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The Domestication of Ice and Cold: The Ice Palace in Saint Petersburg 1740

The winter of 1739/40 was particularly severe, with the whole of Europe caught in its icy grasp. Frozen birds fell from the branches of trees, firewood became scarce, and many regions faced the threat of starvation. Due to the fact that social inequality was tempered for the first time in Western Europe through advanced precautionary measures, this winter is considered a triumph of the enlightenment. As numerous local studies have shown, efforts to avoid famine were successful in many regions.¹

The winter also unleashed its full fury on Russia and, not surprisingly, left traces in eyewitness reports and memoirs from the time. However, it is worth noting that those authors who write about their time in Saint Petersburg hardly make an issue of problems or fears experienced. They report neither precautionary measures taken in advance nor difficulties in maintaining supply. Their attention is focused instead on an ice palace, which shone resplendent on the Neva River from January until March 1740.

This ice palace, the construction of which required only solid and liquid water, was, according to the Professor of Physics Georg Wolfgang Krafft, in keeping with “all the rules of the most modern architecture.” Building blocks of the purest ice were placed on top of each other and decorated with all kinds of ornamentation. Liquid water was used as cement, which fastened the blocks of ice firmly together. With windows, doors, and an outdoor staircase, the palace left nothing to be desired. Inside there were orange trees, mirrors, a corner cupboard, and a magnificent bed. Beside the bed there was even a pair of slippers, although anyone attempting to slide into them soon found themselves with extremely cold feet, for not only the palace walls but indeed every item in and around the building was made entirely of ice.² Much pleasure was also derived from the two dolphins that stood at the entrance to the palace spraying

This essay was originally written in German and has been translated for the *Perspectives* by Kerry Jago. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of German sources are also the translator's.

- 1 Wolfgang Behringer, *Kulturgeschichte des Klimas: Von der Eiszeit bis zur globalen Erwärmung* (München: Beck, 2007), 210–11.
- 2 The most detailed description of the ice palace is provided by Georg Wolfgang Krafft. Georg Wolfgang Krafft, *Wahrhafte und Umständliche Beschreibung und Abbildung des im Monath Januarius 1740 in St. Petersburg aufgerichteten merckwürdigen Hauses von Eiß* (Saint Petersburg: Kayserliche Academie der Wissenschaften, 1741).

burning oil from their mouths. The elephant made of ice on the right-hand side of the palace also attracted many admirers; it was not only able to spray water, but could also make noises like “a natural” elephant—hidden in its cold, hollow belly was a person equipped with a trumpet.

The ice palace was part of the festivities put on by Tsarina Anna Ivanovna to celebrate the victory over the Turks. The unusual attraction also became the scene of an unusual event when Prince Michail Golitsyn was forced to perform serving duties. Tsarina Anna—who, like Peter the Great, possessed a host of court jesters—had demoted the prince to the role of a jester as a punitive measure.³ Golitsyn had fallen out of favor after marrying a Catholic Italian while on a foreign trip and converting to her religious faith. Upon his return, the Tsarina Anna Ivanovna demanded that he remarry. She agreed to cover the financial costs herself, but chose a Kalmyk woman to be his wife. Some historians claim that she was old and ugly.⁴

The preparations for this wedding were elaborate and were by no means exhausted with the construction of the ice palace. The Tsarina had a couple from every province of her empire accompany the wedding procession in traditional tribal dress. A colorful wedding procession of Yakuts, Lapplanders, Samoyedic peoples, Mordvins, and Tatars escorted the bride and groom through the streets of Saint Petersburg. The exotic nature of these tribes for the people of the capital was further highlighted by the fact that their representatives rode in sleighs pulled along by pigs, dogs, wild boars, and elk. The bride and groom themselves travelled through the city seated in a cage that was strapped to the back of an elephant. The wedding banquet also emphasized the diversity of the ethnicities that lived under Anna’s rule; the various couples each received a different meal in accordance with the tradition of their respective peoples. Following the end of the ball, the wedding procession moved on to the ice palace, where the newly-weds were presented with their bed of ice for their first night together. Guards were placed in front of the doors to prevent the happy couple from attempting to flee the pleasures of their wedding night.

