Sounds and Silences on the Neva Shores: US Diplomats about the Soundscape of Imperial St. Petersburg

Author: Svetlana Paulson

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Abstract
This article argues that multisensory approach to studying cultural communications and urban history yields productive results. Using memoirs, diaries, and letters penned by US diplomats, the author explores how records of their aural experiences help reconstruct a fuller picture of life in Imperial St. Petersburg and what new light they shed on the cultural communications between Americans and the population of the Tsar's capital.

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Svetlana Paulson

Cultures of the past, with their geographical and socio-political environments, are complex structures whose distinct characteristics create the spirit of the era and the soul of the place. The most effective approach to studying them is multisensorial. While much of the cultural information in human societies is visual, sonic signals and communications are also vital. Sonic weather alerts, church bells, traffic noise, or martial and holiday music serve as clues helping individuals orient themselves in their society.

For a researcher of urban history and cultural contacts examining sonic signals is indispensable. Integrating sounds and silences into the reconstruction of human interactions in the past gives it more texture and precision. It is important to understand how the soundscape of a culture was perceived not only by its natives, but by foreign "outsiders" as well. Foreigners noticed the sounds that the locals failed to mention due to their familiarity. Descriptions of these sounds in their letters and memoirs expand our knowledge about the place that they visited. Foreigners, of course, interpreted some local sonic communications in a way that corresponded with their own cultural backgrounds and differed from the traditions of the host culture. An analysis of these differences sheds light on the misconceptions and stereotypes that emerged in the process.

In the study of St. Petersburg and the Americans who lived there in the Imperial Era, a sonic approach is promising to reveal unique information. Adjusting to life in Russia's capital was especially difficult for the Americans. They had to deal with an inhospitable Northern climate. More importantly, for them as citizens of a republic, monarchy was alien, and they had to navigate an unfamiliar social and political culture. Succeeding in these tasks required developing sensitivity to the clues – both visual and sonic – associated with geography, as well as the social and political institutions. The number of Americans who came to Imperial St. Petersburg was small. Among them, the group that consistently resided there for long periods of time and wrote letters and memoirs were diplomats and their families. Since diplomats had contacts with the Russians ranging from domestic servants to the Tsar, their observations are of special interest. What did they report about daily life in Russia's most cosmopolitan city? Did the sonic communications produced by the capital's multiple ethnicities surprise them in any way? Did they change their expectations for St. Petersburg? How did Americans react to the

sonic signals reflecting social and political hierarchies in an absolute monarchy? Did their own convictions affect their ability to hear these signals? Overall, how do the sources penned by Americans compliment the Russian sources on the Imperial urban history?

The first introduction of American diplomats to St. Petersburg's environment - both physical and social - occurred when they moved into their places of residence. It differed from the experiences of their colleagues from other countries. While European powers like England purchased permanent residencies for their ambassadors, the US State Department expected its employees to rent housing at their own expense. As their family resources ranged from limited to affluent, their housing choices varied from modest hotel suites to sizable mansions. The fact that the American memoirs discuss numerous living accommodations in the Russian capital makes them uniquely valuable to urban historians.

In the early 19th century, when the US established diplomatic relations with Russia, literary travelogues were popular across the ocean. The French, Germans or Russians enjoyed publications that allowed them to see distant lands vicariously. A curious subgenre of such publications - the so-called armchair travel notes - gradually emerged. An author would sit by the window in his apartment or hotel room, and write a description of the street below, mentioning the shops, hotels, restaurants, and other attractions. In the Russian provinces, armchair notes about St. Petersburg sold very well: visitors to the capital used them as tourist maps. In some respects, however, the focus of the street travelogues on the facades of the buildings and establishments that they housed was limited. An occasional comment about a hotel, for example, did not offer readers a sufficient picture of life within its walls. The American diplomats provided interesting details, explaining why most of them ended up seeking other lodging.

The wife of the first US minister to St. Petersburg John Q. Adams, Louisa, recalled her family's 1810 stay in *Bordeaux* - one the city's oldest taverns turned into a hotel. Her most lasting memories proved aural, and it is remarkable how much they revealed about the hotel's physical and social ambiance. Louisa complained that she could not sing alone or accompanied on the piano by her sister Catherine "without hearing loud clapping of hands and brava's from the neighboring apartments on one side and on the other the directions of a Gentleman for the finishing touches of the toilet which always terminates with Rouge."[1] The walls were too thin, and guests learned too much about each other. While listening to the intimate process of a man's dressing was embarrassing to Louisa, it was doubly so to her unmarried young sister. Minister John Randolph reported similar issues. In the 1830s, he stayed in *Demouth,* a hotel like *Bordeaux,* but famous for the music concerts conducted on its premises. He did not mention any irritation at the sounds of music. However, the diplomat was startled by the commotion when a stranger "unceremoniously" accosted him and claimed to be

[1] Louisa Catherine Adams, *Diary and Autobiographical Writings of Louisa Catherine Adams. Vol. I, 1778-1815* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 319.

a court tailor who came to offer him new attire.[2] Considering such experiences, it is not surprising that most Americans looked for an opportunity to move to an apartment or house.

