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The return of history: Museum, heritage, and national identity in Imperial Russia

Katia Dianina

Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Virginia, USA

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ABSTRACT

History plays a major role in the formation of nations. Museums of history, as they emerged during the long 19th century, are pivotal sites for the display of national heritage and identity. The present article considers the origins of the State Historical Museum in Moscow as a “festival of public activity” and discusses its unique civic character. Although the *idea* of a public museum was not new, in imperial Russia it had existed only as a figment for much of the nineteenth century, until Russian National Museum (*Russkii natsional'nyi muzei*) was founded in 1872.

The press represented the museum as an institution that should cultivate in its visitors pride for the country and “lay a foundation for national consciousness.” The museum’s vast task—to visually represent the millennial history of the Russian state—qualified the Historical Museum as a *national* institution. The museum was “national” in another sense, too: it came to occupy a major place in public culture. Prepared by years of open discourse that problematized and prioritized issues of national identity in the course of which Russian society also learned the basic grammar of representation, the museum assumed a prominent place in society. Years before its opening, the Historical Museum had already become the talk of the nation.

Paradoxically, unlike the popular discourse built around the museum, the institution itself did not fare well. When in 1883, eleven years after its founding, the museum finally opened its doors to the public in conjunction with Alexander III’s coronation, only a fraction of the overall design was implemented. Today the newly opened State Historical Museum returns to assume the role in society that was well articulated but never realized by its progenitor: to serve as an anchor of national identity, a link between the present and the past, and a monument to a revived national tradition.

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The State Historical Museum in Moscow changed names and expositions many times. In 2006, the museum completed its main display, which covers the history of the Russian state up to the beginning of the 20th century. The former Lenin

E-mail address: dianina@virginia.edu



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Museum in Red Square and adjacent buildings, recently added to the Historical Museum, will accommodate the Soviet period. After decades of experiments during the Soviet era, and following the most recent reconstruction and update, the museum celebrated the 125th anniversary of its opening in 2008 with a number of special exhibitions and print editions.¹

¹ Among the jubilee exhibitions that took place in 2008 were “The Museum and the Artist” (*Muzei i khudozhnik*) and “The Historical Space of the Historical Museum” (*Istoricheskoe prostranstvo Istoricheskogo muzeia*). See also a commemorative edition, [Iukhimenko \(2008\)](#).

The return of history to the museum in Red Square, described traditionally as the first such “national” institution, has resonated throughout post-Soviet society. The present article considers the origins of the Historical Museum as a “festival of public activity” (*Otkrytie Politekhnichekoj vystavki*, 1872) and its unique civic character, which, despite decades of hiatus, has remained one of the few constants in the museum’s turbulent history.

1. Moscow’s cultural renaissance

Around the middle of the 19th century, a tremendous growth of culture took place in Moscow. Contemporaries began representing the old Russian capital as the seat of the revived national tradition, in distinct contrast to cosmopolitan imperial St. Petersburg and its modern Western influences, which had helped little to define the unique face of Russia. The press made a great deal of Moscow’s special status especially in the 1860s and 1870s. The newspaper *Moscow*, founded by the Slavophile ideologue and journalist I.S. Aksakov, for instance, promoted the city as “Russia’s genuinely national capital.”² For the historian M.P. Pogodin, a leading figure of official nationality, Moscow was a kind of an ideal mirror, which for the first time reflected the peace and harmony of Slavic brotherhood. Later, N.V. Polenova reminisced about the spirit of the era: “The general national orientation of that time was toward the depth (*glub’*) of Russia and further away from the official, artificial St. Petersburg.” (*Polenova*, 1922, p. 26)

Several milestones helped define the progress of national culture from St. Petersburg to Moscow. Moscow’s cultural renaissance began in 1862, with the opening of the Rumiantsev Museum. Comprised of the rich collections of Count N.P. Rumiantsev, including some 29,000 noteworthy books, the museum had first opened in St. Petersburg in 1831. But after three decades, it was in decline. Upon its transfer to Moscow, however, to the prominently located Pashkov House, the museum assumed center stage in Moscow’s public life. In 1867, the Ethnographic Exhibition took place in Moscow and gave foundation to another Moscow public museum, the Dashkov. Five years later, the Polytechnical Exhibition of 1872 was held in the city and engendered two more permanent institutions, the Polytechnical and Historical Museums. Several private art galleries welcomed visitors, including the Kokorev collection, which opened to the public in 1862, and the Golitsyn Museum, which admitted the public in 1865. Private galleries of the Muscovites S.N. Mosolov, V.R. Trofimovich, and the Golokhvastovs received coverage in the press as well.³ Later in the century, the Tretyakov Gallery would assume a leading role in delivering Russian art to the public.

² As cited in Maiorova (2001). I.S. Aksakov’s panslavist newspaper was founded in 1867, the same year that the Ethnographic Exhibition and the Slav Congress took place in the city; after several warnings by the censor, *Moscow* was eventually closed in 1868.