3 Further on the role of jesters at the court of Peter I and Anna see: Jewgenij Anissimow, *Frauen auf dem russischen Thron*, trans. Gennadi Kagan (Wien: Pereprava, 2008), 109–12; Philip Longworth, *The Three Empresses: Catherine I, Anne and Elizabeth of Russia* (London: Constable, 1972), 122–23; Christopher Marsden, *Palmyra of the North: The First Days of St. Petersburg* (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 95–6; Jelena Pogosjan, “I nevozmožnoe vozmožno: Svad’ba šutov v ledjanom dome kak fakt oficial’noj kul’tury,” *Trudy po russkoj i slavjanskoj filologii. Literaturovedenie* 4 (2001): 80–109.

4 James Hadley Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 187.



Figure 1:
The wedding
procession (Brok-
gauz and Efron,⁵
Ledjanoj dom” in
*Entsiklopediches-
kaia slovar’*, Vol.
17 (St. Petersburg
1896), 483)

It was particularly those who were not personally present at the festivities who described the ice palace and the fool’s wedding as a blatant demonstration of the allegedly sadistic tendencies of the Tsarina and the sinfulness of the autocracy. Historians have also used the episode of the ice palace to portray Anna Ivanovna as a figure who frivolously indulged her cruel fancies and pleasures.⁵ Neither the construction material of the ice palace nor its location upon the Neva play an important role in interpretations to date, with the severe cold also not featuring prominently. In my paper, I will place the focus upon frost and ice as essential conditions of the celebration, since the main location of the festivities was indeed the ice palace. I argue that the events surrounding the ice palace were different from other baroque festivals in that the cold became a means with which autocratic rule could be legitimized and power represented. In conclusion, I will use the interpretations of the ice palace episode arising from the period following it to show that it was precisely the medium of ice, which cannot defy warmth and sun indefinitely, that undermined a successful and lasting presentation of power.

5 The British science historian Simon Werrett and the literary scholar Jelena Pogosjan are the only academics so far to have offered interpretations that contradict this one-sided view. In his dissertation, Werrett interprets the events surrounding the ice palace as an occurrence through which the scholars of the Academy of Sciences hoped to raise awareness of their experiments and research, while the ball of the various tribes is seen as an opportunity for the Saint Petersburg elite to underscore their own high level of civilization. Pogosjan’s approach is more descriptive, offering an overview of the planning process that preceded the fool’s wedding. According to Pogosjan, the parade of the tribes was an attempt by Anna to demonstrate the extent of her empire. Simon Werrett, *An Odd Sort of Exhibition: The St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences in Enlightened Russia*, Dissertation (Cambridge, 2000); Pogosjan, “I nevozmožnoe vozmožno,” 80–109.

The peace festivities, of which the ice palace formed the centerpiece, can be understood as a signal from Anna to her subjects that a long, drawn-out phase of uncertainty—the war against the Turks—was at an end. The backdrop constructed for the fireworks, which were set off on the last day of the celebrations (17 February 1740), sums up well the basic idea of the festival. In the middle and on the right-hand section of the stage, which was designed to portray a temple, female figures were positioned, easily be interpretable as personifications of Anna. Enthroned in the middle was Minerva, announcing with an inscription that “the safety of the Empire” had been restored. The right-hand side of the ceremonial temple seems to me to be the most important, where a goddess sits with a cornucopia. Above her appears the inscription “mir vosstanovlen.” The wording here has a double meaning, with the Russian word “mir” translating as either “world” or “peace.” Depending on the way in which it is interpreted, the inscription announces that “peace” or “the world” has been restored.⁶ The dramaturgy of the festival supports a preference for the second interpretation, according to which the world has been restored to the correct order of things. All of the festive symbols here involve a reference to Anna. She—according to the official message—is the only one who can guarantee order, welfare, and stability. This comprehensive claim to authority and rule on the part of Anna was clearly made visible and brought to bear on three levels: relations with subjects, space, and climate.