A rental place had to be creditable enough for a diplomat's status and the reputation of his country. St. Petersburg traditions required that a respectable household be maintained by a sizable staff. The US ambassadors had to hire local servants experienced in working for the Russian nobility, and, consequently, found themselves immersed in the world of a Russian home. They had to learn to navigate it. Mary Middleton shared her first visual observations about the houses in the heart of St. Petersburg: "Many of the fine houses have large windows of one entire plate of glass. The general style of building is French one might fancy oneself in a French house when one enters one in St. Petersburg. The mujuks however soon remind you where you are. Those are men with long beards in sheepskin coats... "[3] It is fascinating that, amidst the visual complexity of an affluent Russian home, the American eye latched onto an image that typically represented the inhabitants of Russia in the Western imagination. However, the multilingual cacophony of sound inside these houses belied such stereotypes. St. Petersburg was a cosmopolitan city, with many ethnic communities - from Tatar and Armenian to German and French. Throughout the century, the US diplomats reported that, besides the Russians, there were the Germans, the Finns, the Swedes, the French, the Dutch, and the Lithuanians among their domestic help. Having to communicate with each other and their employers, these employees learned multiple languages. Katherine Breckinridge's maid was fluent in four, the footman - in five, and her maître d'hôtel spoke seven.[4] English, though, was not a lingua franca in 19th-century Russia, and domestic personnel typically did not know it. Breckinridge's conversations with them sounded like a bewildering mixture of German and French. Almira Lothrop who was not linguistically proficient found herself in a predicament: "One man will harangue me in Russian, then go for another one who will deliver a volley in German, and the woman who is house-cleaning tries Swedish to no purpose."[5]

In this acoustic atmosphere, diplomats' children - just like the children of wealthy Russians - picked up languages quickly. Russian parents found it hard to control what their offspring heard and repeated from servants, nannies, and gouverneurs: "Once, I enter the children's room and see - Nadya and Lesya are rocking their dolls and singing a German song. At first, I rejoiced at

[2] Kenneth Shorey, ed., *Collected Letters of John Randolph of Roanoke to Dr. John Brockenbrough, 1812-1813* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 144.

[3] Mary Middleton, "Letter to Mrs. H. Ruthledge, November 26, 1820." Historical society of Pennsylvania, Cadwalader Family Papers Collection (1454), Series (Fisher), Box 547, F. 9.

[4] Katherine Breckinridge, "Letter to Susan Lees, November 3, 1894," "Letter to Susan Lees, June 16, 1895," in: Katherine Breckinridge's Papers, Private Collection, Magnolia, Arkansas, in the author's possession. Heretofore sited as K.B. and the date when the letter was written.

[5] Almira Lothrop, *The Court of Alexander III* (Philadelphia: The John Winston Company, 1910), 113-14.

their progress in German. Then, as I listened closely, - Oh, Lord, what is it? I cannot believe my ears. "Wilhelm schlief bei siener neuen Liebe!" - they were singing in their thin voices. I nearly lost my mind."[6] Breckinridge was not happy that her daughters got into a habit of speaking a mixture of German and French instead of using each language properly.[7] There was an upside to such situations, though - the American parents enlisted their children's help as translators.

When performing their tasks, much of the time, the domestic personnel "slipped about... noiselessly."[8] Nonetheless, there was plenty of drama and noise in the household - especially in the era of serfdom. Before 1861, the US diplomats hired both free domestics and serfs. Russian serf owners let some serfs who mastered professions (such as gourmet cooking or driving coach) move to the city and work for others, surrendering a share of their income. Serfs valued such arrangements: while they did not give them freedom, they offered them a degree of independence. In 1855, a tense moment involving Ivan, a serf coachman employed by Minister Thomas Seymour, occurred in the Legation. Dissatisfied with Ivan's fast driving, the Minister threatened to send him back "to his owner."[9] The drama that ensued was recorded by Attache Andrew Dickson White with its full sonic effect. Ivan "groveled before him [Seymour - S.P.], embraced his ankles, laid his head upon his feet, and there remained mumbling and moaning."[10] In the Russian eyes, the diplomat's decision was both ruinous to Ivan's life and unfair. The American did not realize that, in St. Petersburg, the VIPs' coachmen were taught to drive fast - to assert their clients' high status.

