

“... not intended for the Rich”

Public Places as Points of Identification

for the Urban Poor – St. Petersburg (1850-1914)

HANS-CHRISTIAN PETERSEN

“Very many people of Petrograd have heard that somewhere in their city there is a place called ‘Vasia’s Village’. But do many of them know its location and its functions?”¹ This rhetorical question is put at the beginning of a series of articles published in the “Little Gazette” (*Malen’kaia Gazeta*) in 1915, which dealt with one of the biggest slums of the Russian capital St. Petersburg which was renamed Petrograd at the beginning of World War I.² The author of these reports took the ignorance of the population he had noticed as an impetus to write in great detail about the co-existence of roughly 5000 inhabitants of “Vasia’s Village”. As is typical of ‘uncovering stories’ at that time (and even often of today) he added to his report numerous drastic details, introduced specific characters and, in order to verify the authenticity of his descriptions, he put words into their mouths for the dialogues which included their slang expressions. Like in West and Central European major cities, gruesome and obscene tales about the ‘dark’ sides of the city had become a worthwhile undertaking in Petrograd. They were a part of *slumming*³ which included the ‘discovery’, marketing and presentation of the ‘poor’ to the ‘better’ part of the population for their amusement.

1 IASHKOV, 03.01.1915, p. 3.

2 IBID., 03.-04., 06. and 08.01.1915.

3 This expression was first used in Victorian England. Cf. KOVEN, 2006; SCHWARZ et al., 2007; LINDNER, 2004. Hubertus Jahn has retraced this process of ‘discovering’ the urban poor for St. Petersburg: JAHN, 2010. The following work on the still valid relevance of slumming is now at hand: FRENZEL et al., 2012.

In view of these circumstances it is obvious to analyse such a report first of all as a part of a discourse and to ask in the sense of postcolonial studies what we can learn from the text about the mental map of its author and the society. It was part of a process which presented images of the urban poor as the ‘others’, the ‘dark’ and the ‘strange’ and where the remaining inhabitants of the city assured themselves that they led better, ‘brighter’ lives. There is no doubt that such an approach is important, but does it cover everything? This question will be discussed in the following text. Is it true that we cannot gain any knowledge about the ‘poor’ from the reports about them? Is it only possible to write about poverty in Russian history as an object of “social imagination”⁴, public welfare or control, as “beggars and the poor had no historical voices of their own until the end of the 19th century” and that we can only rely on “descriptions from outside”? Or do such sources – besides their discursive aspect – also provide information about those who, as in case of the report on “Vasia’s Village”, had unintentionally become objects of journalistic curiosity? In other words, to which extent is it possible for us to look behind the facade of urban poverty?

This question shall now be discussed by looking at two types of sources that present a totally different degree of ‘authenticity’ at first glance: on one hand we have the above-mentioned series of articles on “Vasia’s Village” as an example of reports in connection with slumming and on the other we have several petitions submitted by traders from Petersburg’s Haymarket, kept in the files of the tsarist Ministry of the Interior. The key aspect will be the question whether we will be able to gain information about the importance these locations had for the urban poor. Can they be regarded as points of identification which were important to them and which they regarded as their ‘own’? In addition to a discussion on the epistemic possibilities and limitations of both types of sources it is thus my intention to challenge the still dominating narrative that the habitats of the urban lower class were solely places of dull backwardness characterised by cramped quarters and a narrowness of mind. This description does not take into account what this ‘narrow world’ meant for its inhabitants. The view from outside ignores the perspective from the inside. The following exposition will focus on this.

Let me first explain some terms. Places like “Vasia’s Village” or “Viazemskaia Lavra” adjacent to Petersburg’s Haymarket will be called *slums* – here defined as places of urban blight and utmost poverty. In doing so, I will follow Loïc Wacquants’ differentiation between “slum” and “ghetto”. He defines the “ghetto” “as a spatially based implement of ethnoracial closure” and points

4 This and the two following quotations were taken from JAHN, 2010, p. 16.

out “that not all ghettos are poor and not all poor areas are (inside) ghettos.”⁵ Such a differentiation solves the problem defined by Ilya Gerasimov. He said that the idea of an exclusive and socially homogeneous neighbourhood does not comply with the reality of Russian imperial society as “people of low socioeconomic status resided all over the city, while certain categories of the modernized could live in the slums (for example, poor students, teachers, or ‘conscious’ factory workers).”⁶ This is undoubtedly true, especially in case of a city like St. Petersburg with its low degree of sociospatial segregation in comparison with other major cities.⁷ Rich and poor were found close together in the town on the Neva River. However, you could also find more prosperous and poorer districts as well as clearly defined areas which were already at that time called *trushchoby* (impoverished areas, slums) by their contemporaries. Works such as the voluminous writings “Petersburg Slums (*Peterburgskie trushchoby*) by Vsevolod Krestovskii⁸, “World of Slums” (*Mir trushchobnyi*) by Aleksei Svirskii⁹ or “New Petersburg Slums” (*Novye Peterburgskie trushchoby*) by Iurii Angarov and M. Semenov¹⁰ made this term popular and marketed it as well, referring at the same time, however, to real existing places which were surely appropriately characterized by the term *trushchoba* (slum).

I. “Mud hole” and “anthill”? “Vasia’s village”

“Vasia’s Village” was situated between lines 17 and 18 on Vasil’evskii Island at the location of a former waste dump. Being the largest of the islands in the Neva Delta, Vasil’evskii Island was originally chosen as the centre of the new capital by Peter I after the foundation of St. Petersburg, before the site around the Admiralty was later favoured as the place for the city centre.¹¹ Correspondingly, many

5 Cf. the contribution by Loïc Wacquant in this book.

6 Cf. the contribution by Ilia V. Gerasimov in this book.

7 A comparative perspective is offered by PETERSEN.

8 This work has first been published as a series since 1864 in the journal “Otechestvennye zapiski”. At the same time it was repeatedly published as a monograph, most recently a few years ago: KRESTOVSKII, 2011.

