for permission to ride around town in it. “Emperor Alexander answered... that he had not the slightest objection, but added, “If the children in the streets should throw stones at it, I hope, Monsieur le Comte, you will not be surprised.”⁹ Adams and his successors in the American mission made sure that their equipages complied with the local standards.¹⁰

Getting the right local coachman proved equally important, for he, just as much as the carriage, was an ambassador’s calling card in the streets of the imperial capital. Obsessed with rank and uniform, the Russians believed that a true VIP employed a coachman who was not only a good driver, but also looked imposing mounted on his box. Upon their first encounter with these colorful characters, Americans thought that they were enormously fat. To their surprise, it turned out that these Russians were of regular frame, and the imposing appearance was achieved by skillfully padded clothes.

Katherine Breckinridge saw her coachman get ready for a ride, transforming from an inconspicuous-looking person into a portly colossus. His wife “put the finishing touches to his elegance. When he was ready she helped him up, fastened

⁸ Cited in: William Egle, *Life and Times of Andrew Gregg Curtin* (Philadelphia: The Thompson Publishing Co., 1896), p. 118.

⁹ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*. Vol. II. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1874), p. 395-396. K.B., January 10, 1895.

¹⁰ One minister, however, dismissed this wise strategy. Arthur Bagby, in 1848-49 the chief US diplomat in Russia, was unwilling to tone down his hatred of monarchy. In rejection of aristocratic traditions, he chose not to hire liveried servants, and rode to the palace accompanied by an American valet in ugly trousers that were “too short.” Both Bagby’s subordinates and other Americans in town thought that he embarrassed himself and his country. The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler. Glasgow University Library. Anna Matilda Whistler – James McNeill Whistler, February 19, 1849. – http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/people/display/?rs-3&named=Bagby_Mr&sr-0&initial-b

the fur robe over him and handed him the reins and whip.”¹¹ Breckinridge found out that a coachman always required assistance when getting dressed. First, he donned a heavily-wadded vest that gave him bulk, and then one or two assistants helped him get into his coat and wrapped his sash.

Padded caftans and huge sashes of Russian coachmen amused US diplomats, but their driving horrified them. Each ride to court events was a suicidal “smoking dash” through the city streets including major thoroughfares like the Nevsky. Attempts to persuade the Russians drive slower failed. Minister Andrew Dickson White complained about his coachman Ivan: “This afternoon he raced, with me in the carriage, up and down the Nevsky, from end to end, with the carriages of grand dukes and ministers, and, do my best, I could not stop him. He simply looked back at me, grinned like an idiot, and drove on with all his might. It is the third time he has done this.”¹² White threatened to fire Ivan. It turned out, however, that in St. Petersburg coachmen employed by high-ranking officials and top aristocracy were expected to drive fast, forcing others to yield the road. These fast races asserted the rider’s high social status. Coachmen who drove the fastest and bellowed out “Make way!” with theatrical effect became celebrities. St. Petersburgers knew them by name.¹³ Ivan made sure that in the streets of the Tsarist capital the US minister’s carriage was received with all due respect.

The reminiscences describing what Americans observed in St. Petersburg upon arrival, how they noticed the nuances of the Russian dress, and what they learned about the traditions associated with carriage-riding, are very instructive for understanding the complexity of such a phenomenon as urban spectatorship. US diplomats first started exploring the city because, in order to perform their professional duties, they needed to understand its traditions. They took mental snapshots of the city and its inhabitants for work purposes. However, once recorded, these observations turned into a chronicle filled with fascinating details. They explained how dress correlated to the system of ranks in the Tsarist society, and how the unwritten traffic rules favored the rich. They presented vivid portraits of the city’s footmen and coachmen. The experience of US diplomats demonstrated that urban spectatorship must be defined in very broad terms. It is not associated only with leisure. One can productively engage in urban exploration both at work and at leisure.

Once Americans settled into their work routines, they began to explore St. Petersburg on their free time. It would be tempting to call this activity traditional *flânerie*. However, in recent years, researchers of urban spectatorship have questioned to what extent *flânerie*, in its classical sense, was possible in autocratic states. Charles Baudelaire who coined the term *flâneur*, referred to a person leisurely strolling through the city, taking in its atmosphere, and, at the same time, remaining free not to engage in the activities surrounding him. In the street in an

¹¹ K.B., January 10, 1895.