If someone on the domestic staff, indeed, was a bad worker, the others found creative ways to discipline them. The Breckinridges were amused and saddened by "a funny adventure" with a ringing doorbell.[11] In the evenings, their French governess left the children alone, sneaking out of the house to visit her lover. The parents were not aware of this, as they were often away at the evening receptions. Then, in the middle of the night, a loud insistent doorbell woke everyone up. Domestic staff, who hated the governess' abandonment of the children, had locked her out. In the morning, the maître-d-hotel, "with a pleased look on his face," told the Breckinridges that the offender at the door had been the French Madame.[12]

Not all the American residencies, of course, were bustling with sound. Bachelor diplomats in St. Petersburg were not required to entertain and could hire few servants. Soon after arriving in the Russian capital in 1850, Minister Neill Brown's wife returned to the USA, and he turned his apartment into that of a recluse. A staunch republican, Brown resented Russia's support of European

[6] K. Zhukov, P. Klubkov, *Peterburg bez mundira*, (Moscow: Oltima Media Group, 2008), 45. "Wilhelm slept with his new love."

[7] K.B., January 22, 1895.

[8] K.B., January 10, 1895.

[9] Andrew Dickson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White*. Vol. II (New York: The Century Co., 1906), 462.

[10] Ibid.

[11] K.B., May 12, 1895.

[12] Ibid.

monarchies during the revolutions of 1848 and viewed the Russian aristocracy as an idle class. His secretary Edward H. Wright noted: "The Governor honestly despises balls, dinners, and operas... because he considers them as fashionable folly."[13] While some diplomats used mingling with the locals as a tool for monitoring the situation in the Tsar's capital, Brown "resolved to show his independence" and stayed home. According to Wright, he would sit in front of his fireplace, "chewing and spitting and spitting and chewing."[14] For posterity, the Minister described St. Petersburg as "a dead alive place... There is no noise - even the birds are afraid to chirp lest the police should put them in lime."[15]

It is noteworthy that Brown used such a powerful symbol as silence. Researchers have pointed out that the notion of silence is a construct which is not exclusively or necessarily physical. Listener, for various reasons, can purposefully shut out or unconsciously ignore sounds - in other words, hear selectively. Due to his political convictions, Brown limited his interactions with St. Petersburg and its inhabitants, and his imagination registered silence. His choice of silent-bird metaphor revealed the depth of his selective hearing. Nineteenth-century St. Petersburg was notorious for its chirping birds – especially, its loud, brazen, and even obnoxious sparrows. It was built in a swampy area with few grazing meadows. Thousands of horses belonging to private owners, city services, and army regiments were held in stables and fed a diet containing oats all year round. This was heaven for sparrows. Not afraid of any janitors or police, their "swarms" became a noisy nuisance.[16]

The Americans who ventured out into the street became familiar with a variety of sounds that formed a unique acoustic signature of the Tsar's capital. Historian Nikolai Antsiferov has classified a range of urban sounds – from those relating to the weather and season changes to the ones of cultural, social, and political origin.[17] One of the main challenges for the US diplomats, upon arrival, was adjusting to the new climate. The weather in St. Petersburg being capricious, the Americans had trouble identifying visual and auditory clues associated with various seasons. Bayard Taylor did not heed the locals' warnings about the fast onset of winter, only to find it occurring in a matter of hours.[18] The establishment of winter was announced by the noise of snow-scraping. An army of janitors cleaned the pavements with screeching serrated shovels.[19] St. Petersburg native Mstislav Dobuzhinsky nostalgically recalled: "[When] janitors dumped snow off the roof, one had to step aside into the middle of the street. And what a special,

[13] Edward H. Wright, "Letters from St. Petersburg, 1850-1851," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, Vol. LXXX, No. 2, (April 1964): 78.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] V.V. Lapin, *Peterburg. Zapakhi i zvuki* (St. Petersburg: Evropeiskii dom, 2007), 61.

[17] N.P. Antsiferov, *Dusha Peterburga* (Petersburg: Brokgauz and Efron, 1922) http://elib.shpl.ru/ru/nodes/22188-antsiferov-n-p-dusha-peterburga-pb-1922#mode/inspect/page/11/zoom/5

[18] Bayard Taylor, *By-Ways of Europe* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Son, 1869), 87-88.

[19] D. Zasosov and V. Pyzin, *Povsednevnaiia zhizn' Peterburg na rubezhe XIX-XX vekov* (Moscow: Molodaiia Gvardiia, 1991), 42.