³ *Moskovskie kartinye gallerei (chastnykh liubiteli) (1863)*. For more on the history of Russian art collections, see Gray (2000).

In an age of national self-awareness, Moscow came to signify the missing core of Russian cultural identity. Patriotic agitation in the wake of the 1863 Polish Uprising led to speculation about whether it might be necessary to formally transfer the capital from St. Petersburg to Moscow.⁴ In the realm of visual culture, too, the 1860s’ turn to Moscow was an overtly national turn. Russian themes and styles came to dominate Moscow’s visual culture, as entire collections of Russian art (Pavel Tretyakov’s, most famously) and whole museums devoted to Russian history (the Rumiantsev Museum, the Historical Museum) appeared in the city. The symbolism of this new center of culture was transparent: the Moscow museums and exhibitions of the second half of the nineteenth century harkened back to pre-petrine Russia. Prominent cultural institutions in the heart of the old city gave rise to a new foundational narrative, that of a genuine and pure Russian nation, strong in tradition and presumably free of foreign influence.⁵

A special set of circumstances attended the expansion of Moscow’s cultural scene: private initiative, broad access, and national thematics. Moscow’s new institutions of culture were genuinely public: the Rumiantsev, Ethnographic, Polytechnical, and Historical Museums all emerged as a result of initiatives on the part of private persons and voluntary associations. In the second half of the nineteenth century, individuals and societies played increasingly important roles in organizing public museums and exhibitions.⁶ Unlike St. Petersburg’s Hermitage or the Academy of Fine Arts—both state-sponsored institutions in essence—the participation of the state in the organization of the Moscow exhibitions and museums was minimal.

2. The Polytechnical Exhibition, 1872

The Historical Museum grew out of the Russian National Polytechnical Exhibition of Industry and the Arts that opened in Moscow in May 1872 and ran with great success throughout that summer. 88 different pavilions were built for the occasion inside and around the Kremlin, housing exhibits that belonged to twenty-six different departments. 750,000 people visited the exhibition during that summer, an impressive figure for Moscow whose population was estimated at 400,000.⁷

The exhibition was a major public event that aspired to engage the Russian society in a common project. Like the Ethnographic Exhibition five years earlier, the Polytechnical

⁴ Dostoevsky, for instance, was a big advocate of this idea (*Panteleev*, 1958). Newspapers, too, supported this discussion on the capital cities. See, for instance, *Nechto po povodu stolits (1863)*.

⁵ For more on the Moscow Kremlin as the center of enlightenment and the arts, see, for instance, *Moskovskii publichnyi i Rumiantsevskii muzei, Torzhestvennoe zasedanie v pamiat’ grafa N. P. Rumiantsova, 3 apreliia 1897g.* (Moscow, 1897), 6–7.

⁶ *Ravikovich (1990)*. Cf. Khodnev, for instance, argued for the establishment of public museums supported by voluntary associations, such as the Free Economic Society (*Vol’noe Ekonomicheskoe obshchestvo*). *Khodnev (1862)*. V.V. Stasov likewise emphasized the importance of private initiative, independent of the government (*Stasov, 1894*). On exhibitions in the first half of the nineteenth century, see, *Mikhailovskaia (1961)*.

⁷ *Zhuravskaia (1995)*. For the number of visitors on individual days, see, for instance, *Obmokni (1872c)*.

Exhibition was sponsored by a voluntary association, the Society of the Friends of Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography (*Obshchestvo liubiteli estestvoznaniia, antropologii i etnografii*, or OLEAE). It was the OLEAE's initiative to host a national exhibition in 1872 and to use its collections as a basis for an applied science museum. The choice of central Moscow as the main site of festivities served as official endorsement of the exhibition: "By sharing space in and around the Kremlin customarily reserved for state or religious ceremonies," Joseph Bradley concludes, "the government conferred a degree of legitimacy on the projects of nongovernmental associations."⁸

The result of this temporary exhibition was far-reaching not only in that it gave birth to the permanent Historical Museum. It highlighted the initiative of voluntary associations and private persons in imperial Russia, helped shape the taste and values of the Russian middle estate, and overall encouraged a sense of national awareness in the Russian public. The contemporary press was keen on emphasizing that the exhibition was the "first major enterprise" organized by the private sector (*chastnaia initsiativa*).⁹ The exhibition also helped advance the cause of general education, which the organizers deemed to be the show's primary focus.¹⁰ The newspaper *Grammian* (*Gramotei*), which was aimed at a broad mass of readers still in need of further schooling, made concerted effort to explain to its readership not only the exhibition proper, but all the unfamiliar terminology associated with it (museum, exhibition, polytechnical, etc.) (N.M., 1872a). Public lectures likewise aided the organizers in reaching their educational goals. Newspapers, for instance, broadly advertised a dozen lectures on Peter the Great and his importance for the Russian people given by the famous historian S.M. Solov'ev in April and May 1872. These free history lessons attracted, according to one newspaper, "the most numerous public from the various classes of Moscow society" (*Moskva, 1-go Maia, 1872*).