¹² Andrew Dickson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White*, V. II (New York: The Century CO), 1906), p. 462.

¹³ Aleksandr Benua, *Moi vospominaniia. V piati knigakh. Knigi pervaiia, vtoraiia, tret'a* (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), p. 148.

autocratic state, however, a person could unintentionally get involved in public spectacles - displays of power organized by the authorities. The majority of the US diplomats who served in the capital of the Tsars took regular promenades. Their memoirs confirm that this experience was peculiar in many respects.

On a walk in any 19th-century city one had to remain alert: even in the famous Parisian Arcades there were pickpockets. On the posh Russian Nevsky, thieves were occasionally reported to steal fur hats with the help of long iron hooks. Americans learned that St. Petersburgers on promenade watched out not only for the thieves, but were equally vigilant regarding the appearance of the Tsar and his numerous relatives. Making a salutation was imperative. The Romanovs took notice when someone who should have recognized them in the street failed to do so. This was especially true in the first part of the 19th century. Nicholas I was known to play jokes – sometimes rather cruel ones - on those who ignored him. During his tenure in St. Petersburg, Minister George Mifflin Dallas heard about the misfortunes that allegedly befell Baron Meyendorff, a representative of a prominent family. The young baron and his friend, after spending a long time abroad, returned to St. Petersburg. They were taking a walk near the Boulevards when they saw the Tsar alone on horseback. Having been absent from Russia for years, the two men did not recognize him and did not bow. Nicholas dismounted, “reprimanded them sternly,” and ordered a sentinel to take them to prison. “They were extremely alarmed, wept bitterly, and were immured for some hours in a wretched cell. After the expiration of that time, a guard announced to them that the Emperor had ordered them to be escorted to the Anischkoff Palace. They went expecting little short of Siberia or decapitation.”¹⁴ At the palace, however, Nicholas scolded them again, and then... invited them to dinner.

Like any rumor, this story may not have been entirely accurate, but the message it conveyed was clear. Alerted as to how seriously the Romanovs took salutations, Dallas was always on a look out for them when taking walks in the city. Nonetheless, one February morning, he paid no attention to a lone sleigh rider muffled up in his cloak. At the next court function, the US Minister had an uncomfortable encounter with Grand Duke Michael. “The Grand Duke crossed one of the longest rooms, came directly up to me, and shook hands. He said he had met me the day before yesterday, while he was in a sledge..., and that I had not recognized him.”¹⁵ Profuse apologies on Dallas’ part seem to have pleased the Duke. He proudly declared that he preferred to move about town without an escort, and that his family were the only royals in Europe “who attempted it.”¹⁶

Duke Michael’s comment revealed his pride in *le tour imperial* - a tradition that was, indeed, unique to Russia. It was established and turned into a legend by Alexander I and Nicholas I. They took daily solitary walks in the streets of St.

¹⁴George Mifflin Dallas, *Diary of George Mifflin Dallas While United States Minister to Russia 1837-1839, and to England 1856-1861* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1892), p. 189. The Meyendorff family was large. There were numerous brothers and cousins. It is difficult to establish which Meyendorff Dallas mentioned.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

Petersburg, occasionally stopping to converse with an aristocrat or a commoner, ordering sentinels to fix some minor problem, or even joining funeral processions that passed by. The Romanov brothers believed that their personal presence in the midst of their subjects solidified their image as masters of the capital city and the country in general. The death of their father Paul I in a palace coup convinced them that the palace where assassins could lurk behind any curtain was more dangerous than city streets. Walking in the city helped the newly crowned Alexander gain popularity: St. Petersburgers saw that this charming Tsar presented a stark contrast to the repulsive – both in appearance and character – Paul I. On his promenades Alexander met courtiers, government officials, and foreign diplomats. He stopped to talk to them, establishing rapport, and turning them into his allies and admirers. For his ability to charm people, Mikhail Speransky nicknamed him a “seducer.”¹⁷ Lady-in-waiting Sophie de Choiseul-Gouffier recalled that the Tsar, raised by Catherine the Great, never discounted women’s ability for political intrigue, and sought allies among women as well as men.¹⁸