9 SVIRSKII, 1898.

10 ANGAROV/SEMEV, 1909-1910

11 Cf. SEMENOV, 2007, on the building history of St. Petersburg. KUSBER, 2009, can be recommended as a recent introduction to the history of St. Petersburg

central buildings were erected on the East Bank of Vasil'evskii Island, among others the Arts House, the Twelve Collegia as well as the Academy of Sciences. The geometric design of the network of canals and streets demonstrated the ruler's ideas of rationalization and order.¹² The side of a street was called a line so that lines 16 and 17 as well as lines 18 and 19 made up one street each. "Vasia's Village" was situated in House No. 18 on line 17, only few houses away from the main boulevard of the island, the Bol'shoi Prospect.¹³ Until the 20th century, the Bol'shoi Prospect was the border between that part of Vasil'evskii Island where streets which started at the prestigious bank of the Neva were lined on both sides by multi-storied stone houses and the markedly bigger part of the island on the other side of the prospect, which had no buildings at all or was the site of flat wooden buildings.¹⁴ Accordingly, "Vasia's Village" consisted of several wooden houses, but was at the same time only a stone's throw away from the 'better-off' residential areas of Vasil'evskii Island. This is a typical example for the close proximity of rich and poor in the Russian capital. The well-known meteorologist Mikhail Tikachev, member of the Academy of Sciences, lived in House No. 20 for some time, directly adjacent to the slum. At the same time, lines 17 and 18 did not only belong to "Vasia's Village", but were also the location of orphanages and institutions for the poor.¹⁵

In the second half of the 19th century, several big industrial plants were erected on Vasil'evskii Island. This changed the social structure of the district. Dwellings for workers were built in the vicinity of the factories. Living conditions were similarly cramped and precarious as in other parts of the metropolis on the Neva River.¹⁶ The island experienced a "densification process"¹⁷. Hitherto open areas or areas which had been used as vegetable gardens were turned into

12 Cf. NIKITENKO/SOBOL', 2008, for a recent encyclopaedic account of the history of Vasil'evskii Island (first edition: IBID., Vasileostrovskii raion. Enciklopediia ulic Sankt-Peterburga, St. Petersburg 1999). Cf. PIROGOV, 1996, for a survey from Soviet times.

13 Cf. NIKITENKO/SOBOL', 2008, p. 423 and 432, as well as the map of the Vasil'evskii Island, including the house numbers: PLANY POLICEISKIKH CHASTEI GORODA S.-PETERBURGA S POKAZANIEM DOMOV, VKHODIASCIKH V SOSTAVE ULIC I PRISVOENNYKH IM NOMEROM, 1902.

14 Cf. NIKITENKO/SOBOL', 2008, p. 16 and 413.

15 Cf. IBID., p. 423; ENCIKLOPEDIA BLAGOTVORITEL'NOSTI. Sankt-Peterburg: <http://encblago.ifond.spb.ru/search.do?objectType=2805596371>, 07.05.2013.

16 Cf. PIROGOV, 1996, p. 30-32.

17 Cf. NIKITENKO/SOBOL', 2008, p. 18.

building sites, and it is really not at all surprising that one of the biggest slums of the city developed in the wake of these changes. However, when looking at respective descriptions of the history of Vasil'evskii Island, "Vasia's Village" is either not mentioned at all or we find just a very cursory account.¹⁸ This can be explained on one hand by the fact that this settlement was not in the centre of Petersburg contrary to the Haymarket and, on the other that it was largely unknown as we have seen from the citation at the beginning of this text. To write about it was in no way as profitable as the tales about the notorious "Viazemskaia lavra", the slum situated between Haymarket and Fontanka which were turned into literature in the works of Dostoevskii and Krestovskii. On the other hand, the fact that the image that should be conveyed for Vasil'evskii Island did not include the existence of a slum explains why "Vasia's Village" was largely neglected in the stories about urban districts: Under Soviet rule the poorest of the poor, the "lumpenproletariat" as they were derogatory termed already by Marx and Engels, did not fit into the teleological narrative about the class of 'conscious' workers eager for a revolution.¹⁹ In post-Soviet Russia we see rather a concentration of high-culture and representative aspects of history, neither of which meshes with a closer look at a slum and its inhabitants.²⁰

Now, what can we learn from the series of articles published on "Vasia's Village" in "Malen'kaia gazeta? According to the descriptions, the inhabitants were uncouth in their speech, were extremely prone to violence, addicted to alcohol and very good at surviving without 'honest work'. Garbage was simply thrown out of the windows and rows of toilettes without any doors were placed outside so that their users were in no way protected from the looks of neighbours (*vo*

18 The latter is only true for the encyclopaedia by NIKITENKO/SOBOL', 2008.

19 In addition to the work by Pirogov this narrative can also be found in: NIKITENKO/SOBOL', 1981. In spite of its proximity to the Bol'shoi prospect "Vasia's Village" is not mentioned.

20 This is also shown by the popular scientific account of BUZINOV, 2006. In respect of the different narratives a comparative reading of the entries dealing with Vasil'evskii Island in the following encyclopedias is instructive: SANKT-PETERBURG – PETROGRAD – LENINGRAD. 1992; ENCIKLOPEDIA SANKT-PETERBURGA: <http://encspb.ru/object/2803998688?lc=ru>, 07.05.2013. Vasya's Village" is mentioned in neither of them, just as little as in the multi-volume encyclopedia which was published to mark the 300-anniversary of the city: Tri veka Sankt-Peterburga, 2005-2011. In contrast, for the "Viazemskaia lavra" can be found a single entry, supplementary to the already detailed article on the Haymarket: TERESHCHIK, 2005, p. 667f.

