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The Red Square as a Counter-Space: Your Conception is Not Our Reality

A Trip to the Red Square

The typical tourist, Russian and International alike, enters the Red Square from the North West, crossing through the nearby Manege Square (Манежная площадь) towards the historical Resurrection Gate (Воскресенские ворота), the legendary passage into Russia's heart (see Figure 1). The deep red gate consists of two spiking green towers, each with an open arch below. As the tourist crosses under one of these two entrances, the dazzling Kazan Cathedral (Казанский собор) on the left catches their gaze. Corbel arches of orange-red contrast with coral green domes, all features leading up to the Cathedral's centerpiece — the golden cupola. On the right, directly across from the Cathedral, is not a castle, but rather the State Historical Museum (Государственный исторический музей), its white angled roof and spires almost like powdered snow resting on top of its brick-red exterior. Walking straight ahead, the tourist emerges onto the main pedestrian space of the Red Square. Encasing them is the GUM Department Store in the East and the Kremlin Wall in the West, but it is St. Basil's in the South that lures the tourist forward. On the way to the famous St Basil's Cathedral, the symbol of Moscow, the tourist might spot Lenin's Mausoleum, its red granite pyramid blending in with the Kremlin Wall behind it. The line to see Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov might deter the tourist from sneaking a peek at his corpse, so the trek towards St. Basil's continues. Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed (Собор Васи́лия Блаже́нного), otherwise known as St. Basil's, consists of eight pointed domes reaching into the sky, four large and four small, organized in a seemingly random order, each with varying heights and different patterns. St. Basil's bright colors invoke a youthful image of fairytale, its shimmering gold and rusted red the only consistent hues of the design. A teal green statue of two men, each with a hand around a decorated sword, stands in front of St. Basil's, too

small to notice at first until the tourist comes close. Finally, the tourist files out to the right of St. Basil's, past the final red and green towers of the Kremlin Wall and towards the Moskva River ahead.¹

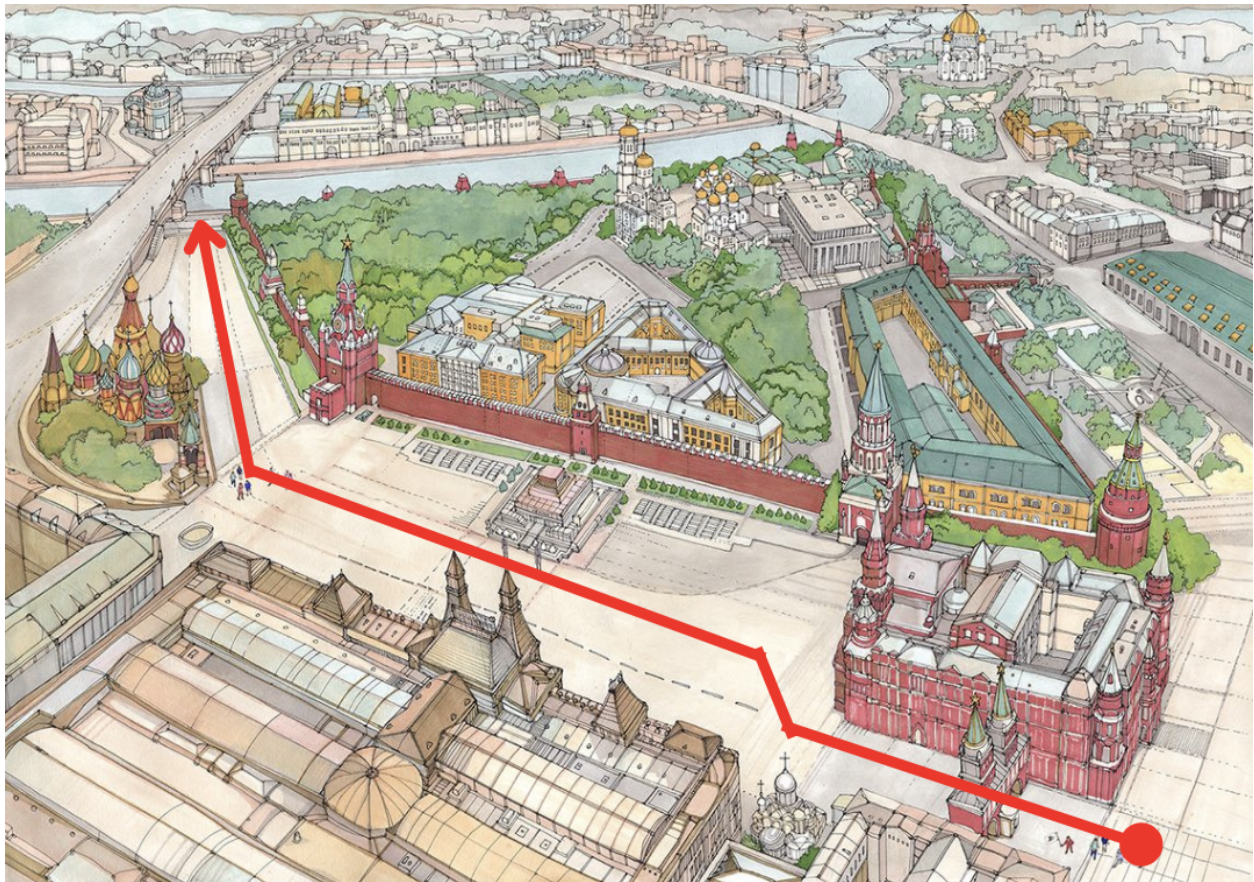


Figure 1. Daker, Abi. *Red Square, Moscow*. Archived Work. <https://abidaker.com/archived-work>. (Red line added)

A Space for Authority or a Space for Resistance?

Ever since its construction, the Red Square has served as a symbol of the Russian ruling class' power. Or at least, the infamous 800,000 square feet² over the span of 467 years³ has embodied the

¹ While the descriptions are my own, I used a number of resources to describe this iconic setting, a place I have unfortunately have not yet had the pleasure of seeing in person. Many thanks to my Russian tutor and friend Taissia Stanmore for her help depicting this iconic square.

The videos below were also a huge help:

Guide for the Traveler. *Red Square Tour, Moscow - Russia*. 14 January 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asc-tB0qNXU>, Youtube.

Ryan, Jeromet. *Red Square Russia*. Youtube, 6 August 2020,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH4Qb9YdiDk>.

² Geisler, Erich. "Fast Facts About Red Square." *National Geographic*, 2 May 2013,

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/fun-facts-about-red-square>. Accessed 28 March 2022.