Louisa Adams’ memoir offers valuable insights on how Alexander I communicated with diplomats’ wives. She frequently met the Emperor on the Nevsky. Louisa and her younger sister Catherine enjoyed long walks on this magnificent avenue. A true Southern Belle, “Kitty” was noticed by the Russian sovereign, and he always stopped the two women for a conversation. At first, his attention seemed gallant. Gradually, however, it turned impertinent. It was not clear if the Tsar viewed Kitty as an object of an amorous adventure, or a potential ally in some palace intrigue. In either case, being seen in his presence could cause gossip, ruining Kitty’s marriage prospects. The sisters thought it wise to suspend their walks. When they returned to the Nevsky, Alexander spoke to them in a new, intimidating, tone. He demanded to know why the Americans had missed their usual walks, and “without waiting for an answer; turned to me [Louisa - S.P.] and said ‘that it was good for my health and that he should expect to meet *us* every day looking at my Sister...’ This was a real Imperial command in its tone and manner.”¹⁹ The two women relayed what happened to the Legation’s men. The men were upset that the Tsar ordered citizens of the republic around as if they were his imperial subjects, and advised Kitty to quit her promenades. Louisa decided that the walks would continue - albeit with more caution. Once the Americans even escaped from Alexander in a carriage. Adams saw him “hastening on with great strides” from a distance, and assumed she and Kitty could drive off without being detected.²⁰ Their retreat was noticed, and the Tsar berated the two women again. Despite all his eloquence, however, Louisa did not give up on keeping her sister safe from his advances. Descriptions of her encounters with Alexander provide a remarkable example of how, in the streets of an autocratic

¹⁷ A.A. Kizevetter, “Predislovie” in: Sophie Choiseul-Gouffier, *Istoricheskie memuary ob Imperatore Aleksandre I ego dvore*, http://dugward.ru/library/alexandrI/shuazel_gufye_istoricheskie_memuary.html

¹⁸ Sophie Choiseul-Gouffier, *Istoricheskie memuary ob Imperatore Aleksandre I ego dvore*, http://dugward.ru/library/alexandrI/shuazel_gufye_istoricheskie_memuary.html

¹⁹ Louisa Adams, p. 316.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 331.

state, one could be manipulated and pressured by the Tsar in person. The Tsars turned *le tour imperial* into an instrument of power. Adams' observations are also important because they present a contrast to the memoir penned by Choiseul-Gouffier and often cited as the main source of information about women's views regarding Alexander I. Lady-in-waiting Gouffier was seduced by the glamour of his royal status. A republican, Adams did not succumb to it. Nor did she shy away from recording evidence that when Alexander failed to impress women, he did not hesitate to intimidate them.

Louisa's husband John Quincy Adams took daily strolls on the Nevsky, Fontanka, and the English Embankment, and his diaries mention a dozen instances when the monarch stopped him for a conversation. These records show how *le tour imperial* served to propagate the notion that the Tsar, while being above his subjects, was always in their midst, and that he watched and knew everything they were doing. Adams saw Alexander I put on theatrical shows. Aware of the location of sentinel posts, the autocrat stopped the American right in front of one, causing the guards to turn out under arms. The 19th-century St. Petersburg guards, with their resplendent uniforms and impeccable bearing, presented a formidable sight. They stayed motionless for the entire length of the Tsar's presence, and at the end he dismissed them with a wave of his hand. Adams noticed that Alexander was playing to the audience looking at him from a distance, and demonstrating his special status. The US diplomat found himself cast in the role of the Tsar's entourage. These autocratic displays produced an impression: "From the time when I left him [The Tsar – S.P.] until I had got beyond the distance where we could be seen together, the people gazed upon me as upon a very important personage; once past those boundaries, every mujik brushed by me with as little notice as if passing one of his fellows. Such is the magic of an Emperor's countenance."²¹ According to Adams, Alexander was also in the habit of peering at those whom he spotted in the street through his spyglass, letting them know that he was keeping an eye on them.