Three departments displayed relics from the national past—those given over to history, the navy, and the defense of Sevastopol'. It was among the organizers of the Sevastopol' display, A.A. Zelenyi, A.S. Uvarov, and N.I. Chepelevsky, that the idea of a permanent Historical Museum originated in 1871.¹¹ In the Sevastopol' display, the Crimean War, which was remembered as a national disgrace, was represented from the perspective of Russian heroism.¹² Here one could find the portraits and personal belongings of Russian heroes, model ships and examples of weapons, maps, strategic

plans, and even a whole mobile hospital. This patriotic, commemorative display was amplified by a collection of archaeological finds from Kherson, an ancient site in the vicinity of Sevastopol', which had been excavated under Uvarov's leadership and which produced relics dating to the Christening of Rus' and other valuables of Russian antiquity.¹³ The juxtaposition of Sevastopol' with ancient Kherson reinforced the old tradition of Russian military glory, just as it helped deflect the viewers' attention from the not-so-glorious results of the military fiasco of 1853–1856.¹⁴

The positioning of the Sevastopol' department next to a historical display filled with Peter the Great's paraphernalia offered another reassuring context within which to view recent history. The celebration of Peter the Great and his numerous conquests provided a solid background against which to reframe the memory of Sevastopol'. The figure of Peter the Great—a Russian "historical hero," according to contemporary press—loomed large at the Polytechnical Exhibition of 1872, the opening of which was timed to coincide with the bicentennial of his birth on May 30.¹⁵ Remembrance of the great Peter occasioned an upsurge of national feeling: Minister of War D.A. Miliutin, for instance, observed that the festivities stirred patriotic feelings in society.¹⁶ The press helped disseminate such noble sentiments broadly. Both Peter's personal belongings and his military conquests became subjects of popular pride. The newspapers eagerly traced the progress of Peter's old sailboat (*botik*), familiarly known as the "grandfather of the Russian Navy," from St. Petersburg to Moscow and cheered its installation at the exhibition's Navy Pavilion. They celebrated the Historical Department of the exhibition—essentially a memorial to Peter—as a "gigantic temple" (*khramina*), as one correspondent put it (*Stromilov, 1872b*). The press represented "Peter's" pavilion as the exhibition's core, the origin of all other branches of Russian industry and the arts.¹⁷ Peter's portraits, his bed, his medals, and the first edition of *The Russian News* (*Russkie vedomosti*)—all these and many other objects were put on display in the Historical pavilion (*Kachenovsky, 1872*). Newspapers wrote about all aspects of life connected with the great tsar. The press reviewed all existing monuments to Peter, published a feature about popular entertainment in his day, discussed Peter's contribution to the development of public life, surveyed the history of St. Petersburg, Peter's most inspired

⁸ Bradley (2008). Bradley has written extensively about the OLEAE and its role in organizing the Polytechnical Exhibition of 1872, most recently in Bradley (2009). See also Bradley (1991) and Bradley (2002).

⁹ See, for instance, Obmokni (1872b). The financing of the project was complex; a number of different sources contributed to the exhibition, including the government, which sponsored the Naval and the Historical pavilions, among several others (Bogdanov, 1914). See also Shaginian (1965).

¹⁰ According to Zhuravskaia, the main goal of the exhibition was to promote people's education ("sodeistvovat' narodoobrazovatel'nym tseliam"). Zhuravskaia, 10.

¹¹ For more on the foundation of the museum, see Razgon (1960).

¹² Contemporaries admitted to a certain unease over recent memories of the Crimean War that circulated in the society. See, for instance, Obmokni (1872a). See also Lebedinskaia (1995).

¹³ Zhuravskaia, 17.

¹⁴ A guidebook explained the intricate connection between the different exhibits from different eras in the Sevastopol' pavilion as follows: "In their entirety, the various collections of this department narrate with great feeling the valorous heroic deeds, which mark the contemporary history of the same very Rus' that nine hundred years ago, in the vicinity of the very same Sevastopol', in ancient Chersonesus, won itself glory not only through military action, but what is more important, through the acceptance of the Christian faith from the Greeks." *Imperatorskii rossiiskii istoricheskii muzei: ukazatel' pamiatnikov*, izd. 2, dop. (Moscow, 1893), iii. The city was originally named Korsun'; the Greeks referred to it as Chersonesus; later, the Slavs called it Kherson.

¹⁵ "Peterburg, 29-go maia," *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 30 May 1872, no. 147.

¹⁶ Shaginian cites an entry from D.A. Miliutin's diary. See Shaginian, 101–102.