Petersburg, sound the resonating thump of snow blocks produced!"[20] American southerners like Katherine Breckinridge were fascinated with snow-scraping as well.[21]

Breckinridge noticed that two or three inches of snow was left on the roads for sleighing.[22] Riding in Russian conveyances could be both exhilarating and frightening. For the wife of Minister Edwin W. Stoughton, Mary, and niece Louise, their first ride in a Russian sleigh started with screams of horror and ended with laughter. Such sleighs had open sides, and a rider was secured in place with a sheepskin cover protecting him from the elements and flying debris. The process of fastening sheepskin over Mrs. Stoughton turned into a piece of street theater. Frightened, she kept crying: "I can't go. I shall fall out!"[23] The impatient horse gave little jumps, each one causing a new desperate cry. The ride, despite Mary's expectations, proved "great fun."[24] Edward Wright also enjoyed sledging. He figured out, however, that if the snow began to make cracking sounds, the temperature had dropped very low, and a long ride could result in a frost bite.[25] Wright used sonic clues for adjusting to the new climate. The fact that he brought this up in his letters is fascinating, for snow cracking in Petersburg was often a matter of discussion among foreigners. Some Russians even played practical jokes on them. One of Petr Viazemsky's acquaintances would authoritatively tell them that skilled Russian coachmen could maneuver their sleighs in such ways that snow cracking sounded like the tunes of various folk songs.[26]

Riding in a formal embassy carriage included a certain aural etiquette. The Americans had to listen to signals given to them by their footman, who sat on the box next to the coachman. When he spotted a member of the Imperial family approaching in a carriage or on foot, he knocked on the window to let the diplomats know that they needed to make a salutation. It was important, as the Romanovs, and especially Alexander I and Nicholas I, resented those who failed to greet them.[27] The diplomats also learned the signals bellowed out by coachmen. The resounding *Beregis'! (Make Way!)* cry warned everyone in the street that a carriage rider was a VIP, and gave Americans another reminder of how important rank and its outward manifestations were in the Russian society.

Vocal signals abounded in St. Petersburg. A new day in the city started with the voices of peddlers advertising their goods in a sing-song fashion. Natives of the Russian capital recalled their chorus fondly.[28] With very few exceptions, such

[20] M.V. Dobuzhinsky, *Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), 10.

[21] K.B., Dec 21, 1894.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Louise Stoughton, "Diary, January 11, 1878." Harvard University Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Louise Stoughton Papers, 1877-1879; Letters, December 9, 1877-May 18, 1879, A-67, f. 1-5.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Wright, 245.

[26] Petr Andreevich Vyazemsky, *Zapisnye knizhki* (Moscow: Zakharov, 2017), 273.

[27] Marie Hansen Taylor, *On Two Continents: Memoirs of Half a Century* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1905), 129.

[28] Dobuzhinsky, 10-11.

as Henry T. Allen and Jeremiah Curtin, US diplomats did not speak Russian, and did not register most of the verbal information exchanged by the locals. However, they paid attention to man-made noises that were – according to Antsiferov's classification – of social and political nature. Among these drumrolls, cannon shots, and military music occupied a prominent place.

St. Peterburg was the capital of a large empire, located on its very border. Consequently, it also became a military center for both the army and navy. In the 19th century, twenty six served as a ground for drills, reviews, and parades. Military presence, seen and heard daily, produced an impact on St. Petersburgers. Partly, this was a result of a conscious government policy. In the era of Nicholas I, regimental orchestras were encouraged to play upbeat victorious tunes as a way of promoting patriotic feelings. Each regiment played its own triumphant march, and civilians could tell from a distance whether the hussars, uhlans, chevalier guards, Cossacks, or dragoons had shown up in their neighborhood. According to the Russian memoir writers, this music - coupled with their resplendent uniforms - inspired pride in the Motherland among many St. Petersburgers, and especially in young boys. Aleksandr Benois recalled his feelings as a boy: "A special enthusiasm in me was aroused by orchestras – those that marched on foot, and, even more so, by the ones that played their famous marches (the spirit-rousing marches!) while riding their horses."[29] In his verses, poet Nikolai Nekrasov also mentioned martial music causing a surge of patriotism:

I stand very patiently
When the troops too numerous to count
Are crossing the road in front of me.
I care not
If my watch disappears from my pocket
Or the frost chills me to the bone
While the drums thunder martially.[30]

This military pageantry had an effect not only on the Russians, but foreigners as well, including the Americans. Sometimes this created difficulties for the US legation. Andrew Dickson White reported that, in the 1850s, during his tenure as a Military Attache, a number of Americans came to St. Petersburg seeking contracts to supply new military technologies to Russia. While some of their inventions deserved attention, others did not. One adventurer believed that his chances to make a sale would improve if he showed up in St. Petersburg wearing a military uniform. In one of the Western states, he bought a militia colonel's commission and a uniform of a major general. Upon his arrival on the Neva, he wore parts of his uniform mixed with civilian clothes. In the eyes of the locals who took uniforms very seriously, this man, according to White, became

[29] Aleksandr Benua, *Moi vospominaniia. V piati knigakh. Knigi pervaiia, vtoraia, tret'a* (Moscow: Nauka, 1990), 18.