Unlike Alexander, Nicholas I was not a great actor or charmer. Having come to power in the midst of the Decembrist uprising, he strove to project the image of a strong ruler who knew how to instill order and discipline in his Empire. On his promenades in St. Petersburg, he acted like a landowner inspecting his estate, and if he saw something wrong, he hurried to fix it. The entire city heard the story about the Tsar attending the funeral of a modest office clerk. Strolling through the streets, the Sovereign of All Russias came upon a hearse followed by a lone woman. He joined the widow, reasoning that a man who had served his country and worn a uniform, deserved a better procession. Upon seeing the Tsar, passers-by joined the funeral procession as well, and it became very impressive.²² This, and other stories, circulating among St. Petersburgers, alerted the US diplomats as to what Nicholas considered appropriate or intolerable in his city. John S. Maxwell, for example, found out that it was never a good idea to smoke in the

²¹ Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs*, p. 261.

²² Igor Zimin, *Liudi Zimnego dvortsa. Monarshie osoby, ikh favority i slugi* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2015), p. 131.

street. Nicholas hated public smoking, prohibited it by a special ordinance, and showed no mercy to those who ignored the rule:

The Emperor, while walking one day, met a Frenchman smoking a cigar. He approached and asked him if he was not aware that it was contrary to the law to smoke in the street. The Gaul not knowing by whom he was addressed, replied that he had been in the habit of smoking in the streets of Paris, and did not know why he should not do so in the streets of any other city. The Emperor... proceeding to the *boutka* or station of a policeman near at hand, gave directions as to the disposition of the smoker. The latter was immediately placed in a... small wagon without springs of any kind, and bounced over a thousand miles of bad road to the Turkish frontier.²³

Diplomats learned that they had better observe city ordinances, lest they ire the Emperor.

Like Alexander, Nicholas stopped to speak to ambassadors in the street. He did not use his brother's manipulative tactics to dominate conversation. Nonetheless, those who observed his encounters with foreigners were left in awe of the authority that he projected. According to Andrew Dixon White, a key element in this was the Emperor's impressive stature. White, who met Nicholas numerous times, called him "the most majestic being ever created."²⁴ Over six feet tall and athletically built, he towered over his interlocutors and looked every bit a man destined to reign supreme. Russian memoirs confirm that the Tsar's appearances in the company of foreigners worked as pro-Romanov propaganda. St. Petersburgers compared ambassadors to the Colossus-monarch, and found him far superior. St. Petersburg native L.I. King recalled talking to a merchant aboard a passenger boat on the Neva. As the boat sailed by the Tsar and a group of diplomats, the merchant noticed them, became entranced for a moment, and then declared: "What a fine fellow our Russian Father-Tsar is! All these foreign ambassadors around him look unbelievably plain. In their midst our Tsar is a beautiful falcon."²⁵

US diplomats realized that, when venturing for a walk, they could become involuntary actors in Russian political theater – in the autocratic power displays. However, there were other ways to explore the city, ones that gave them more freedom to choose what they wanted to do, see, and experience. Americans attended holiday fairs, enjoyed amusements and sporting adventures in the parks, and took sightseeing sleigh rides. A researcher reconstructing the complexity of

²³ John S. Maxwell, *The Czar, His Court and People: including a Tour of Norway and Sweden* (Whitefish (MT): 2006), p. 136.

²⁴ White, p. 470.

²⁵ L.I. King, "Rasskazy ob imperatore Nikolae Pavloviche," in: *Nikolai I: Pro et Contra* (Sankt-Petersburg: Nauchno-obrazovatel'noe kul'turologicheskoe obshchestvo, 2013), p. 209.

their urban spectatorship in St. Petersburg, must not overlook these activities.

A very popular pastime among Americans was watching holiday festivities. Remarkably, this activity proved to bear a closer semblance to Baudelairian *flânerie* than walks in the city. A person strolling in the street attracted attention, but in a holiday crowd, he could “disappear,” become anonymous, and watch people’s behavior without being obvious or annoying. He could observe others from a distance, or approach them closer. He could also volunteer to interact with them in some way. US diplomats wisely utilized the opportunities that crowd-watching offered, and their memoirs provide rare insights into what they felt and sensed on their exploration adventure; what surprised, shocked, pleased, or irritated them.