³ "Red Square - HISTORY." *History.com*, 13 June 2011, <https://www.history.com/topics/russia/red-square>. Accessed 28 March 2022.

supposed strength and sophistication of the Russian Empire, the USSR, and in recent times the Russian Federation. However, some Russians have ensured that Красная Площадь is not defined in such hegemonic terms. Indeed, despite the Russian elite's endless and repeated spectacles of power in this legendary space, the Red Square is just as much an icon of resistance against the state as it is an emblem of the state's power. This contradiction can be understood using Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and its dialectical connection to underlying social relations. Because of the latter, the Red Square paradoxically serves as a mechanism for bolstering state power *and* as a mechanism against the state, a space for dissent *and* a site that conversely produces consent.

Many theorists have looked into this connection between space and power, and relatedly, space and resistance. Much of the existing research uses specific case studies to investigate spatial contradictions, an example being Woltering and Riphagen who studied Tahrir Square.⁴ In their research, they use the term *counter-space* to designate "a space where social processes are regulated in a manner different from how it was conceived and perceived prior to the event."⁵ Similarly, William H. Sewell Jr, in his chapter *Space in Contentious Politics*, offers a vocabulary to articulate space and its role in resistance, or contentious politics.⁶ In what Sewell defines as *spatial agency*, the constraints of physical space can not only be utilized advantageously in political and social struggles, but also those struggles can redefine the meaning of that space.⁷ In the Russian context, *spatial agency* references the persistent contentious politics that occur in the Red Square, where the space's limitations — its functioning as a symbol of the Russian state — are used for the benefit of a group resisting the Russian ruling class, thus turning the Red Square into a *counter-space*. Many maligned protests in the Red Square, such as the modern punk collective Pussy Riot's performances or the anarchist insurrections of the Times of Troubles, demonstrate this location's counter-hegemonic possibilities. Indeed, the Red Square's political and symbolic

⁴ Riphagen, Wladimir, and Robbert A. F. L. Woltering. "Tales of a Square: The Production and Transformation of Political Space in the Egyptian (Counter)Revolution." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. No. 2, 2018, pp. 117-133.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sewell, William H. "Space In Contentious Politics." *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 51 - 88.

⁷ Ibid, 55.

importance ensures that any demonstration that takes place there is not only noticed within Russia but also by the world at large. Despite these practices of resistance, it is the Red Square's connection to the state that makes the space so hard to occupy and hold.

Lefebvre's conceptual triad of space can help ground the contradictory character of the Red Square. *Perceived space* means the actual space itself, the physical or material space if you will, which is inevitably influenced by conceived space. *Conceived space* signifies the designs and conceptions that planners envision for a specific space. On the opposite end from these two conceptions of space is *lived space*, the reality of how space is inhabited by people — often at odds with conceived space.⁸ All three conceptions of space inform each other, contradicting and aligning in various ways; when contentious politics are most successful, Lefebvre argues, the lived space of resistance will produce an entirely new conceived space,⁹ one where the planners are the *dissidents*.¹⁰

The contentious politics (the lived space) of the Red Square, while persistent and inspiring, has not yet produced a different conceived space. Using Lefebvre's model, in order to successfully reclaim the Red Square the conception of the space has to be dictated by the dissidents. When imagining a space conceived by dissidents, the lived experience of the Red Square — the contentious politics that resist the Russian state's hegemony — grounds its design. To outline such a space now, however, would only be pointless speculation, as the movement to take back the Red Square fundamentally guides the production of a newly conceived Red Square. It is the same in the Marxist-Leninist theory of revolution; we can't blueprint communism as it is the process of revolution that will create the communist system. However, we may envision communism in so much as it as a response against the capitalist system, a classless society, just as we may envision the people's conceived space of the Red Square as a response to the state's current conceived space of the Red Square.

⁸ Woltering and Riphagen (cited above) helped me succinctly define this triad

⁹ Lefebvre, Henri, and David Harvey. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Wiley, 1991.

¹⁰ I use the term *dissidents* to encompass all activists, protestors, citizens, foreigners, or in short, *people* that have opposed the Russian state by occupying the Red Square.

The Red Square developed with the rise of the nation-state, its conceived space a product of the violent conquest and religious glory of the Russian Empire. The artifacts and icons of the old Russian order remain in the Red Square today, these ancient symbols of pre-revolutionary Russia largely untouched. Yet as much as the square embodies the Slavic tradition, it also mirrors the resistance of the Russian people throughout the nation's history. In fact, even before the Red Square was architecturally designed (conceived) by the Russian state, it served as a counter-space;¹¹ a setting for opposition to the hegemonic order.

Imperial Russia; the Origins of the Red Square

When Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great, evicted the “criminals” and the impoverished from the land that we now call the Red Square,¹² his vision was both cosmopolitan and rational. The Grand Prince sought out Italian architects to construct stone cathedrals and an impressive Kremlin wall, transforming the heart of Russia into a center of splendid European architecture.¹³ But the poor commoners squatting nearby the Kremlin marred this vision of grandeur and propriety.¹⁴ So the “riff-raff” was thrown out, the mud cleared, and Trinity Square was born.¹⁵ The Red Square's origins, therefore, are rooted in the dispossession of poor Russians.

With Russia's emergence as an empire, the Red Square was iconic of the Tsarist regime's power, majesty, and brutality. Today, many of the square's features remain as historical landmarks of the Russian royalty. The Konstantino-Eleninskaya Tower (Константино-Еленинская башня), once known as the "Timofeyevskaya",¹⁶ was originally built in 1490 to be the Kremlin's medieval torture chamber and to

¹¹ Examples will be provided in the forthcoming sections

¹² Richardson, Dan. *The Rough Guide to Moscow*. Dorling Kindersley Publishing, 2009. Pp 70.

¹³ “Red Square - HISTORY”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Red Square - HISTORY”; In the 17th century this square came to be known as the “Krasnaya Ploschad,” a name we now translate to mean the “Red Square”, but originally meant the “Beautiful Square”.

¹⁶ “Moscow Kremlin's Konstantin-Yeleninskaya Tower.” *Moscow.Info*, 2019, <http://www.moscow.info/kremlin/towers/konstantino-yeleninskaya-tower.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

protect against invaders from the Moscow river (see Figure 2).¹⁷ It is said that the screams from the tortured victims flooded the Red Square.¹⁸

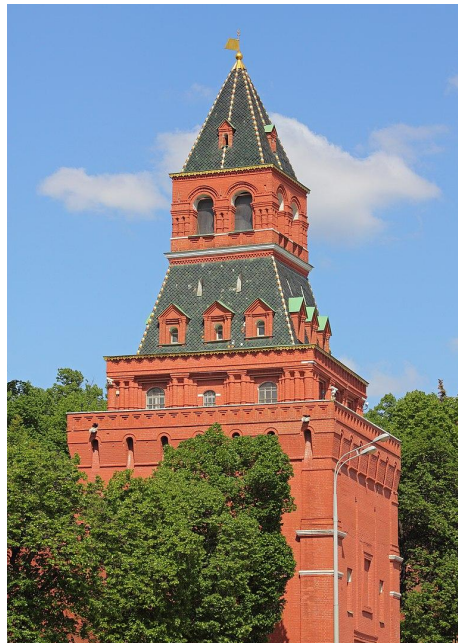


Figure 2. Savin, A. *Konstantino-Yeleninskaya*. Moscow, Russia. Konstantino-Yeleninskaya Tower of the Moscow Kremlin.