The Disciplining of the Aristocracy

The aristocracy, which, at the beginning of Anna’s rule, had attempted to catch her off guard and force her to accept a form of oligarchic, shared rule, was firmly put in its place by this festival. This involved a confirmation of the validity of those social norms that the aristocracy had hoped to sidestep. The public disciplining of the aristocracy was carried out in exemplary fashion upon Prince Michail Golicyn, whose conversion to the Catholic faith had tarnished the reputation of Tsarist Russia as a stronghold of Orthodox religion, and whose forefathers had failed once before in the struggle for the welfare of the Fatherland. Numerous contemporaries emphasize the fact that Golicyn was indeed being punished for his blunder by means of the fool’s wedding. He was publicly humiliated with no way of shielding himself from the eyes of all around him. In the event of public

6 Dmitrij A. Rovinskij, *Obozrenie ikonopisanija v Rossii do konca XVII veka. Opisanie fejerwerkov i illjuminacii* (Saint Petersburg: A. S. Suvorin, 1903), 222–3.

degradation, the fool's wedding held by Anna was decidedly different from the festivities put on by Peter the Great. In Peter's jester festivities the court functioned not only as a group of onlookers, but also took active part in the proceedings. In the case of Anna, the public humiliation was taken to the extreme through the transparency of the ice palace, in which the involuntary groom was to experience the intimate moment of the wedding night with the bride whom he had been forced to marry.

Eyewitnesses considered the fact that Michail Golicyn was stripped of his family name during his servitude as a jester to be perhaps the most monstrous element of the punishment. One of the tasks of the degraded prince from the well-known aristocratic house of the Golicyns was to hand the Tsarina the pitcher of kvas, a drink made from fermented bread. He was only allowed to be called by his first name, or by the name of "Kvasnik." This derogatory name even appears in public documents. The choice of the prince from the house of Golicyn was no coincidence. Kvasnik's grandfather was Vasilij Golicyn, whose military campaigns against the Khanat, allies of the Ottoman Empire, in the Crimea in 1687 and 1689 ended in comprehensive defeat.⁷ In a similar manner to the victory over the Turks, the humiliation of the house of Golicyn delivered a powerful sense of satisfaction. The gratification stemming from a publicly visible defeat was—as Anna emphasized in her opening address—the prerequisite for the restoration of peace and the world.⁸ Furthermore, one must agree with the French diplomat de La Chétardie that the degradation of the prince constituted a message from Anna to her subjects, and particularly to the aristocracy: she alone had the power to dispense prestige and shame.⁹ Through the fool's wedding, Anna presented herself as the central figure of the realm who could guarantee security.

Colonization of Space

The demonstration of power on the part of the Tsarina concerned not only the relations with her subjects, but also the size of her realm. The festivities were an attempt

7 Pogosjan, "I nevozmožnoe vozmožno," 80–109.

8 Ernst von Münnich, *Die Memoiren des Grafen Ernst von Münnich*, reprinted with an introduction and author's biography by Arved Jürgensohn (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1896), 153.

9 Markiz de-la-Šetardi, *Pis'mo Markiza de-la-Šetardi iz Peterburga 1-go Marta/19-go fevralja 1740 g., in Markiz de-la-Šetardi v Rossii 1740-1742 godov: Perevod rukopisnyh depeš francuzskago posol'stva v Peterburge*, ed. P. Pekarskij (Saint Petersburg: Ogrizko, 1862), 55–64.

to achieve a spatial restructuring of the city and the empire through the appropriation of the unknown for the autocracy. This applies firstly to the river Neva, which particularly in its liquid state—according to the theories of Marc Augé—can be described as a *non-place*.¹⁰

A river, in its materiality, is an entity that primarily enables movement. Even in winter, when the water of the river solidifies due to the freezing temperatures and becomes accessible on foot, the Neva is not a place where one spends time but rather a location of transit. Through the ice palace, which rose up in the middle of the frozen river, this non-place was annexed as a territory in its own right. This appropriation corresponded with the founding of the city of Saint Petersburg in 1703 in a swamp region. The ice palace symbolically extrapolated the shift of the center of Tsarist Russia's power northwards from Moscow to Saint Petersburg and, thus, into cold and uninhabited regions.