The holiday festivities that truly surprised them took place on Easter. In celebration of Resurrection, huge crowds spilled into the streets and avenues of St. Petersburg. The Russians kissed friends, relatives, and even complete strangers, joyfully uttering “Christ has risen!” and in response receiving “Indeed he has!” Not having been raised in the Orthodox tradition, Americans saw this phenomenon for the first time. Its massive scale amazed and fascinated them. One morning US Minister Charles S. Todd encountered, in his estimate, “five hundred men kissing each other.” He thought that witnessing something like this, a sight uniquely “belonging to Eastern manners,” was worth the trip across the Atlantic.²⁶

Not everything that Americans experienced amid the Russian crowd was positive or pleasant. On the days of *grand fêtes* they came across a large number of drunks. The US diplomats had known about the common Russian addiction to alcohol since their first days in the capital. The servants they hired for the Legation were usually local, and from time to time they excused themselves from work due to *zapoi*, or a drinking binge. When they were not on *zapoi*, they still drank frequently. The local majordomes assured the ambassadors that firing these individuals was pointless as the replacements would be exactly the same. As a result, Americans dealt with violent behavior from inebriated employees. Dallas’ coachman once beat a postilion so cruelly that his “life was despaired of.”²⁷ Dallas had to speak to the police and make sure that a physician be procured for the injured servant. It stands to reason that, after such experiences, US diplomats would fear drunks in the Russian holiday crowds. However, they did not encounter drunken violence on holidays or weekends. Edward Wright reported that whilst “many a ludicrous sight was enjoyed as the poor creatures... went reeling along to their homes,” “no quarrelling was ever seen.”²⁸ Herbert J. Hagerman similarly observed that during *grand fêtes* the Russians who had imbibed still acted orderly. This could be attributed to the fact that downtown festival areas were under strict police supervision. Hagerman, though, thought there was an additional explanation: the inebriated men were “almost always

²⁶ G.W. Griffin, *Memoir of Col. Chas S. Todd* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Hafflefinger, 1873), p. 93.

²⁷ Dallas, p. 199.

²⁸ Wright, p. 168.

accompanied by someone who could take care of them, often by a sweetheart or a wife who seemed to take the situation as a matter of course.”²⁹

Feeling confident in the multitude of people that filled St. Petersburg’s downtown on holidays, Americans went shopping. Members of the US Legation quickly discovered that holiday, and for that matter, everyday shopping required some ingenuity. Shop owners or clerks usually watched the street in front of the entrance and tried to estimate the size of the guests’ wallets before they even entered the store. Having discovered that she was overcharged a few times, Katherine Breckinridge started dressing modestly for her shopping expeditions, and became a virtuoso incognito shopper. Instead of visiting glittering galleries such as Gostinyi Dvor, Breckinridge often headed to the open-air markets and holiday fairs where one could find interesting antique items or china that made perfect gifts.

Diplomats who brought families to St. Petersburg could not ignore Gostinyi because a fantastic toy store - Doinikov and Sokolova - was located there, and it attracted children like a magnet. In addition, on Palm Sunday and Christmas the streets surrounding the Gallery turned into the best outdoor shopping area in the city. Vendors in brightly colored temporary tents offered various knick-knacks, and a large selection of toys.³⁰ Children all over St. Petersburg eagerly awaited the fair, begging parents to take them shopping. Young Americans were no exception. Dora Allen, the wife of the US naval attaché Henry T. Allen, took her son and daughter to the “doll bazaar” in December. They spent a great amount of time browsing toys.³¹

It is important to note that in St. Petersburg outdoor events like this bazaar were often held in the winter, the coldest season, when venturing outside could present a big challenge. Modern scholarship recognizes that urban spectatorship involves more than taking mental snapshots of the city’s ambiance and experiencing pleasant or shocking encounters with its inhabitants. How one experiences and perceives a city is also shaped by the ways in which he adapts to climate and weather changes: by his ability to face the challenges and irritants to his various senses. For the Americans wanting to explore the Russian capital the biggest sensory trial turned out to be winter cold.