WikiCommons, 25 May 2012, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moscow_05-2012_Kremlin_15.jpg.

Similarly, the Tsar's Tower (Царская башня), which was erected in 1680, takes its name from a previous wooden tower in which legend says Ivan the Terrible threw out dogs and watched both executions and festivals that took place in the square (see Figure 3).¹⁹

¹⁷ "Konstantino-Eleninskaya Tower." *Museums of the Moscow Kremlin*, <https://kremlin-architectural-ensemble.kreml.ru/en-Us/architecture/view/konstantino-eleninskaya-bashnya-moskovskogo-kremlya/#mobile-jump>. Accessed 18 April 2022

¹⁸ Richardson 77

¹⁹ "Moscow Kremlin Tsar's Tower." *Moscow.Info*, 2019, <http://www.moscow.info/kremlin/towers/tsar-tower.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

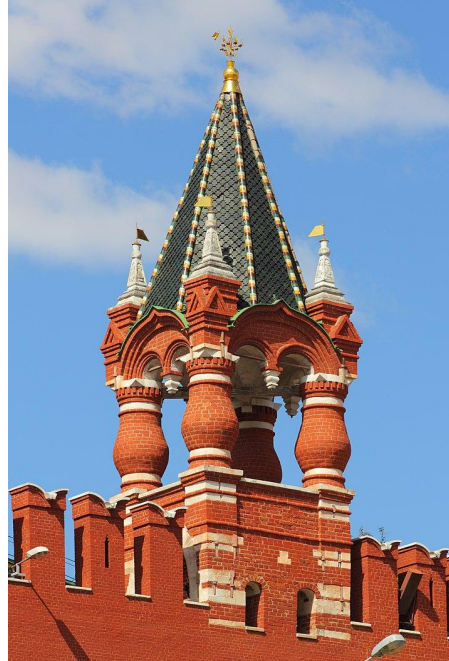


Figure 3. Savin, A. *Tsarskaya Tower*. Moscow, Russia. Tsarskaya (Czar) Tower of the Moscow Kremlin. WikiCommons, 25 May 2012, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moscow_05-2012_Kremlin_12.jpg.

But the conception of the Red Square's structures as signs of imperialist achievements did (and does) not always define its lived reality; the Alarm Tower (Набатная башня) demonstrates this well (see Figure 4). As its name indicates, the Alarm Tower was built for a simple purpose: to warn people of fires, a serious concern at the time when the square was composed of so much wood.²⁰ Following the Plague riots of 1771, however, Catherine the Great ordered the bell's tongue to be ripped away.²¹ These riots were reactions against the Tsardom's rigid measures to counter the Bubonic Plague. Conditions were especially exacerbated by the Russian nobility fleeing Moscow, leaving the peasantry to suffer from food shortages and inadequate medical care.²² These starving and angry Russians took to the Red Square, the ruling class's sacred grounds, in order to be *heard*. During their chaos and havoc, rioters used the Alarm Tower's

²⁰ "Nabatnaya Tower." *Museums of the Moscow Kremlin*, <https://kremlin-architectural-ensemble.kreml.ru/en-US/architecture/view/nabatnaya-bashnya-moskovskogo-kremlya>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Manaev, Georgy. "Why tsarist-era Russians rioted during mass epidemics." *Russia Beyond*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/history/331853-why-russians-rioted-against-quarantines>. Accessed 18 April 2022.
Alexander, John T. "Catherine II, Bubonic Plague, and the Problem of Industry in Moscow." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 79, no. 3, 1974, pp. 637-671, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1867892?seq=1>.

bell to summon a mob; in that sense, they were really being *heard*. While the conceived space of the Alarm Tower was not intended for a peasant insurrection, the lived space of the Alarm Tower claimed the bell for the people, countering its significance for the state. Catherine's destruction of the bell was a reaction to this insurrection, ensuring that it was never used again.²³



Figure 4. *Nabatnaya Tower*. Moscow, the Kremlin. Nabatnaya Tower. Presidential Press and Information Office, 2009, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/articles/Towers_09.shtml.

From many of these towers, you would have a perfect view of Lobnoye Mesto, a circular stone platform constructed in 1598, used both for proclamations and executions (see Figure 5).²⁴ This small stage has hosted a variety of spectacles of state power. The ceremonial services on the platform were typical: Criers declared the tsar's orders, coronations were held,²⁵ and it is said that here the royal heirs would present themselves to the Russian people on their 14th birthdays.²⁶ But the space of Lobnoye Mesto is best known for the Tsar's cruelty, including Ivan the Terrible's numerous executions. Peter the

²³ "Nabatnaya Tower"

²⁴ "Lobnoe Mesto on Moscow's Red Square." *Moscow.Info*, 2019, <http://www.moscow.info/red-square/lobnoe-mesto.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

²⁵ "View of the Red Square in the days of coronation celebrations." *Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library*, <https://www.prilib.ru/en/node/400744>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

²⁶ "Lobnoe Mesto on Moscow's Red Square"

Great continued this pattern of violence with his mass execution of the Streltsy rebels, a mutiny formed against him by Moscow's elite military force.²⁷ Perhaps the most famous execution in the Red Square was that of Stepan Razin under the order of the Tsar Aleksey Mikhaylovich. Stepan was a Cossack leader who sought to unite Cossacks, serfs, and townspeople against the Tsardom in order to end serfdom and create a Cossack army, among other demands.²⁸ His fierce rebellion was met with a fierce end, and the brutal quartering of Stepan continues to be a Russian legend to this day. Thus, *The Execution of Stepan Razin* by Dimitri Shostakovich depicts Stepan as fearless and brave, laughing at the gluttonous tsar even after his head is chopped off.²⁹ Whether or not Stepan actually laughed in the face of death matters little, his brave legacy transformed the lived reality of Lobnoye Mesto into a space of legend and resistance, a direct contradiction to the conception of the stage as a space of dissidents' belittlement and defeat.



Figure 5. Szczepreszynski. *Lobnoye Mesto*. Place of Skulls. 27 February 2009,

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/29673072@N03/3333670061/>.

²⁷ Richardson 77

²⁸ "Rebellion of Stepan Razin." *Shkolyariki*, 23 March 2021, <https://shkolyariki.ru/en/biologiya/vosstanie-stepana-razina-proizoshlo-v-pravlenie-vosstanie-stepana.html>.