*vsei 'nature'*²¹), but had the opportunity of having long conversations during that time. By no means did the author say that all inhabitants were unwilling to work and corrupt. In addition to people like the “soothsayer”²², who had gained a relatively satisfactory fortune by making obscure prophesies and who lived in three numbers of the “village”, we read here about the “honest worker”²³, who came to this settlement while looking for cheap living quarters or the “old single man”²⁴ who lived on alms. They were introduced as “humiliated people”²⁵, as victims just like the children who had names like “wolf” and whose fate “depended totally on the street”²⁶ (*ulica derzhit detei v polnoi svoei vlasti*). However, this differentiation between ‘corrupt’ and ‘innocent’ inhabitants served as a typical stylistic device for reports about the slums in order to evoke both revulsion and compassion and to satisfy the (assumed) lust of people for the spectacular.²⁷ The introduction of specific literary characters was meant to help readers to identify them again. In this respect it was above all “Krestovskii’s” “Petersburg Slums” which exerted an influence on the style of others.²⁸

These passages were above all of a literary nature and can hardly be used as a historical source for the inner life of a slum. Are there – apart from this narrative level – descriptions which tell us about the actual geography of “Vasia’s Village”? When we return to the beginning of the report, we find - together with the information about the location of lines 17 and 18 - markedly more details about the history of the settlement in comparison with the little information we find at other places. The encyclopaedia of Galina Nikitenko and Vitalii Sobol’ states that “Vasia’s Village” was founded on a large free space by a businessman from the peasant population named Egor Vasil’ev. It was his aim to let dwellings of this settlement named after him at low prices.²⁹ We find the same information in the “Malen’kaia gazeta”. However, in addition we learn that Ego Vasil’ev came to St. Petersburg as an adolescent, made a living from collecting garbage for many years and through this was finally able to buy a piece of land

21 IASHKOV, 04.01.1915, p. 3.

22 This and the following quotation from IBID., 08.01.1915, p. 3.

23 IBID., 06.01.1915, p. 3.

24 IBID., 07.01.1915, p. 3.

25 IBID.

26 This and the following quotation from IBID.

27 Cf. for the perception of the street as a place of ‘the crowd’ and of immorality STEINBERG, 2011 (especially chapter two).

28 Cf. JAHN, 2010, p. 123-128.

29 Cf. NIKITENKO/SOBOL’, 2008, p. 423.

on Vasil'evskii Island.³⁰ Here he founded his own waste dump, and when he had collected a sufficient number of materials he built a first house on his estate with the assistance of some mates and the carpenter Klimentii. However, this house fell prey to the wind. He erected a second building which remained and was soon enlarged by further annexes. The first lodgers arrived whom Egor Vasil'ev allowed to stay upon payment of 5 copper kopeks per day. When the series of articles in the "Malen'kaia gazeta" was published in 1915, the settlement had grown to 247 flats with 5,000 inhabitants.³¹ According to the author, their names would fill "three books with a weight of several tons"³², and he met people who had already lived there for 20 years.

On one hand, this means that "Vasia's Village" had existed at least since the mid-1890s³³, hence since the time when the permanently notorious "housing problem" (*kvartirnyi vopros/zhilishchnyi vopros*) of St. Petersburg had increased even further.³⁴ There is no clear indication whether there is a correlation between the rise in prices of living space and the emergence of slums in the case of "Vasia's" Village as well as the other slums of St. Petersburg. Some facts in the newspaper report let us assume, however, that there is such a connection. Under the heading "inhabitants" (*zhil'cy*) we find the above-mentioned "honest worker"³⁵, but also quite a number of persons who could not afford another dwelling due to their low income, among others "the retired city clerk with 7,40 a month"³⁶ and the "widow with many children" who earned 30 kopeks per day for gluing cigarette packets together. According to the newspaper report they all lived in the slum because it offered "cheap flats and rooms".

The growth of "Vasia's Village" to more than several thousand inhabitants and the long stay of part of them make us wonder, however, whether there were more motives than the material necessity that made the people stay in spite of the undoubtedly minimal comfort the settlement offered. An answer to this cannot be found easily in this newspaper report owing to the author's scornful and condescending tone when, for example, telling us about the foundation of the set-

30 Cf. IASHKOV, 03.01.1915, p. 3.

31 Cf. IBID., 06.01.1915, p. 3.

32 IBID.

33 This corresponds roughly to the date stated in the encyclopaedia by Nikitenko and Sobol'. It says there that Egor Vasil'ev founded the "village" at the beginning of the 20th century. Cf. NIKITENKO; SOBOL', 2008, p. 423.

34 Cf. PETERSEN; SUKHORUKOVA, 2002; SVIATLOVSKII, 2012.

35 Cf. IASHKOV, 08.01.1915, p. 3.

36 This and the following two quotations from IBID., 04.01.1915, p. 3.

tlement by Egor Vasil'ev that he "looked for his fortune right there where every person born under a lucky star would look – among garbage."³⁷ Nevertheless, it becomes visible to some degree 'behind' this complacent attitude what "Vasia's Village" meant for its inhabitants in addition to being their refuge. Thus, the development of the slum can be interpreted also quite differently: As a 'wild' adoption of a hitherto unused area beyond the control from the government and with structures of its own. When we read in the newspaper report: "Above all I want to draw the attention of the reader to the lines in these buildings. What kind of lines are they? They could only be drawn by the highly talented heel of Egor Vasil'evs: One of the corners of a building is directed towards the on-looker, the other to the Caucasus Mountains [...]"³⁸ – then this demonstrates the author's aloofness in these surroundings. In spite of his assumed 'crossing the lines' and the supposed authenticity of his reports, he still remained a slum tourist who missed the straight lines so characteristic for the rest of Vasil'evskii Island.³⁹ At the same time it is shown that "Vasia's Village" lived by different, namely its own rules as we can learn from the following passage: "To enter a flat in 'Vasia's Village' is not as easy as is usually the case when we enter other buildings. Before you are able to enter, you have to look for the flat for roughly half a day, as annexes, staircases and numbers of flats are legion. Each of their inhabitants knows only his main entrance hole through which he creeps every day; he knows only the number of his own flat to which he is driven by the darkness of night and the cold. Even the guards in the yards of 'Vasia's Village' get lost in this impenetrable mud hole [*v étom neprokhodimom omute*]. When asked about the flats, they only wave their hand indifferently: 'Don't know..., climb the staircases, somewhere you will find it, but we have no idea [...]'."⁴⁰

What the reporter saw as a chaotic "impenetrable mud-hole", was for the inhabitants of "Vasia's Village" a place with which they could identify in so far as they marked it as 'their own'. The house numbers which were mentioned in the above passages were installed by the owner Egor Vasil'ev and were not only used for numbering purposes, but included some guidelines as follows: "Flat no. XY. 7 cubic Sazhen air. Not more than seven lodgers. Lodging is not permitted

37 IASHKOV, 03.01.1915, p. 3.

38 IBID., 04.01.1915, p. 3.

39 A brilliant description of this fear of the 'wilderness' of Vasil'evskii Island can be found in the character of the Tsarist bureaucrat Apollon Apollonovich in BELYI, 2004.

