

Title: Cultural Properties in Petrograd/Leningrad: Imperial Architecture and Art Treasures
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My paper explores the fate of tsarist-era buildings, monuments, art treasures, and artifacts during the Civil War (1918-1921) and the Blockade (1941-44) – two historical moments when the material legacy of the imperial period was embattled and the question of cultural value most acute. I treat both rhetoric and deed during the two periods, as well as subsequent mythmaking and revisionism. For the Civil War period, I focus on the nationalization and registration of monuments and artifacts, the efforts of Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky and his Narkompros agency, and the initial collaboration of Petersburg “specialists” with the new government. I will trace the way in which these initial post-revolutionary efforts unfolded over the course of the early Soviet years and take stock of where things stood in 1924, when Lenin died. For the Blockade period, I will trace efforts to save imperial monuments and artifacts and examine accounts of the siege that concern themselves particularly with the fate of this cultural legacy.

What efforts were made to protect and preserve imperial cultural property and at whose initiative? What did it mean to devote significant human energies to guarding a material legacy of ideologically contested value during times of uncertainty, danger, and privation? What counter-efforts, both official and unofficial, occurred alongside these cultural rescue missions? When and how was the decision made to direct major resources toward post-blockade restoration and reconstruction of imperial cultural properties? What does it mean that significant portions of the “imperial cultural legacy” are in fact meticulously created reproductions? What are the primary issues surrounding imperial cultural property in Petersburg today?

My paper draws on periodical sources and memoirs, Western and Russian historical accounts, and representations in fiction, poetry, fine arts, photography, and film.