²⁹ You can access a copy of this libretto in Russian here:

"Евгений Евтушенко: Казнь Стеньки Разина." *Главная библиотека поэзии*, <http://poetrylibrary.ru/stixiya/kak-vo-stolnoj.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

It was under the rule of Czar Ivan IV, Ivan the Great's grandson (ironically known today as Ivan the Terrible), that the gem of the Red Square was constructed — the Church of the Intercession (see Figure 6), better known as the Cathedral of St. Basil the Blessed (St. Basil's).³⁰ Religion and the state went hand in hand in Tsarist Russia, a religious-political hegemony that together guaranteed serfdom and political obedience in the coming centuries. In fact, St Basil's was commissioned by Ivan the Terrible following his victory in Kazan, a victory that promised new possibilities for Russia's colonization and trade, transforming the state into a true empire.³¹ Such a victory boded well for Russian Orthodoxy, as it also meant a defeat of Islam.³² As William Brumfield describes, "The new monument was, therefore, to express the triumph of Orthodoxy and of Muscovy, a dual-purpose evident in the fact that the Intercession Cathedral was sponsored by both Metropolitan Macarius (a famous Russian cleric) and the tsar."³³ When conceiving of this ostentatious church, the Russian elite named it after a commoner, a "holy fool", the Blessed Basil. Saint Basil came from a poor family and lived the shared misery of most saints. His gift of prophecy and divine prediction, as well as humble origins, made Basil an icon of the Russian peasantry.³⁴ Through exploiting St Basil's acclaim — using the religious hero ideologically to characterize the Church as the people's — the Russian Tsardom masked the political and religious elite's joint exploitation of the people. Russian serfdom was still legal, but at least the serfs had a religious space in the Red Square dedicated to one of their heroes!

³⁰ "Red Square - HISTORY"

³¹ Brumfield, William. "The mysteries of St. Basil's on Red Square." *Russia Beyond*, 10 December 2021, <https://www.rbth.com/travel/334505-st-basils-red-square>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Blessed Basil of Moscow the Fool-For-Christ." *Orthodox Church in America*, 2 August 1999, <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/1999/08/02/102185-blessed-basil-of-moscow-the-fool-for-christ>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

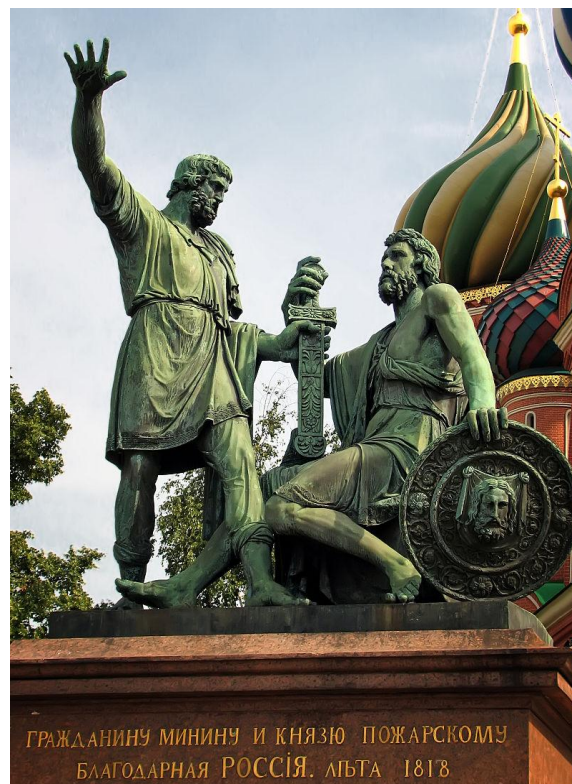


Figure 6. Silver, Julius. *Saint Basil's Cathedral*. 20 January 2016,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1_Saint_Basils_Cathedral.jpg.

By the 17th and 18th centuries, the monuments and structures that define the Red Square today had all been constructed. In 1712, the Russian Tsardom moved onto another city, a new capital: St. Petersburg.³⁵ As a consequence, the Red Square lost much of its political significance as a space for resistance. Yet its dialectical existence as both a conceived space of the state and a lived space of the people continued. There was one substantial addition to the Red Square, however, that cemented the Russian state ideology that continues today: promoting class unity in the face of foreign intervention. The monument to Minin and Pozharsky was put up in 1816, a dedication to the butcher and a prince who

³⁵ “When was St. Petersburg Russia's capital?” *Russia Beyond*, 28 July 2021,
<https://www.rbth.com/history/334052-petersburg-russias-capital>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

rallied Russia during the Time of Troubles (see Figure 7).³⁶ The timing of its construction, the Russian-Napoleonic war, spurred the patriotic monument. The bronze statue depicts the historic alliance between a commoner (Minin) and aristocrat (Pozharsky), the two brave heroes that lead the national militia against the Polish invaders of Moscow in 1612.³⁷ Such an image of cross-class unity was perfect propaganda for the Russian state, which needed the Russian peasantry as soldiers against Napoleon's forces.³⁸ Like St Basil, this conception of space represents Russian honor and camaraderie by co-opting the traditions and heroes of the Russian working class. Nevertheless, this strategy failed to align the lived space of the Red Square with the tsar's narrative; the square remained a periodic space of resistance and not of totalizing obedience.



³⁶ Manaev, Georgy. "Who are the two bronze guys on Red Square standing for Russian freedom?" *Russia Beyond*, 20 February 2018, <https://www.rbth.com/history/327639-minin-pozharsky>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Napoleon's Russian Campaign: The Retreat" *Napoleon.org*, The Foundation of Napoleon, <https://www.napoleon.org/en/history-of-the-two-empires/timelines/napoleons-russian-campaign-the-retreat/>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

Figure 7. Pavlov, Steven. *Monument to Minin and Pozharsky*. 18 August 2008,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monument_to_Minin_and_Pozharsky_in_Moscow.jpg.

In the time of the Russian Empire, the Red Square was conceived, and thereafter repeatedly reinforced, as an ornate stage for the Russian Tsardom to illustrate its authority. Despite the numerous insurrections, riots, and uprisings on behalf of Russian dissidents, they were not successful in changing the conception of the Red Square. To truly resist the state's power, to transform the Red Square from a periodic counter-space to a revolutionary space, Russian dissidents needed to re-conceive the square based on their experience of occupying it. The contentious politics of Imperial Russia were no failures, however, as these radical moments contributed to the spirit of revolution rising in Russia. The climax of the Red Square's spatial tension, the peak of the common cause,³⁹ was near.