40 IASHKOV, 04.01.1915, p. 3.

in the corridors and in the kitchen.”⁴¹ In correspondence with the tenor in the newspaper report, these instructions had in fact lost touch with reality – people lived in every corner of a room and in every dingy cellar in “Vasia’s Village” just like in many other places of Petersburg. However, in addition to this they put inscriptions above the doors at the entrances which, for example, read “Fyodka-Ovchuch, thief”.⁴² Such labels are certainly no reason to romanticize people’s relationships in retrospect (I will deal with this later on); in the sense of the questions asked by this investigation they express the intentional overwriting of the original spatial order of a place, irrespective of moral assessment. Here we even find a certain amount of self-mockery.

The identification of the inhabitants with ‘their village’ was shown most prominently on the walls of the settlement. They were covered with numerous of their writings and drawings. One of the wall paintings showed the owner, Egor Vasil’ev as he approached on the back “of his cropped male dog with his fist raised and smoke coming out of his mouth while he called out: ‘Have your dough ready, damned inhabitants of Vasia’s Village (*Gotov’te gamzu, okaiannye vasinoderevency*)’.”⁴³

This graffiti is in two respects proof of an ongoing process of identification with that area, which is regarded as one’s own possession threatened by the owner. On one hand, such marks on the wall are expressions of a process of adopting the respective space. It corresponds with Richard Sennett’s definition of graffiti being “a writing of the underclass” – an openly shown sign of their presence: ‘We exist, and we are everywhere. Moreover, you others are nothing; we write all over you.’”⁴⁴

On the other hand, the fact that they called themselves “damned inhabitants of Vasia’s Village” tells us about their relationship to this place as well as to each other. The notion *Vasinoderevency* refutes the assumption stated in the newspaper report that the inhabitants of the ‘village’ do not care for each other but are merely interested in their own “dingy dwelling”. Instead, the people had evidently found a joint identity just like it was reported from other places of poverty in Petersburg.⁴⁵

41 IBID.

42 IBID.

43 IBID. “Gamza” is an underworld slang expression and stands for “money, wallet”. Cf. SNAPSKAIA, 2000, p. 121; GRACHEV, 2003, p. 187.

44 SENNETT, 1990, p. 207.

45 Aleksei Svirskii writes that the inhabitants of the slum called each other “slum brothers” (*truscobnye bratii*) and used the ironic nickname “slum yacht club”

This conclusion does not imply a retrospective romanticism of life in “Vasia’s Village. Like other places of society in general and of urban underclass in particular, the slum on Vasil’evskii Island was penetrated by various power structures and inequalities. The wall painting described above is evidence of one of these confrontations – the opposition between owner and lodgers. The joint identity of the inhabitants described as *vasinodereveny* originated not least from the joint feeling of “we” against “him”. At the same time, this “we” did not exist in the sense of an egalitarian co-existence, although the newspaper report conveys the idea of such an idyll in some instances, e.g. when we read about the numerous ‘characters’ found in the ‘village’ as follows: “Everything finds its place in the anthill of ‘Vasia’s Village’. It accommodates everybody, nobody is left outside.”⁴⁶ The picture of an “anthill” is certainly true in so far as the slum was a place of refuge for those on the margins of society who were rejected at other places. However, we also find numerous examples in the newspaper report which show how strongly gender hierarchies moulded the structure of the social space “Vasia’s Village”. As an example may serve the omnipresent violence practised on the streets of the ‘village’ by men and juvenile gangs which caused women to keep away from these places in the evenings and at night.⁴⁷ These inequalities made the ‘anthill’ a contested area.

II. “... for poor people”: The Haymarket seen from the viewpoint of ‘itinerant peddlers’

A find from the archive will serve as a second source of information for a look behind the facade of urban slum areas. It comprises three petitions submitted by traders of the Petersburg Haymarket to the Minister of the Interior as well as to

(*truscobnyi iakhtklub*) for the night asylum on Izmail Field located between Fontanka and Obvodnyi Canal, cf. SVIRSKII, 1898. As another example can serve the “Viazemskaia lavra”, in which lived among others the so-called “Viazemskie’s cadets” (*Viazemskie kadety*), cf. SKORODUMOV, 1866.

46 IASHKOV, 06.01.1915, p. 3.

47 IBID. A fundamental treatise of this topic is to be found in NEUBERGER, 1993. Cf. also the contribution by Mark Steinberg in this book.

the Tsar personally in the mid-1860s. They are kept in the files of the finance department of the Tsarist Ministry of the Interior.⁴⁸

The Haymarket, strictly speaking the Hay Square (*Sennaia ploshchad'*), was a place which was originally located on the outskirts of the city where farmers from the vicinity of St. Petersburg were allowed to sell hay and firewood at certain times.⁴⁹ When the city expanded, it was no longer situated on the periphery, but had finally moved to the centre of the capital by the 19th century, only a few minutes' walk away from the grand boulevard of St. Petersburg, the Nevskii prospect. Moreover, its functions changed from being a temporary trading place for specific goods to becoming the permanent marketplace with a markedly broader range of products where mainly the poor population of Petersburg bought their basic food.

In the second half of the 19th century the Haymarket became the epitome of the 'other', unknown and dangerous St. Petersburg in the minds of the inhabitants of the Russian capital. On one hand, this was to be attributed to increasing marketing efforts in connection with slumming, which was already mentioned above. Literary works even created the character of a typical lodger of the Haymarket (*Sennovskii obitatel'*).⁵⁰ On the other hand there was some reason for these projections and anxieties. The *Sennaia* as well as its market presented sanitation problems affecting – beyond its own boundaries – adjacent districts as well as the entire city. Already in its first year the “sanitary commission” which was set up by the municipal дума after the severe cholera outbreak in 1867 arranged for an inspection of the Haymarket. It reported alarming hygienic conditions. The ground of the place was covered by a thick layer of garbage, food leftovers and other debris from the market.⁵¹ Moreover, there were several slums in the vicinity of the Haymarket, among others the above-mentioned “Viazemskaia

48 RUSSIAN STATE HISTORICAL ARCHIVE/ROSSISKII GOSUDARSTVENNYI ISTORICHESKII ARKHIV (RGIA), f. 1287, op. 29, del. 1600.

49 A survey of the varying history of this place which is probably the most prominent square of St. Petersburg besides the Palace Square is presented by IURKOVA, 2011. Further titles are JAHN, 1996, as well as BAUER.