¹⁷ For instance, N.M., 1872b.

creation, etc.¹⁸ For the duration of the festivities, even the eternal competitors, St. Petersburg and Moscow, seemed to have partially reconciled. The celebration of Peter in Moscow indeed gave modern prestige to the old Russian capital. As one correspondent observed, “Peter I appealed to Russia to take initiative, and now Moscow celebrates his bicentennial with such a festival of public activity that he would be sure to greet it with a kind word.” (*Otkrytie Politekhnikheskoi vystavki, 1872*)

In this historically rich context, the Moscow Polytechnical Exhibition appeared as a “living monument” to Peter the Great, a uniquely Russian tribute that arose out of patriotic feelings, as one journalist framed it. Developing this felicitous metaphor further, the same author observed that the exhibition possessed a distinct “Russian national character.” “Following the history of this wonderful exhibition, we cannot but exclaim with Pushkin: ‘This is the Russian spirit; it smells of Russia here’ (*Zdes’ Russkii dukh, zdes’ Rus’iu pakhnet!*)” (*Iubilei Petra I (itogi), 1872*). Peter’s imperial ambitions notwithstanding, the Polytechnical Exposition clearly took a Russian turn.

Russian national character could not be missed in the distinct architecture of the exhibition either. For the first time, the Russian style was used as the organizing principle of an exhibition. (Technically, this new architectural style had been first applied at the Exhibition of Manufacture in St. Petersburg two years earlier, but the press had passed over it in silence at that time). The chief architect of the exhibition, D.N. Chichagov, maintained this original style throughout—in the specially designed pavilions, in the theater, and the restaurants. Made mostly of wood and decorated with traditional carved ornamentation, the exhibition’s many buildings in their totality produced the impression of a gingerbread village borrowed from some familiar fairytale. The Historical Pavilion containing Peter the Great’s memorabilia attracted more attention than others. Contemporaries noted that V.A. Gartman’s architectural design was the “most original” (*preoriginal’nyi*): the semi-circular temporary structure, with a likeness of a Russian church in its center, was executed in a style that would soon take over the center of Moscow, with the construction of permanent edifices to house the Historical Museum, the Polytechnical Museum, and the Moscow Arcade in the following decades (*Kachenovsky, 1872; Lisovsky, 2000*).

Another distinguishing feature of the Polytechnical Exhibition was broad press coverage. Many newspapers wrote about the exhibition, but one of them, the daily *Herald of the Moscow Polytechnical Exhibition* (*Vestnik Moskovskoi Politekhnikheskoi vystavki*), was founded by editor and publisher S.P. Iakovlev specifically for the purpose of covering the exhibition. In its composition, the newspaper represented the whole microcosm that was the Polytechnical Exhibition. Beginning May 1, 1872, *The Herald* published daily updates on the exhibition’s progress and detailed accounts of its various departments; it announced

the Rules for public behavior and calculated the number of visitors. The newspaper emphasized the importance of visual culture in general and separate exhibits in particular, as well as provided an overview of industrial exhibitions abroad and translated accounts of the Moscow show from the foreign press; it also showcased numerous advertisements and occasional works of fiction. Outlining the newspaper’s “program,” the editor also emphasized that, aside from being a “true and complete reflection of everything that is to take place at the Exhibition,” the daily should also contain official announcements, foreign telegrams, court records, stock exchange news, correspondence from the provinces, descriptions of tourist attractions, and feuilletons about Moscow public life (*fel’eton moskovskoi obshchestvennoi zhizni*) in order to be a genuinely comprehensive guide to visitors.¹⁹ Letters to the editor indicate that the public needed such a publication—a forum to exchange opinions about an exhibition that was turning into an event of national importance.

3. The Russian National Museum

The *idea* of a national museum was not new but for much of the nineteenth century, the Russian national museum existed only as a figment. The first concerted attempts to establish a public institution for the visual display of national identity were undertaken in the early nineteenth century. In 1817, under the title “A Proposal for the Establishment of a Russian National Museum,” the journal *Son of the Fatherland* (*Syn otechestva*) published an article by the Prussian scholar Friedrich von Adelung, who urged the founding of a new kind of encyclopedic institution, a national museum (*natsional’nyi muzei*), that “will allow the immeasurably vast and extraordinarily diverse Russian state to be viewed with ease”.²⁰ Aside from Adelung’s, two other projects for a national museum appeared in the 1820s, those of Burckhard von Wichmann and P.P. Svin’in. But all these intellectual undertakings remained fruitless at the time. A similar fate befell the proposal for a Museum of Aesthetics (*Esteticheskii muzei*) in the 1830s. Plans for ethnographic and historical museums dating to 1845 when the Imperial Russian Geographic Society was founded were likewise left unrealized.²¹

In 1862, the year of Russia’s Millennium, a project for a comprehensive museum representing all spheres of Russian life and knowledge again became topical.²² When

¹⁸ *Iz zhizni i deianii Petra Velikogo* (1872), *Liubetsky* (1872), *Lupakov* (1872), *Peterburg pri Petre Velikom* (1872), *Peterburgskii listok*, 17 May 1872, no. 96, *Stromilov* (1872a). For discussion of Peter’s bicentennial, see also *Wortman* (2000).