The Russian Revolution and the USSR; a Missed Opportunity

At the turn of the 20th century, the Russian people — workers *and* peasants — united and rose up against the Tsarist regime. While St. Petersburg was the focus of the unrest during the 1905 Russian Revolution, the outbreak of World War I, and finally, the February and October Revolutions of 1917, Moscow was not isolated from the Russian people's armed solidarity. The feeling of possibility overwhelmed every corner of Russia, a reimagination of the factory, gender relations, political economy, and even architecture.⁴⁰ Indeed, the overarching conception of space was radicalizing as the socio-economic relations of Russia transformed. Egalitarian planning designs circulated during the revolutionary period, like Sabsovich's communes, with collective dining and communalized child-rearing, or the Disurbanists Green City, a non-urban environment-based reorganization.⁴¹ It was an opportunity to reimagine space — structures designed for the community instead of the individual, for the people instead

³⁹ In feudal times, Russian writers would use the phrase “the common cause” as a euphemism for revolution to avoid censorship. See Chernyshevsky, Nikolai. *What is to be done?* Translated by Michael R. Katz, Cornell University Press, 1989. Footnote 224

⁴⁰ Sinelschikova, Yekaterina. “Soviet-era plans for rebuilding the Red Square.” *Russia Beyond*, 15 February 2021, <https://www.rbth.com/history/333408-plans-rebuilding-red-square>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁴¹ Stites, Richard. *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 1991.

of the elite. When the Bolsheviks could not properly facilitate this, Russians conceived community space themselves, and a wave of communes hit the countryside and the towns.⁴²

Contradicting the popular impulse to follow Proudhon's motto "I destroy in order to create," the Bolsheviks proved to be unexpected anti-iconoclasts; in short, the Soviets took great efforts to prevent the Russian people's destruction of relics from Tsarist Russia.⁴³ Such prohibition countered a strong tradition of vandalism in Russian peasant insurrection, where lords' manors, artifacts, and libraries were destroyed for symbolic and practical reasons. While Lenin's decree on monuments oversaw the removal of multiple tsarist statues,⁴⁴ as well as the renaming of certain places, the Red Square was practically untouched. This contradiction between revolutionary iconoclasm by the Russian people against anti-iconoclasts by the Bolsheviks⁴⁵ ensured that the Red Square would not transform from a counter-space into a revolutionary space in the Russian Revolution.

There was one change to the Red Square, however, that indicated a possible new conception of the space — a reclamation of the square against its Tsarist history into something for the people and by the people. The Kremlin Wall, constructed by Italian architects as one of the first structures of the Red Square, became a necropolis for those who died during the battle for Moscow in 1917.⁴⁶ 240 fallen revolutionaries from the October Revolution were buried in a mass grave along the wall, a burial place that came to be a great symbol of honor in the USSR. These corpses, brave men who took arms against the Russian Tsardom, would occupy the space forever. In that sense, the Red Square will always be a counter-space, at least as long as their memory remains in the land. Yet ultimately, while the Red Square was home to remarkable resistance — war, revolutionary victory, and festivals — the revolutionaries did not succeed in reimagining the conceived space, incorporating the lived space of the Red Square during

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "Soviet May Day Decree." *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/mayday/soviet/decreed.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁴⁵ This tendency, especially on the part of Lenin, is surprising: "the working class must break up, smash the "ready-made state machinery," and not confine itself merely to laying hold of it."

"The State and Revolution - Chapter 3." *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/ch03.htm>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁴⁶ Richardson 76

the revolution in its conception. Lefebvre himself lamented this, in connection to all of Russia: “A lesson to be learned from soviet constructivists from the 1920s and 30s, and of their failure, is that new social relations demand a new space, and vice-versa.”⁴⁷

The authoritarian turn of Soviet Russia cannot be reduced to Lenin’s death and Stalin’s subsequent rise to power, but the burial of Lenin marked a new spatial epoch for the Red Square. Against the wishes of Lenin’s widow Natalya Krupskaya,⁴⁸ Stalin ordered a massive mausoleum to be built in the Red Square (see Figure 8), where Lenin’s preserved body could be visited by every Russian (and every tourist). The mausoleum’s space was conceived to perpetuate the cult of Lenin, and later Stalin, a conception of space that attempted to both legitimize the Soviet Union’s brand of state socialism and prevent insurrection against it. If you wish to see this Russian revolutionary leader’s corpse (which takes taxpayers 1 million every year to maintain),⁴⁹ one must wait in a long line, pass metal detectors, take hats off and hands out of pockets, and finally, walk down the stairs to the dimly lit room that holds Lenin’s body in a bulletproof glass case.⁵⁰ No talking, photography, nor cell phones are allowed, and the space is set up so that you don’t have more than a few minutes to see Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. Stalin turned Lenin into a saint⁵¹ to be ogled at, conceived the space of his body, his corpse, to serve the Stalinist regime. There were even plans to build a Soviet Necropolis, a pantheon akin to Rome’s temple of gods, to house tombs of the USSR’s greatest leaders.⁵² The counter-space, the temporary lived insurrectionary character of the square and all of Russia, had been reclaimed by the Russian state once more.

⁴⁷ Lefebvre and Harvey 59

⁴⁸ Natalya Krupskaya: “Do not let your sorrow for Ilyich find expression in outward veneration of his personality. Do not raise monuments to him or palaces to his name. Do not organize pompous ceremonies in his memory.” Meisler, Stanley. “Remaking the Revolution: For Kremlin Rulers, Lenin Is Only God.” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 October 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-10-25-mn-16433-story.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁴⁹ Richardson 75

⁵⁰ Bluit, Rebecca. “Lenin’s Mausoleum: What it’s like to visit Moscow tomb.” *CNN*, 9 November 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/lenin-mausoleum-moscow/index.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁵¹ This insistence on showing Lenin’s preserved corpse can be traced back to Russian Orthodoxy, which elevates an un-decayed corpse, incorruptibility, as proof of sainthood.

Petrizzello, Melissa. “Too Good to Rot? Saints with Incorrupt Bodies.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/story/too-good-to-rot-saints-with-incorrupt-bodies>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁵² Sinelschikova, Yekaterina. “How the Red Square almost became a NECROPOLIS for Soviet leaders (PICS).” *Russia Beyond*, 8 February 2021, <https://www.rbth.com/history/333377-red-square-necropolis>. Accessed 18 April 2022.



Figure 8. Rostad, Bernt. *The Lenin Mausoleum*. 3 August 2008, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brostad/2773598983>.