50 Cf. TSEITLIN, 1998, p. 3, as well as on the development of the myth “Haymarket” as a whole JAHN, 2010, p. 113-128.

51 O DEIATEL'NOSTI GORODSKOI SANITARNOI KOMISSII, 1868, p. 48f. When the medical doctors of the sanitary commission examined the place in the middle of March this layer was still mixed with snow and ice. Severe problems arose at the end of the freezing season. Cf. the report of the German travel writer KOHL, Vol. 1, p. 200f.

lavra” now housing up to 20,000 people.⁵² In the eyes of the authorities the name “Haymarket” was associated with a constant potential threat to public order – at the latest since the time when it became the stage for the so-called “cholera revolt” (*kholernyi bunt*) in 1831 in the wake of the first cholera epidemic. This was the first people’s revolt in the history of the city.⁵³

This combination of real and imagined threats led to various efforts of the government to impose regulations on this ‘wild’ place. After the erection of a central police station (*Hauptwache*) in 1820, it was above all the project to build permanent market halls instead of the hitherto open place which had been on the agenda for more than 20 years.⁵⁴ There were three opposing parties: The first was represented by the Governor or Gradonachal’nik of St. Petersburg, Count Nikolay Levashov. He wanted the Haymarket to become a representative marketplace appropriate for the image of the Russian capital. He promoted projects which intended to turn the entire Haymarket into one big covered marketplace. As such schemes were expensive and did not fit into the budget of the дума, Levashov advocated payment by private persons who should, at the same time, be in charge of the Haymarket. This means that it was the governor’s aim to privatize the Haymarket which had so far been in possession of the municipality.⁵⁵

Just as the Governor, the municipal дума was also in favour of a solid covered market. Last but not least, its interest was of a concrete economic nature. Income from the rents of market stalls amounted to up to 50,000 roubles a year. However, unlike Levashov, the majority of delegates of the дума emphasized the importance of the Haymarket as a market for the ‘common people’. It was said that the nature of this location was to be preserved. That was why the re-construction should be “as simple as possible”⁵⁶ including roofing for only half of the market, whereas the other half should be used for the traditional sales by peasants directly from their carriages (*vozy*) also in the future.

52 In addition to the above-mentioned literature cf. CHARITONOVA, 1996. Cf. for a contemporary report by a commission founded by the city council on the interior of the “Viazemskaia lavra” O SANITARNYKH MERAKH PO DOMU KNIAZA VIAZEMSKAGO, 1883, p. 872-885.

53 Cf. the report of an officer on duty on this event FON-DER-KHOVEN, 1885, as well as the account by KOHL, Vol. 1, p. 194-196.

54 Cf. besides IURKOVA, 2011, also VEKSLER, 2008. A detailed analysis of this re-organization of the Haymarket is in preparation.

55 Cf. amongst others: OB USTROISTVE NA SENNOI PLOSHCHADI RYNOCHNAGO ZDANIIA DLIA PROIZVODIASHCHEISIA TAM TORGOVLIA, 1865, p. 450-464.

56 OB USTROISTVE SENNOI PLOSHCHADI, 1866, p. 401.

A third opinion was held by the municipal sanitary commission and the Chief Police Officer of Petersburg. The chairman of the sanitary commission, Petr Zhukovskii, emphasised repeatedly that the Haymarket was above all a source of epidemics which should be demolished altogether and reconstructed from scratch. In addition, the nature of the market would have changed fundamentally. Today the queues in front of the food concourse (*obzhornyi riad*) would scarcely consist of workers, but instead of many “useless people”⁵⁷ from surrounding houses. This argument was supported by the Chief Police Officer in a similar way. He felt that the continued existence of the market was dangerous from the point of view of the police as it would attract a large number of criminals and prostitutes in addition to the buyers. This “enormous number of dangerous people of our society”⁵⁸ would find ideal conditions at the Haymarket where they could hide and gather in the adjacent houses. This development could only be stopped by a “complete cleanup of the place” and the removal of the market to the outskirts of the city.

The debate on the reconstruction of the Haymarket went on for well over 20 years before it resulted in the construction of four large metal pavilions which opened in 1886. After this there was no room for the traditional sales of peasants from their carriages which were originally deemed important by the duma. Trade was now conducted at fixed and equally large stalls in the market halls.⁵⁹ Hence the transformation of the Haymarket was an example of the city’s endeavours to organize public space in a ‘better way’, i.e. to regulate it. During this time, numerous reconstruction projects were carried out on the markets of Petersburg among which the Haymarket was merely the most prominent example.⁶⁰

The three petitions, which shall now be looked at in detail, are part of this controversial constellation. They were filed by traders who offered their goods on the Haymarket and who had come into conflict with the new regulations. The petitions belong to the very few statements we have from inhabitants and traders of the Haymarket. As much as has been written about this place, a history of the

57 OB USTROISTVE KRYTAGO RYNKA NA SENNOI PLOSHCHADI, 1870, p. 142.

58 This and the following quotation were taken from the letter of Chief Police Officer of St. Petersburg to the Ministry of the Interior 29.06.1869, RGIA, f. 1287, op. 40, del. 310, l. 114.

59 Insights into the interior of the market halls can be found in ZASOSOV/PYZIN, 1999, p. 110-112; BAKHTIAROV, 1994, p. 138-148.

60 A comparative treatise of this process is still missing. A first survey is presented by PROCAT, 2005.

Haymarket ‘from below’ is still missing. We get an idea from these petitions how these regulations of public space were perceived by the people concerned.

When we look at the epistemic value of these sources, the petitions seem to show a markedly higher degree of ‘authenticity’ than the reports published in the “Malen’kaia gazeta”. In fact, the categorical difference is – as may be readily concluded – that here we have the voices of the ‘common people’ themselves and not an account by a third person wanting to sell a ‘story’. In this context Keith Snell, the author of fundamental studies on the self-conception of the English poor, defines letters and petitions as “alongside oral history [...] *the* most authentic sources for ‘history from below’ and historical questions of identity among the poor”⁶¹ we have.