The domestication of unknown regions was also symbolized by the parade of the various tribal groups. The diverse peoples presented as subjects of Anna were done so in a manner that displayed their foreignness to its full extent, such as their appearance in traditional dress and the playing of their traditional music. This was a clear reference to the vastness of the empire and the success of expansion and “inner colonization.” This corresponds with the efforts of the Academy of Sciences at the time to produce a map of the whole empire and thus to appropriate distant regions of the Tsarist Empire through visualization.¹¹ Simultaneously—and this was surely a signal not only to the onlookers, but also to the Yakuts, Ukrainians, and Tatars who made up the procession—this was a gesture clearly indicating that the indisputable center of the empire was indeed in Saint Petersburg. Here was the place where the extent of the empire could be experienced firsthand. The festival also formed a part of the consolidation of Saint Petersburg as the new capital. The canons and mortars made of ice, which surrounded the ice palace, reinforced the claim to expansion and inner colonization. Their potential to represent a threat was enormous, since they could so easily be made from water. In all the descriptions of the ice palace, these canons—along with the fact that they could be used to shoot real ammunition—feature very prominently.

10 Marc Augé, *Orte und Nicht-Orte: Vorüberlegungen zu einer Ethnologie der Einsamkeit*, 2. ed. (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer, 1994).

11 Longworth, *The Three Empresses*, 143.

The festival reflects the ambitions of the monarchy to appropriate for itself that which was unknown, even if it was very distant. This is particularly evident in the essay by Georg Wolfgang Krafft entitled *Wahrhaffte und Umständliche Beschreibung ... des ... merckwürdigen Hauses von Eiß* (Truthful and detailed description ... of the ... remarkable house of ice), which he published in 1741. In it, he describes the ice palace as an embodiment of the conditions on the planet Saturn: on Saturn, there are such ferociously cold temperatures that all water has the consistency of marble and the inhabitants of Saturn can use frozen water for the construction of their “huts.” Krafft expresses regret at the transience of the ice palace, for which Saturn would have been a more appropriate location.¹² The ice palace transformed Saint Petersburg into an outpost of Saturn.¹³

Cold and Climate

Through the medium of the festival, it was not only the rebellious aristocracy and the vastness of physical space that were portrayed as enemies that could only be conquered by such a powerful Tsarina as Anna. The winter too, and even the climate in general, underwent a metamorphosis from being a virtually insurmountable danger to a risk that could be brought under control. The symbolism of the peace celebrations emphasized the idea that neither powerful enemies from inside or outside the empire, nor the power of nature were able to disturb the natural order and encroach upon Anna’s power.

The much-emphasized beauty of the ice palace and the respective scientific experiments enabled a shift in the perception of severe cold, which in Russia, just as in other countries, was traditionally associated with doom and crises. I argue that the Tsarina’s ice palace was an attempt to domesticate the climate by making its most extreme feature—severe cold—into an object of artistic appropriation and scientific study, granting not only that particular winter but also the climate itself unprecedented aesthetic and scientific dimensions. The European elites were able to compete with one another not only with their grain depots, but also with the taming of the cold through art, thus demonstrating to each other the achievements of their enlightened rule.

12 Krafft, *Wahrhaffte und Umständliche Beschreibung*, 9.

13 Simon Werret interprets the references to Saturn as an attempt to gain Anna’s support for his experiments, which were connected with the ice palace. Anna was enthusiastic about astrology, and her ruling planet—as an Aquarius—was Saturn. Werrett, *An Odd Sort of Exhibition*, 174.