[30] Nikolai Nekrasov, *About the Weather*, https://knigityt.ru/text/o-pogode/2/. The poem's translation here is made by S. Paulson.

a "standing joke."[31] However, when he heard the martial thunder of drums that impressed Nekrasov, matters turned even worse.

Drumroll was one of the more ubiquitous sounds in the city. Drums set the pace for marching troops and signaled various maneuvers to them by playing different cadences. The general public heard signals *march forward, retreat*, or *charge bayonets* from the training grounds so often that they had no trouble identifying them. Drumrolls saluted the Romanovs and high-ranking officers. In the 18th century, guardhouses were erected in every part of the city.[32] The sentinels on duty had to present arms to officers of lower rank. However, when a general passed by, the entire guard presented arms with the beating of drums. Having realized this, the American impostor general started walking by the guardhouses in full uniform, each time causing them – "to his delight" – to beat the drums. This disgusted "the generals of the Russian army and… the troops, who thus rendered absurd homage and found themselves taking part in something like a bit of comic opera." White lamented that the US diplomats had to engage in arduous effort to keep this kind of their countrymen within the limits of propriety when dealing with the locals.[33]

Cannon shots were heard in St. Petersburg as often as the drumroll. They were not a mere sign of military activity, but also a part of a city-wide notification system. In older Russian cities, various alerts were communicated to the population by ringing church bells. Peter the Great decided that cannons would play this role in his capital. Historian Vladimir Lapin suggested that the choice of the Bombardier Tsar was dictated both by his love for artillery and practical considerations: while medieval cities like Moscow formed compactly around their kremlins, St. Peterburg was spread over several islands, and cannon shots were heard there from a further distance than church bells.[34] Cannon fire warned St. Petersburgers about the impending floods, which on the Neva caused mass devastation and loss of life. City residents blamed Peter for having built on flood-prone terrain. Countess Tolstaya (Protasova) garnered celebrity by showing these sentiments publicly. When riding past the Bronze Horseman, she "could not help but indulge in the pleasure of sticking her tongue out at him."[35] Edward Wright expressed similar thoughts, albeit in a less radical way. In a letter to his sister, the American reported that cannon shots – flood warnings - had sounded, and admitted: "It is painful to have to believe that this magnificent city, situated as it is on the dead level shores of the tempestuous Baltic, may some day be overwhelmed by the waves."[36] Peter the Great "could not have selected a more unfortunate

[31] Andrew Dickson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickson White* (New York: The Century Co, 1905), 456.

[32] N.A. Sandalovsky, *Peterburg v armeiskom mundire* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2010), 57.

[33] White, 456-57.

[34] Lapin, 122.

[35] Vyazemsky, p. 96. Anna Petrovna Protasova was a lady-in-waiting. In 1810, she married count Varfolomei Vasilievich Tolstoy.

[36] Wright, 159.

position" for his capital.[37] On another occasion, Wright reported hearing cannons signaling that the ice was coming down from Lake Ladoga. He went to the river to observe hundreds of small boats make a dangerous last crossing of the season.[38]

The booming cannons also relayed social news, primarily dealing with the Imperial family. They announced the births, anniversaries, and passings of the Romanovs, underscoring their lofty position in the country's social and political order. A hundred volleys marked anniversaries and births of the Tsar's daughters, while the arrival of Tsar's heir was celebrated with a mighty three hundred. Almira Lothrop recalled the sonic impact: "I stopped to count the guns of the fortress which fired a salute of one hundred, and shook the house so the windows rattled."[39] Although meant to inspire awe, such cannonades, according to the Russian reports, produced results that were not always intended. The soundworks in honor of the unpopular members of the Imperial family were met with indifference or cynicism. When the much-disliked Alexandra, the wife of Nicholas II, gave birth, St. Petersburgers were counting cannon volleys and irreverently making money bets whether they would hear one or three hundred. US Ambassador John Foster witnessed the reaction of a famous financier, Sergei Witte. When the American was in his office, the phone rang and cannons fired, announcing the birth of a princess. Witte continued conversation "as if nothing had occurred," not even pretending in front of a foreign dignitary that he was happy for the Imperial couple.[40]

The largest number of artillery salvos accompanied the emperors' funerals. Peter the Great understood the importance of funerals in the imperial scenarios of power, and when transforming Russia into an empire, he introduced a lavish burial ceremony based on that of the French absolute monarchs. Over the next two hundred years it evolved, becoming more elaborate. On the one hand, it served as a demonstration of the Romanov dynasty's supreme power. On the other, a prominent participation of the new Tsar in the ceremony prepared his subjects for the transition to his reign. Not only the visuals, but also the sonic effects of the Sad Procession were scripted in detail. John Foster, who attended the funeral of Alexander II, was impressed by a grandiose cannonade during the movement of the funeral cortege: "The firing of the volley of artillery from the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul was the signal for the assembling of the cortege; a second volley was the signal for its formation; and a third for its march, when all the church-bells of the city began to sound, interspersed with artillery firing from all the forts."[41] Cannons fired at one-minute intervals until the procession reached the cathedral. The lowering of the coffin into the burial vault was accompanied by three hundred artillery salvos. Foster remarked that "probably no mortal ever received a more regal internment."[42] Yet, the American noticed the issues that