Starting with Stalin, the changes made by the new Soviet state of Russia reinforced the main purpose of the original conception of the Red Square, asserting the Russian ruling class's power, but this time with a Stalinist flair. In the 1930s, Stalin ordered the Kazan Cathedral and the Resurrection Gate to be destroyed and the Minin and Pozharsky monument moved;⁵³ he wanted better accessibility for military instruments, tanks specifically. Legend says that Stalin even considered taking the St. Basil's Cathedral out of the Red Square, but that architect Petr Baranovsky convinced him otherwise.⁵⁴ So the spectacles continued, the Red Square as the Soviet's stage, military parades and grand speeches replacing the Tsardom's coronations and public executions (executions were now done privately). May 1 (Worker's day) and November 7th (the Revolution's anniversary) were two of the most important dates for said state festivals; one such parade is immortalized in grainy videos and black and white photos, the 1941 November 7th parade,⁵⁵ which took place during the Great Patriotic War (or as Americans label it, the Eastern Front of World War II). Despite the Germans being only 70-100 km away from Moscow, Soviet

⁵³ Richardson 70

⁵⁴ Shevchenko, Nikolay. "How did an architect convince Stalin to spare St. Basil's Cathedral from destruction?" *Russia Beyond*, 4 December 2017, <https://www.rbth.com/history/326919-st-basil-cathedral-architect-stalin>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁵⁵ *Soviet October Revolution Parade, 1941 Парад 7 Ноября*. 24 May 2016. *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kkIJ9DuCE4>.

leadership came to the Red Square to lead the military parade, Stalin assuring the Russian people that Germany's defeat would come soon.⁵⁶ In this instance, the conceived space of the Red Square reflected the lived space; there was no room for contentious politics when the Germans were encroaching and the ranks of Soviet troops were armed for battle.

Khrushchev's famous 1956 "Secret Speech" boldly denounced the personality cult of Stalin, and offered a spark of hope for the spatial conception of the Red Square: "Comrades, in order not to repeat errors of the past, the central committee has declared itself resolutely against the cult of the individual. We consider that Stalin was excessively extolled."⁵⁷ But despite this unexpected proclamation against Stalin, the conceived space of the Red Square was not changed to reflect Khrushchev's words. Stalin's body was merely moved from Lenin's Mausoleum into the Kremlin wall among other Soviet heroes and martyrs,⁵⁸ and the square's glorification of Imperial and Soviet Russia persisted. Ultimately, until Glasnost, the Red Square's conceived space was also its lived space — the price for creating a counter-space, for creating spatial agency, was too high. Resistance of any kind met with brute force at the hands of the KGB,⁵⁹ and to resist in the state's center was assured suicide for yourself, and likely your family. There are two important exceptions, however, the 1963 African student protest and a demonstration in reaction to the 1968 Czechoslovakia invasion.

When Assare-Addo, a Ghanian medical student, was mysteriously murdered in Moscow's district of Khovrino, around 500 protestors took to the Red Square to demand justice. The crowd composed of mostly black men carried posters with the words: "Moscow, a second Alabama", "Stop killing Africans" and "It's the same thing all over the world".⁶⁰ Yet the Russian reaction was strategic, and ultimately kinder than if this demonstration were by Russians. There were important political considerations: the Soviets

⁵⁶ "A parade on the Red Square in Moscow during the Great Patriotic War took place." *Boris Yeltsin Public Library*, <https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619695>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁵⁷ "Khrushchev's Secret Speech." *Wilson Center Digital Archive*, 25 February 1956, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/115995>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁵⁸ Rosenberg, Jennifer. "Body of Stalin Removed From Lenin's Tomb." *ThoughtCo*, 12 September 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/body-of-stalin-lenins-tomb-1779977>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁵⁹ "KGB - Creation and role of the KGB | Britannica." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/KGB/Creation-and-role-of-the-KGB>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁶⁰ Shevchenko, Nikolay. "Why did 500 Africans protest on the Red Square in 1963?" *Russia Beyond*, 11 October 2021, <https://www.rbth.com/history/334288-african-students-protest-red-square-1963>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

were a strong ally for decolonization movements in Africa and offered scholarships to African students to study in the USSR.⁶¹ Moreover, the US Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, and the Soviets wanted to appear as an anti-racist government in comparison. Therefore, Soviet Minister of Education Vyacheslav Eliutin took the lead in addressing the protestors instead of the KGB. While offering both a moment of silence and a promise to seriously look into Assare-Addo's death, Eliutin stressed the need for a solid front, solidarity among Marxists.⁶² Despite this moment of resistance by African students in the Red Square, the ideological force of the Soviet line worked, and the dissidents dispersed.

Following reformist Alexander Dubček's takeover of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, and the subsequent "Prague Spring" that called for "socialism with a human face",⁶³ the USSR sent troops and tanks to take back the Soviet control of the country.⁶⁴ In Moscow, eight Soviet dissidents took to Red Square to protest the invasion and show solidarity with the Czech people. The protest, consisting of a Czech flag and a banner with the words "For Your Freedom and Ours", lasted no longer than a couple of minutes before the KGB swept them away to labor camps.⁶⁵ The lived space of the Red Square had changed yet again; as filmmaker Ksenia Sakharnova explains, "...it wasn't simply a one-off demonstration that everyone soon forgot about. It resonated widely...and it's an example to today's young activists."⁶⁶ However, overall, the Red Square following Lenin's death did not serve as a counter-space for the Russian people. Even including this brave demonstration (with severe consequences), only 46 percent of Russian people are aware of the 1968 invasion, and much less the Red Square protest against it.⁶⁷ The Red Square as a counter-space could not exist until Gorbachev and his Perestroika.

⁶¹ Scholarships were not limited to Africa, the USSR was actively engaged in International Education across the globe, see below:

Rosen, Seymour. "The USSR and International Education: A Brief Overview." *The Phi Delta Kappan: International Education*, vol. 51, no. 5, 1970, pp. 247-250.

⁶² Shevchenko.

⁶³ Maynes, Charles. "50 Years On: A Red Square Protest, and Seeds of Russian Democracy." *VOA*, 27 August 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/years-on-a-red-square-protest-and-seeds-of-russian-democracy/4545810.html>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁶⁴ Castellina, Luciana. "Why We Fought." *Jacobin*, 2018, <https://jacobinmag.com/2018/05/why-we-fought>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁶⁵ Maynes.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Maynes.

Modern Russia; Capitalism Comes at a Price (For the People)

On May 28, 1987, 19-year-old West German Mathias Rust landed a Cessna F172P light aircraft in front of St. Basil. In Rust's words, "I was thinking I could use the aircraft to build an imaginary bridge between West and East to show that a lot of people in Europe wanted to improve relations between our worlds."⁶⁸ For the first time since Napoleon's invasion, the lived space of the Red Square was inhabited by a Westerner. Mathias' shocking plane landing in Russia's capital foreshadowed the West's intervention in the Russian economy following the fall of the Soviet Union.