¹⁹ *Moskva, 1-go Maia* (1872). See also *Vestnik Moskovskoi Politekhnikheskoi vystavki*, 18 May 1872, no. 18; 29 May 1872, no. 29; 6 July 1872, no. 67. By all counts, the Department of Turkestan was one of the most popular ones; see, for instance, *Obmokni’s* account of it in an issue dated 30 July 1872, no. 91. Amidst other sundry details, the newspaper reported that one litterateur—I.S. Turgenev—attended the exhibition. Many other newspapers and journals wrote about the exhibition as well. See, for example, *Vnutrennee obozrenie* (1872).

²⁰ As cited in *Thomas* (1998). See also *Mastenitsa* (1999).

²¹ *Kasparinskaia* offers an extensive overview of the Russian museum movement. See *Kasparinskaia* (1991).

²² Cf. In 1864, an interesting museum project circulated in the press: the so-called “Central Museum” (*tentral’nyi*), which was envisioned as embracing all existing museums of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. See *Tsentral’nyi muzeum v S. Peterburge* (1864).

the Rumiantsev Museum reopened in Moscow, it seemed to have answered the needs of the society, if only temporarily and in part. But it was not long before critics noticed that the Rumiantsev Museum, comprised of different divisions and departments, produced the impression of a “crowded and tight, complicated” facility; at best, it could be designated as “only an embryo of the National Museum.”²³

The museum boom of the 1860s brought about all kinds of new institutions of culture: exhibitions and museums devoted to agriculture, ethnography, applied science, and ancient art. All of them were of great benefit to the country, as K.N. Bestuzhev-Riumin wrote in *The Voice*: they “caused much talk and spread knowledge all over Russia; and what is more important, they temporarily excited discussion.” But a main, truly Russian museum was still nonexistent. “We have many museums of applied science and specialized research (*mnogo u nas muzeev i prikladnykh, i spetsial'no-nauchnykh*),” continued the author, “but where is our national, all-Russian historical museum?”²⁴ Finally, in 1872, the Russian National Museum (*Russkii natsional'nyi muzei*), named after the Crown Prince (the future Alexander III), was founded on the basis of the historical collections of the Navy and the Sevastopol' Pavilions from the Polytechnical Exhibition and Peter the Great's display.

From the beginning, the museum, located in Red Square, next to the old Kremlin and across from St. Basil's Cathedral, was conceived of as specifically a national (*natsional'nyi*) institution, thus the ethnic ring of the word “Russian” (*russkii*) in its original name. Although after 1881 it was officially known as the Imperial Russian Historical Museum (*Imperatorskii Rossiiskii Istoricheskii Muzei*), contemporaries continued to use the two names, Historical and National, interchangeably. In my discussion of contemporary debates that unfolded around the museum, I follow this practice as well. Interestingly, at earlier stages, the organizers envisioned this museum as being devoted to the Russian military; then the idea metamorphosed into “a temple to Russian glory” (*khram russkoi slavy*); and only later—a museum of Russian history.²⁵ After the Crimean war, epic history replaced military power as the preferred anchor for national pride. Ultimately, the new museum's

goal was to represent the history of the Russian state, from the earliest times to the present.

That history plays a major role in the formation of nations is by now axiomatic. In what has become a classic study of nationalism, Anthony Smith underscores the point:

National unity requires both a sense of cohesion or ‘fraternity’ and a compact, secure, recognized territory or ‘homeland’; all nationalisms, therefore, strive for such fraternity and homelands. But, since neither are born overnight or *ex nihilo*, both presuppose a long history of collective experience. So ‘history’ becomes the focal point of nationalism and nation-formation. The ‘rediscovery’ or ‘invention’ of history is no longer a scholarly pastime; it is a matter of national honour and collective endeavour. Through the tracing of our history, ‘we’ discover (or ‘rediscover’) who we are, whence we came, when we emerged, who our ancestors were ... (Smith, 1986, p. 148).