Getting through the cold months in St. Petersburg was difficult even for its natives. The arrival of winter, according to Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, gave everyone the blues, inducing the feeling that “something gloomy, awesomely devastating, and scary” was about to happen. But life had to go on, and, to their credit, the Russians learned “to outsmart mother-nature.”³² Layers of clothing and warm *shubas* allowed them to bravely step outside in the freezing temperatures. They

²⁹ Herbert J. Hagerman, *Letters of a Young Diplomat* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: The Rydal Press, 1937), p. 41.

³⁰ K. Zhukov and P. Klubkov, *Peterburg bez mundira* (Moscow: Olma Media Group, 2008), p. 46–47.

³¹ Henry T. Allen Papers Collection, The Library of Congress Manuscript Division. Box 1, 1893-95, *Dora Allen Diary, 1894*, December 28, 1894.

³² M.V. Dobuzhinsky, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), p. 10-11.

brightened their days by enjoying winter park amusements and sports, as well as sleigh rides on the Neva ice.

Local friends of the US diplomats encouraged them not to stay cooped up in their apartments, but to venture outside and see the magic of St. Petersburg covered with snow. In order to do so, the Americans first needed to purchase fur coats. The Russian coats, covered with velvet on the outside and lined with fur, were practical and well-designed. The dense velvet prevented them from getting wet, while their lining kept cold air out. Such marvelous creations of Russian tailors were quite expensive. Prices remained high throughout the century, and almost all US diplomats complained about them. In 1841, secretary of the Legation John Lothrop Motley lamented: "I have been obliged to spend for furs... and although I tried to keep as near the bottom of the ladder of prices (up which you may go for a single wrapper to \$10,000 or \$12,000) as was consistent with decency, yet the price was tremendous and would have clothed me for a year in Boston and three in Dedham."³³ Choosing the right furs caused Americans much anxiety. Black fox was stricken from the list right away as it was the costliest. US ministers and their wives usually decided on blue fox and beaver.³⁴ The price tag on these was still far from reasonable, but the high status of the Legation's first couple required such a splurge. Junior diplomats were free to select from a wider range of furs and could even happily settle on coon.

The new *shuba* owners were ready for the cold, if not, perhaps, for all the surprises that wearing *shuba* offered. When Edward Wright stepped outdoors, he was astounded by what he observed:

No human creatures are to be seen; but coons, bears, foxes, beavers and all sorts of animals are perambulating about, dressed up, if one might judge from their hats and boots, in the latest Parisian fashion. Walking out the other day with the animals for a little fresh air, I was astonished to see an odd looking *coon* draw up before me, and to hear my name pronounced with a chuckle. On examination I found it was Stoeckle, laughing away at my red nose...³⁵

It turned out that, in the freezing temperatures, Russian layered clothing and fur coats could sometimes hide their owners' identity, and give urban spectators a moment of anonymity that they craved.

Moreover, the arrival of freezing temperatures provided new opportunities for exploring the city. As soon as the ice of the Neva River got strong enough, Americans noticed small sleighs on it. Decorated with bells and bright ribbons, these festive sleighs belonged to the Laplanders who came to St. Petersburg from Finland to earn some seasonal cash. For mere pennies, they offered fast,

³³ John Lothrop Motley, *The Correspondence of John Lothrop Motley*. Vol. I. (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1900), p. 99.

³⁴ K.B., March 10, 1895.

³⁵ Wright, p. 88.

thrilling rides on the ice roads or through the city downtown. A few US diplomats succumbed to this temptation.

Another type of rides interested them as well – the legendary St. Petersburg ice mountains, a very popular and “dangerous sport.” The riders reached the summit of these structures by staircase, and then slid down a “steep concave of planking” coated with ice in a sled.³⁶ The taller the hill was, the faster and more abrupt was the descent. This entertainment was not for the faint-hearted. Bayard Taylor’s first experience at the ice hills proved petrifying. He discovered that the sleds accommodated two, one passenger, and one driver who guided the descent by slightly touching the ice with a gloved hand. Being a novice, Taylor rented a sled and hired a pilot:

I engaged one of the mujiks in attendance to pilot me on my first voyage. The man having taken his position well forward on the little sled, I knelt upon the rear end, where there was barely space enough for my knees, placed my hands upon his shoulders, and awaited the result. He shoved the sled with his hands, very gently and carefully, to the brink of the icy steep; then there was a moment’s adjusting; then a poise; then – sinking of the heart, cessation of breath, giddy roaring and whistling of the air, and I found myself scudding along the level with the speed of an express train. I never happened to fall out of a fourth-story window, but I immediately understood the sensations of the unfortunate persons who do. It was so frightful that I shuddered when we reached the end of it.³⁷