On the other hand, we have narrative conventions observed by such sources. Russian history has known petitions since the Middle Ages which means that they follow a certain tradition as regards contents and formal layout.⁶² Hence, this leads to the conclusion that an overoptimistic interpretation of these sources as ‘authentic’ may be questionable.⁶³ First of all, it has to be considered who wrote the petitions, the undersigned himself or the undersigned parties themselves or rather a scribe? This was not unusual in view of the widely spread illiteracy of the urban poor. In addition we have to ask how the wording of the petitions which we see on paper was actually composed. Who took part and how big was the contribution of a possible scribe in the final text? And, last but not least, it has to be considered that petitions were a performative act which served to let one’s request appear in the most favourable light in order to convince the addressee who, as a rule, was in a much higher position. Are they really the utterances of the poor ‘themselves’? To find an answer to this question, let us look at the petitions of the traders and consider at the same time whether they offer information about the Haymarket as a place of ‘their own’.

As to the formal characteristics of the petitions it can be stated that all three were written down between February 1865 and June 1866. In February 1865 as

61 SNELL, 2012, p. 2.

62 In this connection, I refer to the paper submitted by Hubertus Jahn on the occasion of the conference “Poverty in Modern Europe. Micro-perspectives on the Formation of the Welfare State in the 19th and 20th Centuries” at the German Historical Institute in London in May 2012: *Voices from the Lower Depths: Russian Poor in Their Own Words*, presenting an analysis of petitions for the time from the 17th to the 20th centuries. A publication of the contributions to this conference is under way.

63 Cf. on the following also KING, 2008, p. 252f.

well as in May 1866 they were addressed to the Ministry of the Interior. On June 6, 1866 they were addressed to the Tsar himself. In each case the handwritings do not correspond to the signatures of the applicants so that it may be assumed that the petitions were written down by scribes. How the final wording came about cannot be said for lack of further sources for these petitions. It is possible that the applicant narrated the case to the scribe. In all three cases about 90 % of the signatures were those of peasants as well as of petty commoners (*meshchane*) in a few cases. While the petitions of February 1865 as well of June 1866 bore signatures of about 100 names, they numbered only 15 on the petition of May 1866. Obviously as many signatures as possible were collected for the last petition which was the only one addressed to the Tsar himself. It can be noticed that some of the people who had already signed the petition of February 1865 put their signature under this document as well. It may hence be concluded that these people knew each other or were at least in touch so that contacts could be established quickly. Moreover, they must have had similar interests. This leads us to the question of the contents of the petitions.

A central concern of the petition of February 1865 was the right to sell meat at the Haymarket also during the summer, a right that was threatened from the viewpoint of the undersigned parties. The two petitions of the following year asked for the permission to continue the sale of goods along the edges of the Haymarket close to public and private buildings. The origin of both requests was very similar, which explains the existence of overlapping signatures: They were 'itinerant peddlers' (*torgovcy v raznos*) without any permanent place who expressed their concern and fought a treatment considered unfair in their opinion. The composition of the signatories of the petition shows that they were for the most part peasants who sold their goods directly from their carriages (*vozy*) contrary to those stationary traders who had permanent stalls (*lavka*).

Correspondingly, the petitions are very similar in respect of set-up and argumentation.⁶⁴ Each of them was caused by actions of the commercial police to enforce resolutions of the municipal дума: on one hand, the prohibition of meat sales by 'itinerant peddlers' at the Haymarket between April and November and on the other a decree forbidding sales of 'itinerant peddlers' close to public and private buildings. The decrees passed by the дума in connection with meat sales were preceded by requests of stationary traders asking the commercial police

64 In addition, the two petitions of May and June 1866 show partly identical passages. However, this is not surprising as their concerns were the same and they were written down within a short period of time.

to take steps against the competition from ‘itinerant peddlers’.⁶⁵ The petitions opposed these measures by arguing in two ways: by referring to the law and by emphasising that the Haymarket was a traditional place of the ‘common people’.

As to the legal aspect of this dispute, it has to be said that it was the *duma*’s principal right to enact trade regulations at the Haymarket as this place was part of the municipal property. However, its resolutions could be overturned by the Ministry of the Interior. In the case of meat sales by ‘itinerant peddlers’ during the summer months the legal position was undisputed: Since 1842 sales of fresh meat had only been allowed at the Haymarket during the summer at permanent stalls where it was possible to keep goods cool.⁶⁶ The general ban on trade in the vicinity of public and private buildings was more controversial in some respects. It was not without reason that the signatories of the petition argued that the decree passed by the *duma* was above all directed at sales conducted in front of houses adjacent to the Haymarket or in their courtyards. These houses were not part of the property of the *duma*, but belonged to individual owners. Correspondingly, the signatories emphasized that such a ban would violate the “right to private ownership”⁶⁷ (*prava chastnoj sobstvennosti*). However, this point was not undisputed. In the end it was a matter of political decisions. Already at former instances the *duma* had passed decrees entitling it to decide about the allocation of trading places. However, these resolutions were met by opposition from private house-owners as well as the Ministry of the Interior. In 1842, the latter had decreed that peasants coming from the urban hinterland had the principal right to sell their products at the city’s trading places.⁶⁸ However, in 1854 the Ministry made it clear that private persons were not entitled to allocate

65 Cf. Proshenie krest’ian, torguiuvshchikh miasom na Sennoi ploshchadi, 09.02.1865, RGIA, f. 1287, op. 29, del. 1600, l. 21. The complaint is also mentioned in O VOSPROSHCHENII TORGOVLIA MIASOM NA SENNOI PLOSHCHADI, A TAKZHE MELOCHNAGO TORGA S POSTOIANNYKH MEST OKOLO CHASTNYKH I KAZENNYKH ZDANII, 1867, p. 373.

66 Cf. O VOSPROSHCHENII TORGOVLIA MIASOM NA SENNOI PLOSHCHADI, A TAKZHE MELOCHNAGO TORGA S POSTOIANNYKH MEST OKOLO CHASTNYKH I KAZENNYKH ZDANII, 1867, p. 373.