In nineteenth-century Russia, contemporaries also repeatedly noted the connection between the study of the past and the development of national consciousness. Already in 1867, Solov'ev observed on the occasion of the Ethnographical Exhibition: “There are times in the life of every people when the demand for national consciousness becomes one of its principal spiritual needs. To all appearances, such a time, a time of maturity, has finally come for our people. The study of national history and archaeology has acquired particular importance and attracted special support.”²⁶ We have also noted the public's rising interest in national history during the Polytechnical Exhibition. Before that, it was the Rumiantsev Museum that encouraged historical inquiry into the origins of Russian national culture. Bestuzhev-Riumin expressed the link between history and identity in even stronger terms: “People who wish to be great should know their history.” It was the museum's responsibility to teach it to the masses, for the museum is “one of the most powerful means of attaining national consciousness.”²⁷

The new museum's special power consisted in that it offered an “illustrated history” of the major epochs of the Russian state to its visitors and acquainted them with their heritage in accessible, memorable terms. The museum's organizers acknowledged the importance of visual imagery for the study of Russian history: scholarly knowledge is not very accessible, nor does it comprise “a complete picture — only a picture, only a visual representation, can leave an indelible impression and have a moral influence.” Paintings and the theater stage, according to the new museum's visionaries, were the best educators for the masses (*Muzei imeni Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha v Moskve, 1874c*). The Historical Museum reinforced the power of the visual aids (*nagliadnost'*) that were first popularized by the Polytechnical Exhibition. Contemporaries deemed pictorial representation indispensable for popular education: the

²³ *Putevoditel' po Kartinnoi galeree Moskovskogo Publichnogo i Rumiantsevskogo muzeev* (Moscow, 1876), 30, 39. By the 1920s, its collections would be disbanded and divided between various museums, whereas its depository of books and manuscripts would form the foundation for Moscow's Lenin Library in 1925 (Polunina & Frolov, 1990). For more on the history of the Rumiantsev museum in general, see Kestner (1882).

²⁴ Bestuzhev-Riumin (1873). The article is unsigned; on its attribution to Bestuzhev-Riumin, see Razgon, 239 n.

²⁵ Lebedinskaia, 26. See also Ravikovich, 22. A detailed chronology of the museum can be found in *Otchet Imperatorskogo Rossiiskogo Istoricheskogo Muzeia imeni Imperatora Aleksandra III v Moskve za 1883–1908 gody* (1916). Consider the curious shift from “russkii” to “rossiiskii” in naming the museum: it would seem that the first idea was more national, while the resultant name was more imperial in orientation. In earlier projects for the national museum, however, the two adjectives seemed interchangeable; thus Adelung's 1817 proposal was entitled “Predlozhenie ob uchrezhdenii russkogo natsional'nogo muzeia,” whereas four years later, Wichmann proposed “Rossiiskii otechestvennyi muzei.” Razgon, 226–228. Later in the century, the museum was again known as “national”: *natsional'nyi muzei Imperatora Aleksandra III*. See *Nedelia stroitelia*, no. 44 (1896): 213.

²⁶ As cited in Razgon, 232–333.

²⁷ Bestuzhev-Riumin (1873). See also *Sankt-Peterburg. 9-go fevralia 1873* (1873).

language of the visual arts was more eloquent and more accessible (especially, for the uneducated) than the printed book.²⁸

The press tasked the Russian National Museum with cultivating pride and respect for the country in its visitors and “lay a foundation for our national consciousness”.²⁹ Terms for the study of the fatherland—*otechestvovedenie* or *otchiznovedenie*—that had first gained popularity in association with the Rumiantsev Museum during its transfer to Moscow a decade earlier, again punctuated newspaper columns devoted to the new museum of history.³⁰ Thus Bestuzhev-Riumin appealed to his fellow citizens to stop aping the achievements of Western civilization, to focus on their own history, and to begin taking pride in their own culture. The metaphors that contemporaries used to describe the new museum speak eloquently of its high symbolic value in society: “a living chronicle of a thousand-year-old Russia”; “a living monument to the millennium of Russia’s existence”; “an all-Russian monument that testifies to the Russian people’s love for their fatherland”; “a monument to all of Russia, the history and the prosperity (*dostoianie*) of our whole fatherland”; “a material expression and representation of the thousand-year history of the Russian people in all its varieties and everyday situations”.³¹ Echoes of the millennial sentiments previously voiced ten years earlier in Novgorod and reiterated in the Rumiantsev Museum proudly resounded in the monumental rhetoric of the new museum.

Years before it actually opened its doors to the public, the Historical Museum—in conjunction with its library and its public lectures—was declared a major culture-building institution.³² One feuilletonist put it in fairly simple words: “the museum will tell us loudly, clearly, and truthfully: who we were, who we are, and what our worth is, and thus what is our place in the family of civilized states.” The museum’s main role would be to serve as a “catechism of national consciousness” (*katekhizis samosoznaniia*) (*Moskovskie zametki*, 1875). The society had expressed its “unanimous support” (*edinodushnoe soglasie*) for this initiative, which was meant to correct the detrimental “lack of national consciousness” (*nedostatok samosoznaniia*) and unite

different groups of citizens into what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community.” (*Muzei imeni Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha v Moskve*, 1874b).