The year 1985 kicked off President Mikhail Gorbachev's era of reform,⁶⁹ his programs *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* welcomed both economic deregulation and the Russian people's voices. Thereafter, the privatization of the Russian economy, the 1991 coup, the new constitution, the Chechnyan wars, and the first free elections characterized what Russians call the "wild 90s" (лихие девяностые). It was an unimaginably chaotic and scary period for Russians; gangs ruling locales, Russian oligarchs seizing state assets, and inflation incapacitating families.⁷⁰ However, the space of the Red Square did not reflect the people's devastation but rather represented the transition of a new epoch — one where capital ruled.⁷¹ In addition to the square becoming a UNESCO World Heritage site,⁷² the Red Square's Kazan Cathedral was reconstructed in 1990, opening its doors for the first time since its "barbaric destruction in 1936" (as the official website describes).⁷³ Similarly, the Resurrection gates were restored in 1994.⁷⁴ As the Soviet Union disappeared and the Russian Federation emerged in the chaos of the 90s, the Red Square was re-fortified as a space for state capitalism.

⁶⁸ Hadjimatheou, Chloe. "Mathias Rust: German teenager who flew to Red Square." *BBC*, 7 December 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20609795>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁶⁹ "Perestroika and Glasnost - Definition, Dates & Gorbachev - HISTORY." *History.com*, 14 November 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/perestroika-and-glasnost>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁷⁰ Zubacheva, Ksenia. "What was so 'wild' about 1990s Russia?" *Russia Beyond*, 6 February 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/history/331652-wild-90s>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁷¹ For a comprehensive overview of the suffering in Eastern Europe postsocialism see:

Ghodsee, Kristen. *Red Hangover: Legacies of Twentieth-Century Communism*. Duke University Press, 2017.

⁷² Fryazin, Marco, and Pietro Antonio Solario. "Kremlin and Red Square, Moscow - UNESCO World Heritage Centre." *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/545/>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁷³ "Возрождение Казанского Собора на Красной Площади." *Казанского собора на Красной площади*, <http://kazanski-sobor.ru/site/istoriya-sobora/vozrozhdenie-kazanskogo-sobora-na-krasnoj-ploshhadi/>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁷⁴ Geisler.

But the lived space of the Red Square does not comply with the conceived space's latest hegemonic consolidation. Though the contentious politics of the present period in Russia share neither purpose nor form, the diverse range of issues protested all confront the Russian ruling class's hegemony. The past 30 years have seen a series of non-traditional protests, transforming the Red Square into a strong counter-space for resistance against the Russian state once more. An overview of the distinct demonstrations — from performance activism to terrorism to traditional protest — indicates the exceptionalism of Russian resistance in the Red Square today.

In 1991, ETI (Expropriation of the Territory of Art) saw its dissidents lay down in the Red Square (see Figure 9), their bodies spelling out the word *хуй* (cock). It was a protest against the new Law on Morality, which forbade swearing in public places.



Figure 9. Osmolovsky, Anatoly. *The E.T.I. Movement. Action "E.T.I.-text"*. 18 April 1991, <https://artguide.com/posts/1019>.

In 1995, Alexander Brener stripped to his boxers, put on boxing gloves, and screamed “Yeltsin, come out!” — (see Figure 10) a challenge to fight the Russian president at the time, who had just sent

Russian troops to the Republic of Chechnya.⁷⁵ Ironically, Yeltsin's lack of appearance signified a win for Brener according to boxing rules.



Figure 10. Stomakhin, Igor. *The artist Alexander Brener challenges Boris Yeltsin to a fight in Red Square*. 1995, <https://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/14/russian-performance-art-exhibit-pussy-riot-futurists/>.

In December 1999, on the eve of an election, Anatoly Osmolovsky and a few other dissidents stood on a platform in front of Lenin's Mausoleum with a banner that read *Against All* (also translated as *Against Everyone*) (see Figure 11). Their purpose was that only a vote "against all parties" was the way to assert personal freedom.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Pavlensky, Pyotr. "Red Square riots: performance art in the centre of Moscow." *The Calvert Journal*, 3 June 2015, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/4190/performance-art-in-red-square-pussy-riot-pyotr-pavlensky>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁷⁶ Ibid.



Figure 11. Osmolovsky, Anatoly. *Against Everybody*. 1999, <http://moscowartmagazine.com/en/issue/41/article/774>.

In 2003, the widow of a Chechen rebel commander who was killed during the Second Chechen War, set off a bomb at the entrance of the Red Square, killing herself and six other people, as well as injuring 44.⁷⁷ This is described by the Russian state, and many Russian people, as an act of terrorism; nevertheless, it still serves to create the Red Square into a counter-space, a lived space that contradicts the elite's conception of the space.

In 2010, the anarchist Punk collective Pussy Riot performed their original song *Riot in Russia — Putin Wet Himself* (see Figure 12); 8 dissidents, all women, sang on top of Lobnoye Mesto, the setting for the Tsardom's many executions centuries ago.⁷⁸



⁷⁷ “Вдова не приходит одна.” *Коммерсант*, 10 August 2004, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/496533>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁷⁸ Pavlensky.

Figure 12. Sinyakov, Denis. *Members of the Russian radical feminist group 'Pussy Riot' sing a song at the so-called Lobnoye*

Mesto. [Reuters](#), 20 January 2012

In 2013, inspired by the trial of the Pussy Riot following their latest stunt in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, activist artist Petr Pavlensky nailed his scrotum to the ground in the Red Square (see Figure 13). The image of a nude Petr hovering on the floor resembles the naked Saint Basil, the holy fool for whom the square's main cathedral (Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed) is named. Petr was addressed by bewildered policemen, who eventually threw a blanket over him while they waited for medical care to un-nail him. Later, Petr explained that his demonstration coincided with Russia's annual Police Day, and was "a metaphor for the apathy, political indifference and fatalism of modern Russian society."⁷⁹ Petr refuses to run from Russian authorities, arguing that his art is to demonstrate a position of strength against the Russian state. "Whenever I do a performance like this, I never leave the place. It's important for me that I stay there. The authorities are in a dead-end situation and don't know what to do. They can't ask the person to leave a square, because he's nailed to the square."⁸⁰

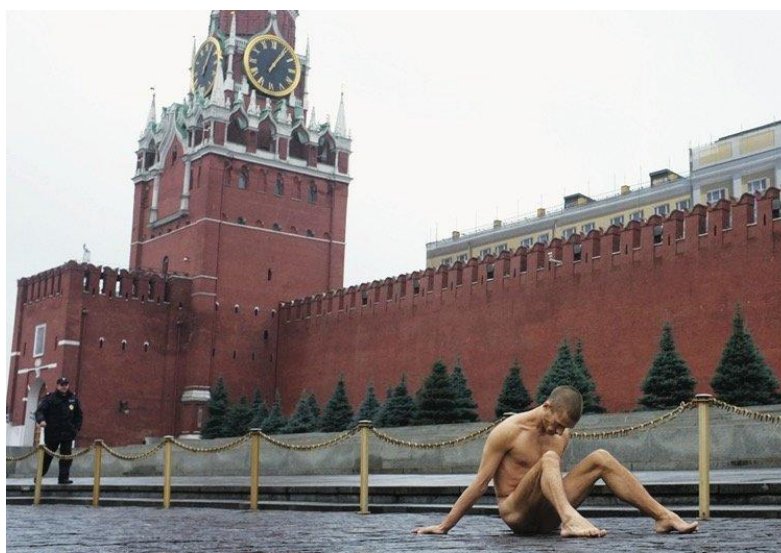


Figure 13. Zmeyer, Maxim. *Fixation*. Reuters, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/11/magazine/pyotr-pavlensky-art.html>.