[37] Ibid.
[38] Wright, 79.
[39] Lothrop, 84.
[40] J. W. Foster, *Diplomatic Memoirs* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 230-31.
[41] Ibid, 185-86.
[42] Ibid.

had caused Russian observers to question the wisdom of such funerals: the more elaborate they became, the less sympathy for the Romanov family they elicited. The imperial subjects increasingly viewed them as theatrical shows. Residents of the streets, along which the Sad Procession marched, sold "tickets" to those who wished to watch the show from their windows.[43] Foster recalled: "In the crowds I saw an occasional… stray tear, but more often quiet laughter and commonplace joking, as is usual in ordinary assemblages of the middle or lower classes. There has been deep sorrow doubtless, but not to the extent that would have been expected."[44]

In their official capacity, the Americans also attended various events at the court, including birthdays and anniversaries accompanied by dinners and balls. They recorded unique observations about the sonic atmosphere at these receptions, allowing researchers to reconstruct a fuller, multisensory picture of life in the imperial palaces. A visit to the palace started with preparation of the attire that a diplomat would wear. The sight that he presented reflected upon the prestige of his country. In a hierarchical Tsarist society, military uniforms indicating high status of their wearers commanded particular respect. To impress the Russians, foreign ambassadors donned resplendent elaborate uniforms. However, in the locals' opinion, the skill of uniform wearing included both the visual and sonic effects. An officer was expected to make sure that his spurs and saber produced a "soft noble… melody" for which the Russians invented a special term "*malinovyi zvon*" (a mellow chime- S.P.). To achieve this effect, officers developed great control of their movements.[45] American memoirs reveal how challenging it was for uniform-clad diplomats who had not been career military to live up to these standards. Edward Wright recalled how the Dutch minister instead of "*malinovyi zvon*" created a loud explosion of shattered glass. At the reception in the palace of the Grand Duchess Helen, he "managed to get his sword into the midst of a pyramid of flowers; and turning around suddenly to pay his respects to a lady, down came with a crash the pyramid of cut glass, porcelain and dirt…"[46] The atmosphere of the royal reception, according to Wright, became "droll," reminding him "of some scenes in [his] younger days, when a party of giggling children attempt to put on the airs of great ladies and gentlemen."[47] Fortunately, the State Department required that the US diplomats wear civilian attire, saving them from uniform-associated mishaps.

Balls, masquerades, and celebrations at the imperial palaces were not just entertainment, but also a political and social arena where the Tsars asserted their supreme status, politicians and diplomats intrigued, and aristocrats found friendships and love. Sounds and silences, often strategically designed, were an integral part of these events. Upon arrival, the guests were greeted by ushers

[43] Osip Mandelstam, *Shum Vremeni*, https://www.lib.ru/POEZIQ/MANDELSHTAM/shum_wremeni.txt

[44] Ibid, 193.

[45] They also wore silver spurs that sounded better. D.S. Likhachev, *Izbrannoe: Vospominaniia, 3d edition* (St. Petersburg: Logos, 2006), 48.

[46] Wright, 248-49.

[47] Ibid.

whose "silent gravity… and… slow, majestic, almost mysterious march" amazed Bayard Taylor.[48] The motionless guards in the halls produced an even stronger impression: "their respiration seems to be suspended. There is something weird and uncanny in such a preternatural silence and apparent death-in-life."[49] The contrast between the personnel's silence and the guests' chatter, as well as music in the great hall was palpable. The music commenced with a loud blast at the entrance of the Imperial family.[50] Republican Americans noted how this silence/sound dichotomy reflected social divisions in an autocracy.

While the balls showcased the aristocrats' privilege, the latter still had to follow a sonic protocol. Speaking to the Emperor or Empress first was prohibited. In their memoirs, the Americans admitted that, coming from a different political culture, they sometimes failed to abide by this rule. Katherine Breckinridge noticed that Empress Alexandra felt uncomfortable in public, and initiated a conversation with her, hoping to boost her confidence. According to Breckinridge, the Empress seemed grateful and did not mind her transgression.[51]