All elements of the museum—the objects on display, the building’s architecture, its interior design—were enlisted in this creative task. Thus the historians F.I. Buslaev and Solov’ev carefully selected subjects from the Russian national past to be reproduced in the interior decoration.³³ But it was the museum’s building that caused the most discussion in society. One reason, as a correspondent for *The Voice* observed perceptively, was that no special architectural form for a public museum had previously existed in Russia—not until 1875, when the selection committee approved a project poignantly entitled “Fatherland” submitted by the architect V.O. Shervud and the engineer A.A. Semenov. What was striking about the winning model was that it “smelled of Russian antiquity.” (*Moskovskie zametki*, 1875). Every detail of the new building resonated with the masterpieces of old Russian architecture, such as St. Basil’s Cathedral and the Kremlin, which Shervud took as reference points in his design. Multi-level towers and red brick of the exterior balanced well with the Kremlin, while decorative details, including stylized animals, and fragments of traditional ornament echoed back to familiar imagery found in Russian Orthodox churches.

The social mission of museums, as nationally conscious contemporaries like the art critic V.V. Stasov, historian I.E. Zabelin, architect Shervud, and others construed it, was first of all to be national in both content and form.³⁴ Shervud, much praised for the Russianness of his design at the time, aspired to accomplish in architecture what the composer Mikhail Glinka had done in Russian music, as he admitted in private correspondence with the historian Zabelin upon whose recommendation St. Basil’s Cathedral was taken as the model for emulation.³⁵ Shervud believed that genuine art was inherently national: “Art is created by the people, but this art also creates the people” (*Iskusstvo sozdaetsia narodom, no ono v to zhe vremia sozdaet narod*).³⁶

Nor was there any precedent for the institution of a Russian national museum, as journalists generally agreed. Contemporaries did not seem to know what a national museum was supposed to mean. Journalists tried to explain the new phenomenon to their readership by comparing it to existing European institutions, individual authors offering disparate museums as possible role models: the Royal Museum of Berlin, the Museum of Munich, the British

²⁸ Kokorevskaia kartinnaia gallereia (1863). See also Bestuzhev-Riumin, *Moskovskie zametki* (1875) and *Sankt-Peterburg. 9-go fevralia 1873* (1873).

²⁹ Bestuzhev-Riumin (1873). Soon, the press designated the Historical Museum as the “main” museum in the country (*Moskovskie zametki*, 1875; *Muzei imeni Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha v Moskve*, 1874d). Near the century’s end, Sizov likewise noted that the Historical Museum should enliven people’s interest in their own land. See *Sizov* (1899).

³⁰ *Moskovskie zametki* (1875). On the Rumiantsev Museum’s role in energizing society’s interest in Russian history, see *Sbornik materialov dlia istorii Rumiantsevskogo muzeia*, vyp. 1 (Moscow, 1882), 2.

³¹ Kasitsyn (1876), *Muzei imeni Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha v Moskve* (1874e) and I.E. Zabelin, as cited in Razgon, 271.

³² On the museum’s library, comprised of a number of distinguished collections (for instance, the Golitsyn and Chertkov libraries, which specialized in Russian history), see *Otchet Imperatorskogo Rossiiskogo Istoricheskogo Muzeia* (Moscow, 1916). For a description of the museum’s auditorium, planned to seat 500 people, see *Moskovskii istoricheskii muzei po projektu gg. Semenova i Shervuda* (1875).

³³ Kirichenko (1982). See also *Vnutrennee ubranstvo budushchego istoricheskogo muzeia v Moskve* (1880).

³⁴ Consider the appearance of a particular design in the Russian style for the museum buildings, first endeavored in 1863 by K.K. Shtel’b in an unrealized project and then successfully executed in the construction of the Polytechnical Museum in 1874–1877 (N.A. Shokhin, A.S. Kaminsky, I. A. Monighetti) (Lisovskii, 2000, p. 127, 139). Shtel’b’s museum project in the Russian style was widely commented upon in the contemporary press. For instance, *Dmitriev* (1863), *Iz peterburgskoi zhizni* (1863), *Listok* (1863), *P.P.* (1863), *Somov* (1863).

³⁵ Lisovskii, 140–142. With the construction of the building extending over a very long period of time, the authors of the original project, Shervud and Semenov, participated only in the first stage of its execution.

³⁶ As cited in Kirichenko, “Istorizm myshleniia,” 137.

Museum.³⁷ There were several other options as well. The curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, for instance, defined the national museum in 1904 as essentially a folk museum (Coombes, 1988). The Soviet scholar A.M. Razgon offered an entirely different set of museums designated as national, including the National Archaeological Museum in Copenhagen (1807), the Versailles (1848), and the National Museum in Nuremberg (1855).³⁸ According to a more recent opinion, national museums are to be viewed as “institutions funded by the national government.” (Museums, 1994). One reason for such difference of opinion is the fluidity of the concept itself: depending on their cultural needs, different countries at different time periods invest the idea of “national museum” with their own unique meanings.