In his essay, Krafft emphasizes the fact that the ice palace was not an object of senseless amusement, but must be understood rather as an *experimentum physicum*, which also provided military and economic benefits. He stresses the fact that the usefulness of frozen water had not yet been fully realized, even though nobody doubted the usefulness of liquid water. Water, he asserts, has many positive characteristics in its frozen state as well. Krafft attributed life-preserving characteristics to the cold based on experiments carried out by the Academy of Sciences, although the cold in Tsarist Russia normally involved connotations of decline and death. Krafft pointed to the differing freezing points of liquids such as water, beer, and brine, and to the conserving properties of low temperatures. Furthermore, in his opinion the ice palace showed that ice was excellently suited to use as a building material.¹⁴ Krafft emphasizes time and again that these discoveries must be attributed to the Tsarina, who encouraged and supported science in the Russian Empire.

For Krafft, the winter of 1739/40 was also an opportunity to put Tsarist Russia on the European temperature maps and to establish himself as an expert on the cold among European scientists. He exchanged temperature data with such famous colleagues as the professor Anders Celsius from Uppsala and produced chronicles in which the most severe winters since 177 BCE were listed. Precautionary measures were, for Krafft, essentially feats of prediction. Based on his observations, he suspected that countries should be prepared to experience a severe cold snap once every thirty years. In his eyes, it was particularly the experiments connected with the ice spectacle that guaranteed that the domestication of the winter lasted beyond merely a single moment. The view towards larger periods of time and, thus, towards the climate as the sum product of weather occurrences robbed the winter of 1739/40 of its peculiarity and relativized its horrors. It made the present appear normal and allowed a greater degree of certainty when looking to the future. The festival, shaped considerably by art and science, propagated the message that even the forces of nature could be controlled by an enlightened ruler.

Summary

Through the fool's wedding and the ice palace, the Tsarina Anna was successful in presenting herself as a powerful and enlightened monarch who did not need to shy away

¹⁴ Krafft, *Wahrhaftige und Umständliche Beschreibung*, 9.

from comparison with other European rulers. In the reports of eyewitnesses, there are no indications that the presentation of power and authority during the festival of 1740 was unsuccessful in any way. While she used the fool's wedding to display the extent of her power, which was curbed neither by the aristocracy nor by the vastness of her empire, Anna made use of the ice palace and its connection with experiments to present herself as a supporter of the sciences, who was able to measure and tame frost.

Eventually, the spring sun spelled doom for the ice palace. The melting of the ice palace contradicted the conception of power based on ideas of durability, tradition, and timelessness. As a representative glance through the German-speaking literature shows, the ice palace lost its symbolic power as a representation of good and enlightened rule through its transience, and particularly the fact that the exact timing of its downfall could not be predicted. While it still remained connected with power and authority, the ice palace along with the fool's wedding soon came to be seen as symbols for the cruel arbitrariness of the autocracy.

In the poem *Eispalast* by Ferdinand Freiligrath from 1846, the building made of ice is portrayed as a symbol of unnatural and unjust rule, the end of which is not far away, "It [the Neval] shakes the winter frost of tyranny proudly from its neck and winds away, for long it bore the ice palace of despotism!"¹⁵ The poem is a good indication of how strongly the present situation at a given point in time alters the perception of the ice palace and its symbolic ascriptions. Freiligrath, a poet of the *Vormärz* who was writing in opposition to the *ancien régime*, connected the demise of the ice palace with the warning that sooner or later, all despotic regimes will experience their own downfall. In his poem, the transience of the ice palace and the lack of control over its disappearance become a symbol for weak rule. With the transformation of the frozen water into another physical state, namely that of a liquid as temperatures rose, Anna's power was also liquidized in the eyes of those who had seen the ice palace as a symbol of her rule. Through its inevitable transience, the ice palace became a symbol for the autocracy's lack of legitimization.

15 Ferdinand Freiligrath, "Eispalast," in *Ferdinand Freiligraths Sämtliche Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. by Ludwig Schröder (Leipzig: Hesse, 1907), 5:99–101.

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