⁷⁹ Walker, Shaun. "Petr Pavlensky: why I nailed my scrotum to Red Square." *The Guardian*, 5 February 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/feb/05/petr-pavlensky-nailed-scrotum-red-square>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

In 2015, “The Blue Horseman” performed *The Exorcists: the Defilement of the Mausoleum*; screaming “Rise and be gone” in Russian, two men sprinkled holy water on Lenin’s mausoleum.⁸¹ As a dissident member describes, “We want to destroy those things to which people attach themselves through our actions; through such buffoonery.”⁸²

These contentious moments stand out in recent Red Square history, but the past few years have seen a rise in traditional protest, where ordinary Russians have come together in struggle, despite the dangers. At the same time, as Putin’s power has grown, Russian landmarks have become even more regulated and watched — any protest shut down within minutes. Human Rights organizations and known dissidents have especially faced unprecedented crackdown at the hands of the Russian state, including cyber attacks.⁸³ When opposition leader Alexei Navalny was sentenced to jail in February 2021, Putin ordered riot police in all major spaces of Russia, including the Red Square.⁸⁴ Russian police detained and violently suppressed all dissidents, resulting in an estimated 10,000 Russians detained throughout the country following Navalny’s sentencing.⁸⁵ As Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russian security affairs describes, “The intent was political, to make it clear that the government has what in military terms is called ‘escalation dominance’: the will and capacity to escalate to match and exceed anything the protesters can do. The goal is to make people think resistance is futile.”⁸⁶ Therefore, Putin asserted his power by policing the space of the Red Square while dissidents asserted their contention in spite of the violent pushback. As the stakes rise, the square transforms into a more powerful counter-space, a point of convergence for pushback against Putin’s hegemony.

⁸¹ See the video below:

Грани.Ру. *Мавзолей облили святой водой*. Youtube, 19 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcvzubxdCMI>.

⁸² Pavlensky.

⁸³ “Russia blocks website of protest monitoring group OVD-Info | Censorship News.” *Al Jazeera*, 25 December 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/25/russia-blocks-website-of-prominent-rights-monitor>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁸⁴ Sauer, Pjotr. “Riot Squads on Red Square and Full Detention Centers: Moscow After Navalny Verdict.” *The Moscow Times*, 3 February 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/02/03/riot-squads-on-red-square-and-full-detention-centers-moscow-after-navalny-verdict-a72817>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁸⁵ “Независимый Правозащитный Медиа-проект.” *ОВД-Инфо*, <https://ovdinfo.org/>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁸⁶ Sauer.

The past few months have continued the contentious politics of the Red Square, with Russian dissidents now demanding *Нет Войне* (No to War).⁸⁷ While Putin's propaganda indicates otherwise, not all of Russia agrees with the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. According to the Independent monitoring group OVD-Info, more than 15,000 detentions have taken place in relation to anti-war action in Russia.⁸⁸ Videos show Russians being dragged away by the police at any hint of protest. One video next to the entrance of the Red Square shows a woman holding up a sign that says *два слова* (two words) on it, and within seconds being pulled away by 5 policemen.⁸⁹ As one reporter puts it, "Anyone trying to go out or looking like a protester has been violently dragged away."⁹⁰

The Next Step; Conceiving the Red Square in Revolution

Dissidents seek out the Red Square as their setting for obvious reasons — it is precisely its implication as a space of the state that makes it such a fitting place for demonstrations. Geographically, one could even call the Red Square Putin's front yard (or alternatively, Putin's stage). This choice of location is not unique to Russian protest, monuments and landmarks of the state or capital (or often, both) are ideal grounds for causing havoc. The Washington Monument, Wall Street, Tahir Square, Embassies, Plaza de las Tres Culturas, and Tiananmen Square are all emblems of the nation-state that the *people* wish to reclaim. What is exceptional about Russia and other authoritarian "democracies", however, are the consequences of demonstrations. You jeopardize your job, life, and your family's well-being when you speak out politically in Russia; to publicly dissent is both terrifying and catastrophic. The Russian state takes active measures to prevent both spontaneous and planned demonstrations, often through censored social media and riot police. However, the centrality and well-known character of the Red Square beckons people in times of struggle. This contradiction is a fundamental quality of the square, and neither the Tsardom, the Soviets, nor Putin has been successful in overcoming it.

⁸⁷ Taylor, Alan. "Photos: Anti-war Protests in Russia." *The Atlantic*, 24 February 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2022/02/photos-anti-war-protests-russia/622914/>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

⁸⁸ "Независимый Правозащитный Медиа-проект"

⁸⁹ The Telegraph. *Police arrest Russian peace protester within seconds of starting interview*. Youtube, 14 March 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TO9u0XT6O40>.

⁹⁰ "Hundreds of anti-war protesters arrested across Russia." *Al Jazeera*, 13 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/13/russia-ukraine-war-protesters-arrested>. Accessed 18 April 2022.

As the Russian State has evolved, adopting new repressive techniques to subdue insurrection, Russian dissidents have reimagined their resistance. The majority of recent protests in the Red Square possess a level of creativity unlike other demonstrations, these contentious politics are not merely protestors and chants, but performances, eye-grabbing actions, that attract not only the attention but the curiosity of their Russian and international audiences. In the face of police violence and prison, protestors use the space's significance historically and globally to stand out. Indeed, the memory of the Red Square's contentious politics lives on in the demonstrations of today, groups like Pussy Riot shouting their songs on top of Stepan Razkin's execution grounds, Lobnoye Mesto.

The Red Square may represent a form of legitimacy for the Russian state and its interests but it at the same time serves as an iconic point of struggle and resistance against the Russian state and its interests. This spatial contradiction continues today as performance artists and outraged Russians occupy the square, reclaiming the hegemonic space for the people. By understanding space as a tool for resistance, activists can take power through spatial occupation and can create change through spatial conception. The Red Square has served as a counter-space for centuries, what Russians need is for it to be something more, to be a revolutionary space.

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