The founding of the national museum was an important milestone in the Russian culture-building project. For a whole decade between the museum’s conception in 1872 and its opening eleven years later, the press incessantly wrote about this museum built out of words and its significance for the country, broadcasting its every failure and success and encouraging the public to deliberate on this important project. The plurality of opinions and voices that we find in the contemporary press do not add up to any single answer; rather, we encounter a fascinating work in progress and a thickening of discourse on culture. One author, for instance, argued that the establishment of a national museum should be a matter of pride for any country: a museum means that the state has already evolved to assume its final form, “that it is what it should be,” and that it can look back upon its own progress and observe it in peace (Moskovskie zametki, 1875).

The museum’s Statute emphasized the need to present each historical period comprehensively:

The Museum collects all monuments from the remarkable events of our national history. These monuments—originals, copies, or casts—arranged in chronological order, should represent, as much as possible, a complete picture of every epoch, with its monuments of religion, law, science and literature, with objects from the arts, crafts, home industry and, overall, with all monuments related to the everyday aspects of Russian life, as well as objects from the army and navy.³⁹

The vast task of the museum—to visually represent the millennial history of the Russian state and its sweeping

content—qualified the Historical Museum as indeed a national institution.⁴⁰

The museum was “national” in another sense, too: it became a part of public culture. Prepared by years of open public discourse that problematized and prioritized issues of national identity, in the course of which Russian society also learned the basic grammar of representation, the museum assumed a prominent place in society. As this institution of culture turned into an issue of national importance, it was no longer the subject of an occasional feature or a routine Sunday feuilleton. The Historical Museum became the talk of the nation.

Unlike the popular discourse built around the museum, the institution proper did not fare nearly as well. In 1883, eleven years after its founding, the partially completed museum finally opened its doors to the public in conjunction with Alexander III’s coronation. Only the first eleven rooms of the exposition were finished; in the following 34 years, another five would be added. Eighteen rooms allocated to the history of the Romanovs were never realized. The construction of the building, originally meant to be completed in 1877, met with enough organizational and financial “complications” that Shervud had to publicly defend the very idea of the museum in the press. Soon, society began expressing doubts about whether the museum was even necessary at all.⁴¹ Already in 1885, Zabelin, who took charge of the museum in that year, compared it to a “paralyzed invalid and insolvent debtor.”⁴²

With the passage of time, the national museum faded from the pages of the press. The first brief guidebook to the exposition was released only in 1914. It would seem that society virtually stopped noticing the museum, which only a few years earlier had been the subject of many ardent debates. Russia’s “main” museum was sufficiently “invisible” for another proposal for a “Special National Museum” in Moscow, this time named after the tercentenary of the Romanovs’ rule, to surface in the early 1910s.⁴³

The Russian National Museum had turned out to be an impossible project. The impracticality of such collective dream is apparent in retrospect. But at the time, in anticipation of a public museum for the display of the entire country, the contemporary Russian press greeted each new candidate as a genuine national institution. Due to popular writing, the historical museum, however belated and incomplete, occupied a very special place in the public sphere of Imperial Russia. Popular writing was in itself a culture-building event rather than a mere reflection of material culture. Today the newly opened State Historical Museum returns to assume the role in society that was well articulated but never quite realized by its progenitor: to serve as an anchor of national identity, a link between the present and the past, and a monument to a revived national tradition.

³⁷ Iz Moskvy, 18-go avgusta (1875) and Kasitsyn (1876). At that, some thought that the Russian National Museum should be better than the German one, while others dismissed the German paragon altogether, cheering Russia as the champion in this museum race. Cf. Moskovskie zametki (1875).

³⁸ The last one in the list was similar to the projected Russian National Museum in that at its origin, the German National Museum was also mostly a collection of historical artifacts. For more on the German National Museum in Nuremberg, see Hoffmann (1994).

³⁹ Ustav Muzeia imeni ego imperatorskogo vysochestva gosudaria naslednika tsesarevicha. Otchet imperatorskogo Rossiiskogo istoricheskogo muzeia imeni imperatora Aleksandra III v Moskve za XXV let (1883–1908) (Moscow, 1916), p. 187. See also Muzei imeni Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha v Moskve (1874a).

⁴⁰ Svedeniia ob ustroistve muzeia imeni Gosudaria Naslednika Tsesarevicha (Moscow, 1874), 8.

⁴¹ See, for instance, *Novoe vremia*, 20 October 1881, 7 November 1881; *Sovremennye izvestiia*, 22 October 1881; *Golos*, 7 May 1882.

⁴² As cited in Lebedinskaia, 25, 29 n.

⁴³ For more on “Special National Museum” in Moscow, named after the tercentenary of the Romanovs’ rule, see Mal’tseva (1995).

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