67 Proshenie s Peterburgskikh trgovcev v raznos, 21.05.1866, RGIA, f. 1287, op. 29, del. 1600, l. 28.

68 The respective decree of the Ministry of the Interior of November 29, 1842 was published in: OB OTVODE MESTA DLIA BAZARNOI VOZОВОI TORGOVLI I OB IZDANII OBIAZATEL’NAGO POSTANOVLENNIA O PORIADKE TORGOVLI Z VOZOV V S.-PETERBURGE, 1885, p. 315. This included fish and meat, however, only as frozen goods.

trading places by passing a new resolution. This would impair municipal finances.⁶⁹ Because of this rather unclear legal situation the sales by peddlers without a permanent stall were ultimately tolerated around public and private houses, until the commercial police tried to stop them in 1864. Last but not least it was the decree of 1842, which the signatories used as a reference when applying directly to the Ministry of the Interior.

However, the passages of the petitions referring to the nature of the Haymarket as a place of the ‘common people’ are of a greater relevance to the context in this essay than the legal aspects of the dispute. One of the arguments pointed out by the undersigned parties was that the “wellbeing of the people”⁷⁰ (*narodnoe blagosostoianie*) would be jeopardized if extensive restrictions were imposed on ‘itinerant trade’. So far “a large proportion of the capital’s poor population who shopped at the Haymarket” had bought fresh meat from them which was of equal quality as that offered at the stalls, but their prices were much lower. If their sales were stopped, permanent traders could fix prices “arbitrarily”⁷¹. This would lead to the establishment of a “monopoly”⁷² which would above all affect the poor population of Petersburg.

At the same time the undersigned parties argued that there existed a kind of customary right. They pointed out that they would conduct their sales in the same way as had been practised already “for a long time”⁷³. They would ask for nothing more but the right to return to their customary places at which they had conducted their sales “up to today”⁷⁴ (*ponyne*). Consequently they rejected the allegation of the *duma* that they had usurped these places “unauthorized”⁷⁵

69 Cf. O VOSPROSHCHENII TORGOVLIA MIASOM NA SENNOI PLOSHCHADI, A TAKZHE MELOCHNAGO TORGA S POSTOIANNYKH MEST OKOLO CHASTNYKH I KAZENNYKH ZDANII, 1867, p. 373. A possible economic damage refers to the fact that itinerant peddlers had to buy a tin token from the municipal authorities at 2 roubles and 86 kopeks.

70 This and the following quotation: Proshenie krest‘ian, torguiuvshchikh miasom na Sennoi ploshchadi, 09.02.1865, RGIA, f. 1287, op. 29, del. 1600, l. 22.

71 IBID., l. 21 ob.

72 IBID., l. 22.

73 Proshenie s Peterburgskikh torgovcev v raznos, 21.05.1866, RGIA, f. 1287, op. 29, del. 1600, l. 27.

74 Proshenie, 06.06.1866, RGIA, f. 1287, op. 29, del. 1600, l. 32.

75 O VOSPROSHCHENII TORGOVLIA MIASOM NA SENNOI PLOSHCHADI, A TAKZHE MELOCHNAGO TORGA S POSTOIANNYKH MEST OKOLO CHASTNYKH I KAZENNYKH ZDANII, 1867, p. 374.

(*samovol'no*): “We cannot accept the seizure of our places by the *duma* as it does not own them and therefore has no right to allocate them.”⁷⁶ Instead, they would have obtained the places “in accordance with an agreement with the house-owners in the same way as practised by the *duma*”. If, however, the house-owners would not have the right to do so “we will accept the trading places also from the *duma* and [...] and pay the customary fee.” In any case, stop the “unsubstantiated prosecution” by the police that “has driven so many of us into poverty”.

The background for these arguments was the traditional sale of goods by peasants who came to town.⁷⁷ This situation could still be seen at the Haymarket at the time of the formulation of the petitions in so far as the place had been divided into two halves since the beginning of the 19th century: on one side, the open “green” area where products were sold directly from the carriages of incoming traders (during the wintertime timber and hay, in the summer agricultural produce such as vegetables, cabbage and milk)⁷⁸, on the other half the sale of mainly meat, fish, fruit and vegetables at permanent stalls. The undersigned parties of the petitions quoted as a precedent that they had sold their meat products directly in the “green area” until the interference of the commercial police. The permanent traders at this place would have taken no offence up to then.

Whether these arguments were sound, was disputed in the *duma*. Supporters of a general “clean-up” of the total Haymarket, such as the above-mentioned Petr Zhukovskii or the delegate Ivan Glazunov, denied the existence of such a customary law. They pointed out that the majority of traders had stopped being farmers long ago and that they acted as intermediaries. Through this the market had fundamentally changed its nature and no longer followed the tradition of the former trading place on the outskirts of the city.⁷⁹ They considered open sales

76 This and the following quotations up to the end of the paragraph *Proshenie*, 06.06.1866, RGIA, f. 1287, op. 29, del. 1600, l. 31 ob-32 ob.

77 Cf. the comprehensive account by BAUER. During the winter, the sale was carried out from sledges, cf. KOHL, Vol. 1, p. 198.

78 Cf. on the range of products offered the report of the commission for public interests and necessities of January 28, 1868, in: *IZVESTIIA SANKT-PETERBURGSKOI GORODSKOI OBSHCHEI DUMY*, 1868, No. 2, p. 75; *ISTORICHESKIE TRUDY ALEKSANDRA TOMILINA*, 1854, p. 66-69; KOHL, Vol. 1, p. 196f.