Receiving personal attention from the Tsar was considered prestigious, a factor that the Romanovs exploited in their political games. At the 1810 ball, Louisa Adams found herself at the center of Alexander I's intrigue against France. Raised by Catherine the Great, Alexander learned to use ballroom diplomacy for signaling change in his foreign policy and manipulating foreign ambassadors. He lavished attention on those whom he wanted to be his allies, snubbed the ones whose counties displeased him, and pitted diplomats against each other. Many contemporaries considered him a superb political player. Adams' description of her interactions with Alexander, and especially its sonic details, offer a rare example of his methods. The Tsar invited Louisa to the Polonaise, the opening dance at the ball. Such an invitation was typically issued to the highest-ranking female guest. As the American was not, the breach of tradition turned heads. Alexander proceeded with a charm attack on Mrs. Adams. After the music stopped, he tried to "converse with her." However, the Tsar had hearing problems, and Louisa was temporarily deaf due to an illness. His gallantry resulted in awkward silence. With all the attention on the pair, Adams felt uncomfortable. Alexander, on the other hand, remained unperturbed and danced with Louisa's sister. Not knowing anything about monarchies, the young American "began laughing and talking to him… herself beginning the conversation contrary to all usages du Monde."[52] This dance "produced a Buz of astonishment" among the guests.[53] The Tsar seemed pleased. His intentions became clear to Louisa when he caused the same buzz around the Americans at the next ball. By showing them favoritism and ignoring the French, Alexander signaled that Russia was aligning itself with the USA and moving away from France. The French ambassador left the gathering. Adams'

[48] Bayard Taylor, *By-Ways of Europe* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Son, 1869), 96.
[49] Ibid, 102.
[50] Ibid, 97.
[51] K.B., December 29, 1895.
[52] Adams, 318-19.
[53] Ibid.

reminiscences about the aural atmosphere at the 1810 balls, and her sister's and other guests' vocal reactions to Alexander's diplomatic maneuvers add a new depth to a reconstruction of the 19th-century palace events. They demonstrate how political information was communicated through subtle sonic clues, and how sensitive the attendees were when detecting them.

American memoirs also reveal fascinating nuances relating to the ball entertainments that were at the intersection of visual arts, music culture, and politics. Arguably, the most prominent among them were the living pictures that had emerged as a static art pre-dating photography. A group of performers selected a famous painting and froze in various attitudes, imitating the people depicted in it. In the 19th century, living pictures were very popular. The middle class enjoyed staging them at home parties - as a creative group activity where participants demonstrated their amateur acting skills. The aristocrats of St. Petersburg turned this art form into a display of privilege. At the imperial balls, they organized veritable galleries of living pictures. Since costumes for these exclusive events cost astronomical sums, and "actors" were invited to rehearse at the palace, participation in such performances was a status symbol.

In 1822, Mary Middleton attended a grand picture staging at a fête given by Empress Maria Fedorovna in honor of her daughter Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna. The sequence of living pictures copied a Hermitage gallery. The guests received beautiful programs listing the performers and imitated paintings. This program alongside an excerpt from the memoir of a writer Vladimir Sollogub has served historians as the main source of information about the 1822 show.[54] Sollogub, however, was only nine when he saw it. His notes were brief and visual. By contrast, in her unpublished letter to a friend, Middleton described both what she saw and heard. She mentioned that living picture performances contained musical and vocal elements. For instance, the impersonation of *The Spanish Conversation* by Charles-Andre van Loo was accompanied by music. "As the Empress stood before this picture the orchestra began to play "les folies d'Espagne" which had a very pretty effect." The American was most impressed by the last living picture of the evening representing a village fair. It was so massive that professional actors had to be hired to play peasants, and, besides the adults, fifty children participated in the performance. "They imitated… a fair, in which the peasants were drawn amusing themselves in various ways. In a minute or two the figures began to be animated, some danced to one who played on a violin, others began to eat and drink… and each did what one would expect to see at merry-making. After a few minutes they all at once resumed the attitude they had at first assumed and the curtain fell! Nothing was heard but the exclamations of surprise!"[55]

[54] Images from the Program can be found here: http://www.raruss.ru/ceremonies/1461-representation-de-la-fete.html

[55] Mary Middleton, "Letter to Mrs. H. Ruthledge, April 27, 1822." Historical society of Pennsylvania, Cadwalader Family Papers Collection (1454), Series (Fisher), Box 546, F. 6-7.

Middleton's report is of special interest to researchers studying the symbolism of visual and musical culture. In the 19th century, an emphasis in a living-picture presentation was typically placed on the perfection of a frozen pose. Performers competed in achieving an ideal still attitude. While sound effects were used sometimes, they were of a secondary importance and not considered necessary. At the 1822 living-picture show that served as an example for similar palace events in St. Petersburg for the rest of the century, sound effects and motion came to the forefront. The music and movement started when the Empress approached. Just like the sun awakened nature, the Empress breathed life into a still form, setting it in motion and giving it sound. This arrangement of the living pictures reflected the symbolism of the autocratic-rule era.