While Taylor found the ice mountains frightening, the younger members of the US Legation became addicted to them. Young bachelor Edward Wright purchased a fancy sled with “the softest of cushions,” and, every day, spent an hour at the amusement. He turned into an expert pilot and successfully used this fact to flirt with the ladies.³⁸

Americans believed that, despite the harsh St. Petersburg climate, children had to spend time in the fresh air and engage in outdoor activities. Parents taught their offspring not to fear the cold, taking them on sleigh rides and even to the ice hills. However, children’s favorite outdoor amusement was ice skating. As soon as the ice froze, skating rinks appeared everywhere in the city, ranging from small ones in people’s backyards to the large ones on the ponds and the Moika River. Families of US diplomats received invitations to skate in the Taurida Park, a prestigious place reserved for the royal family and top aristocracy. They also participated in private skating parties. Minister John W. Foster recalled that his children looked forward to such parties:

³⁶ Bayard Taylor, *By-Ways of Europe* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Son, 1869), p. 93.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Wright, p. 242.

The younger members of our family found much enjoyment in the skating parties in the private parks reserved for the nobility and the Diplomatic Corps, the grounds beautifully illuminated, and the skaters moving to the melody of a band of music detailed for the purpose while hot tea and sandwiches were served from adjacent booths.³⁹

Mary Breckinridge, daughter of the US Minister, described skating trips in St. Petersburg fondly, emphasizing that such outdoor activities gave her and her sister Lees an opportunity to socialize with young St. Petersburgers, and develop friendships with Russian children of their own age. Fifty years after her return from the city on the Neva, she still remembered the names of her best Russian friends, the “three charming... sisters (Annie, Dina, and Magda).”⁴⁰ Outdoor adventures in the Empire of the Tsars became some of the more interesting moments in her early life.

Examination of the US diplomats’ efforts to explore St. Petersburg offers insights into the general nature of urban spectatorship, and into its specific manifestations in an autocratic state such as the Russian Empire. The experiences of Americans provide evidence supporting the thesis that urban spectatorship is a phenomenon expressed in many forms, and that one can engage in it not only at leisure, but at work as well. US representatives successfully observed the locals and their traditions while attending various diplomatic functions, and even while making “mad dashes” through the city in the Legation’s carriage. They combined this on-duty observation with exploration of the city in their free time, and their reminiscences about their walks in St. Petersburg proved to be fascinating. These records revealed that, in an autocratic state, a person intending to take promenade and to enjoy some anonymous social botanizing could instead be forced to participate in theatrical displays of power staged by the monarch. Meanwhile, anonymous experience close to classical *flânerie*, with most likelihood, could be obtained by joining crowds of people at holiday festivities or going to the parks for sports and amusements. Having figured out these peculiarities of urban spectatorship in the capital of the Tsars, Americans managed to gather a large volume of unique information about St. Petersburg. Although they did not necessarily like encountering the Romanovs on the Nevsky, they still took care to record conversations with them for posterity. Their memoirs offered historians new details describing personalities of the Russian autocrats, as well as their methods of rule. After trips to the parks, ice hills, and skating rinks Americans did not hesitate to discuss the sensations and emotions that they had felt. They mentioned feeling exhilaration on a sleigh ride, dying from fear while descending

³⁹ J. W. Foster, *Diplomatic Memoirs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), p. 169.

⁴⁰ Mary Breckinridge, *Wide Neighborhoods: A Story of the Frontier Nursing Service* (The Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1981), p. 10.

ice mountain, or enjoying the warmth and comfort of a new *shuba*. For native St. Petersburgers these emotions and sensations were not new, and as their novelty had passed, Russian memoir writers rarely brought them up. By adding these details to the descriptions of life in the city on the Neva, American urban spectators made it possible to imagine 19th-century Petersburg in more vivid terms. Specialists in urban studies and history of St. Petersburg should view memoirs and diaries penned by US diplomats as a valuable resource.

About the Author

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