St. Petersburg and Its Backbone: The Neva River as Gateway to Europe and the Sword of Damocles

Alexei Kraikovski

Summary

Since its foundation in 1703, the history of St. Petersburg is closely linked to the Neva River. The Neva is the biggest and the most important river in the Eastern Baltic. The citizens of St. Petersburg constructed complex technologies of river control that enabled them to live cheek by jowl with the mighty and self-willed stream.

With a total length of only 74 kilometers, the Neva is a short yet mighty river that flows from Ladoga Lake to the Gulf of Finland. One of the biggest rivers in the Baltic Sea basin, the Neva has always had substantial fish populations, including Atlantic sturgeon, Atlantic salmon, eels, and smelt. The earliest written data on fisheries in the Neva and its tributaries go back to the late fifteenth century, but the local Finnish population undoubtedly used the Neva fish resources much earlier. Several urban settlements were founded on the banks of the Neva River during the fourteenth through eighteenth centuries, but one settlement stood out amongst all of them: St. Petersburg.

Founded in 1703 by the Russian czar Peter the Great on the islands of the Neva estuary, St. Petersburg soon developed into one of the most important European cities. The Neva itself formed the core of the urban space. It was the central part of "the space of modernity"—the structure of the new city in Europe and a departure from traditional Russian city planning.

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Horse-drawn sleds on the ice of the Neva River

Photo by Karl Bulla, early twentieth century.

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From the beginning, the Neva has always had a life and will of its own in the history of the city. The first settlers soon adapted to living near this powerful waterway and learned to use its services and to escape its threats. As the population grew, the Neva and the water system of the Neva estuary became all the more important. They served as the main source of water for the city, including drinking water, and in the winter, the river provided ice for the icehouses. Its streams and channels were also used as a natural sewage system to remove the waste produced by the city until the construction of modern sewers in the twentieth century. Furthermore, the Neva was the main transit route (both in summer and in winter) for both people and goods within the city, as well as for long-distance transport. Finally, the Neva tributaries provided power for factories and plants: another important service among the countless others that the river provided to the city.

At the same time, the Neva was an obstacle for the development of the city. The people of St. Petersburg had to work very hard to create a system of river control that soon consisted of heavy granite embankments and hundreds of bridges, including huge drawbridges across the Bolshaya Neva. Still, the river's constant floods posed the greatest threat and measures were taken to control them. During the most catastrophic floods (such as the floods of 1724, 1777, 1824, and 1924) the Neva destroyed significant parts of the city. Many people died or lost their property. During the floods the Neva also washed out waste, which in turn caused epidemics. River pollution in general became another severe threat the citizens had to face. Water pollution was the main cause for the severe cholera epidemics that St. Petersburg faced through all of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These epidemics often led to growing social unrest, such as during the cholera riot of 1831 .

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It was only in the twentieth century that modern technologies made it possible to cross the Neva at any time of day or night, as well as offering further flood prevention measures. However, there is still substantial water pollution and the ecosystem is under significant pressure.

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Further readings:

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- https://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/st-petersburg-cholera-riot-1831-water-pollution-and-social-tension

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