In recent decades, sensory studies developed rapidly. Linguists and anthropologists have pioneered research demonstrating that sensory experiences, while transitory, do not vanish without a trace. Smells or sounds dissipate, but memories of them last. Languages, for instance, accumulate vocabulary describing food smells or street noises. Based on such words in a society's language, scholars can discern information about its dietary practices or economic activities.[56] The methods used by linguists and anthropologists have inspired historians to examine how sensory records can enhance our understanding of cultural traditions, socio-political institutions, as well as cross-cultural contacts in the past. Sensory studies of US history have produced impressive results. An analysis of the differences in sound perception by Native Americans and Puritans allowed the reconstruction of a more nuanced picture of their encounters. An examination of the sonic traditions brought by enslaved Africans to America helped to explain how their sonic culture differed from that of the whites.[57] While aural aspects of domestic US history have been discussed by researchers, the Americans' sonic experiences abroad, in countries like Russia, have not yet received appropriate attention. In Russia, sensory history is gaining popularity. Scholars there have analyzed the role of sounds in the Orthodox religious tradition and noted the differences in the aural atmosphere of Moscow and St. Petersburg.[58] They have also written essays on local olfactory culture, using Russian and even some French sources.[59] Unfortunately, they have not produced any sensory works based on American letters, diaries and memoirs.

Analysis of American sources from a sonic perspective in this article shows that they deserve a systematic investigation by sensory historians. Records of

[56] A good example of how linguistics is used in sensory studies can be found in Constance Classen, "Other Ways to Wisdom: Learning through the Senses across Cultures," *International Review of Education*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (1999), 269-280.

[57] A detailed survey of works dealing with aural aspects of US domestic history is offered in Richard Cullen Rath, "Hearing American History," *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (Sep. 2008): 417-431.

[58] L. A. Shumikhina, "Kolokola – simvoly russkoi kul'tury," https://elar.urfu.ru/bitstream/10995/50195/1/sr_2003_012.pdf; L.E. Liapina, *Mir Peterburga v russkoi poezii: ocherki itstoricheskoi poetiki* (St.Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriia, 2010). V.V Lapin, Op. cit.

[59] A. Stroev, "Chem pakhnet chuzaia zemlia," in *Aromaty and zapakhi v kul'ture*, Vol. 2, ed. by O.S. Vainshtein (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003), 75-100.

the US diplomats' auditory experiences shed valuable light on many aspects of life in Imperial St. Petersburg. Discussions of their housing arrangements and encounters with the local domestics offer a fascinating perspective on the multiethnic culture of the Tsar's capital. The cacophony of various languages surprised Americans, indicating to them that they would deal with an ethnically diverse staff. One of the more interesting facts in their reminiscences is that the staff who, for the most part, could not boast a high education level, spoke four or five languages. This suggests that they had acquired these skills through practice in the community, and that the communications and ties among St. Petersburg's ethnic communities were stronger than is often acknowledged today.

The depth or shallowness of a diplomats' perception of the Imperial capital, as the case of Minister Brown showed, depended on the degree of his professional flexibility. Due to his ardent devotion to republican values, Brown went so far as to limit his contacts with Tzarist subjects to the bare minimum. He failed to truly hear St. Petersburg, and later made distorted statements about it. On the other hand, Americans who were open to investigating their environment, listened to the city noises, both natural and manmade. They learned to adjust to the new climate by noticing moving ice on the Neva or crackling snow. Their descriptions of the sound effects that accompanied seasonal changes can be helpful to researchers analyzing how 19th-century weather patterns affected daily life in the Russian capital.

As outsiders in an absolute monarchy, US diplomats with a curious mindset developed sensitivity to social and political aural signals. Their observations about the Romanovs' burial ceremonies were remarkably astute and similar to the opinions of the Russians who criticized them for having become too theatrical and lacking a genuine solemn spirit.

American reminiscences also offer unique details about receptions at the Imperial palaces. In this setting, with the ear of an inquisitive foreigner, they detected subtle sounds and silences that served as status markers in the absolute monarchy's social hierarchy. Their reports, such as the Middleton letter regarding the living pictures, contain nuanced information about these markers that is not available in the Russian sources. Historians examining foreign policies of Alexander I will find American notes on how he used sonic clues in a ballroom to manipulate his allies and opponents valuable. Overall, the unique data that the US diplomats shared demonstrates that the majority adapted well to St. Petersburg, finding ways to communicate with the locals. This data adds important missing pieces to the puzzle of the city's soundscape, revealing its deeper meanings.

About the Author: Svetlana E. Paulson is Professor of History at Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia, Arkansas. She has authored a series of articles about the experiences of US diplomats in Imperial St. Petersburg. Several of these articles have appeared in the *Journal of Russian American Studies* (*JRAS*).