79 An example of this argument can be found in the contribution by Glazunov in the debate in the *duma* of February 15, 1868, in: *IZVESTIIA SANKT-PETERBURGSKOI GORODSKOI OBSHCHEI DUMY*, 1868, No. 5, p. 226-243.

as well as the adjacent food concourse a “disgrace”⁸⁰ (*bezobrazie*) which had to be abolished. This was vigorously denied by other delegates. Aleksandr Iakovlev emphasized that besides the repeatedly appearing images of the Haymarket there were also traders who were no criminals. Moreover, the constant demonization of intermediaries who were said to have destroyed the ‘original’ bazaar would not at all be convincing in view of the growth of the Haymarket as well as the entire city: “The answer could be that indeed every merchant could be regarded as an intermediary. He buys goods first hand and sells them immediately afterwards. I cannot see that this is condemnable or unethical.”⁸¹ He went on saying that the social function of the Haymarket and its ‘itinerant peddlers’ had to be taken into consideration as well and that the Haymarket is the only “market of the people”⁸² (*narodnyi rynok*) in St. Petersburg. He continued: What would it mean to close down such an institution as the ‘food concourse’ which was called “kitchen of the nobility” (*dvorianskaia kuchnia*) by the man in the street: “It is said that among others you will find people eating there who do not deserve any attention according to an expression used by the sanitary commission: among others homeless people, thieves, fraudsters, illegal persons without any documents [*bezpasportnye*]; this may be true, but they still have to eat. They will not go to the permanent food stalls for fear that their passports be checked.”⁸³

Eventually the majority of the delegates of the *duma* adopted Iakovlev’s point of view and voted in favour of continuing open sales as well as keeping the ‘food concourse’.⁸⁴ As regards the three petitions, it had already been decided beforehand that the sale of meat in tents would be allowed for a year under the same sanitary conditions as those applying to permanent sale stalls.⁸⁵ As regards trading in front of private and public buildings the *duma* made it clear that the right of the house-owner would end at the facade of the house and that everybody offering his goods could only do so by asking permission of the *duma* and

80 Amongst others the expression used by the governor-general in a letter to the head office for traffic infrastructure and public buildings of August 16, 1855: RGIA, f. 218, op. 3, del. 1288, l. 3.

81 *IZVESTIIA SANKT-PETERBURGSKOI GORODSKOI OBSHCHEI DUMY*, 1868, No. 5, p. 233.

82 *IBID.*, p. 235.

83 *IBID.*, p. 240.

84 Cf. *IBID.*, p. 241-243.

85 Cf. the protocol of the debate in the *duma* of July 7, 1867, in: *IZVESTIIA SANKT-PETERBURGSKOI GORODSKOI OBSHCHEI DUMY*, 1867, No. 16, p. 856.

by paying a corresponding fee. Basically, it was endeavoured to keep trading to locations of the city which were intended for this purpose.⁸⁶

Thereby a preliminary arrangement was found for the Haymarket before the inauguration of the four market halls stopped any open trading whatsoever on the market – at least officially. However, the matter of ‘itinerant peddlers’ was still a topic. This is not only true for the vicinity of the Haymarket where peddlers moved to other places such as the Obuchovskii Square on the Fontanka.⁸⁷ Also at other places the municipal authorities did not manage to stop this type of trading. In the same year when the halls at the Haymarket were inaugurated, the gradonachal’nik of Petersburg felt impelled to issue a regulation in which he complained that open trading was still conducted at “certain places”⁸⁸. He continued his appeal to observe the respective decrees of the duma, but this did not bring about any significant changes. Even at the beginning of the 20th century the ‘itinerant peddlers’ were still the object of controversial discussions about the farmer’s market (*Sytnyi rynok*)⁸⁹ located at the Petersburg side as well as in connection with the project to establish a central market at the Vyborg side.⁹⁰

This shows that the petitions discussed in this paper do not represent isolated cases. The topic concerned the entire the city. At the core of the matter we find the question as to who had the right to organize day-to-day activities at places like the Haymarket. Or to be more precise: Who owned the markets of the city?⁹¹ Irrespective of the conclusive answer to this question, the above-mentioned passages make it clear that the ‘common people’ regarded places such as the Haymarket as places of their own where they had conducted trading for a long time. Of course, reverting to the argument of the “wellbeing of the people” was also part of their discursive strategy, which intended to present the problem as a matter of general interest. As stated by Steven King, petitions were in fact “multi-functional documents, combining reportage, fact, posturing, rhetoric and circumstance”.⁹² But, King goes on, the narrative and strategic formation of such

86 IBID.

87 Cf. ZASOSOV/PYZIN, 1999, p. 112.

88 Decree of the gradonachal’nik as well as of the police of August 1886, in: IZVESTIIA SANKT-PETERBURGSKOI GORODSKOI OBSHCHEI DUMY, 1886, No. 35, p. 663.

89 Cf. the report of the municipality of May 23, 1904, in: IZVESTIIA SANKT-PETERBURGSKOI GORODSKOI OBSHCHEI DUMY, 1904, No. 13, p. 1205-1214. Just like 30 years ago the basis for this was again the complaint of the stationary traders.

90 Cf. RGIA, f. 1293, op. 137, del. 91.

91 Cf. for the concept of a “Right to the City” LEFÈBVRE, 1968.

92 KING, 2008, p. 253.

sources does not mean that we cannot see them as part of an agency that tried to exert an influence on real existing processes.⁹³ This is also true for the examples analysed in this paper. By submitting a petition, the signatories articulated their claim to the Haymarket and tried at the same time to make their position public. The fact that they themselves did not write them does not mean that they do not reflect the interests of the subjects. The reference to the Haymarket as a place of the poor did not only fulfil a rhetorical function but was also part of their self-positioning in contrast to the places of the rich. This is demonstrated by another petition mentioned in the book by Zoia Iurkova which also dealt with retail trading: “It is a well-known fact [...] that the *duma* harasses the poor people (*bednyi narod*) and keeps on supporting the rich, but the Haymarket was not intended for the rich, but for rural, for poor people and today they are not even provided with a slice of bread.”⁹⁴ The self-positioning of the poor people was attached to certain locations in the city – in this case to Petersburg’s Haymarket.

III. Summary

Let us revert to the question asked at the beginning of this article. In how far is it possible to look behind the facade of urban poverty? An interpretation of both types of sources which were discussed as examples is faced with many difficulties when we try to answer this question. This is also true for the allegedly ‘more authentic’ petitions which are indeed also “multi-functional documents”. On other hand, however, differences should not be completely equalized. Both for the acting persons of that time as well as for our interpretation of today it was and is certainly not irrelevant whether you could support a petition by signing it yourself or whether you were able to refrain from putting your name under this paper. The inhabitants of “Vasia’s Village” did not have such an opportunity of authorising a text which we find as a source in the archives today.

As difficult as newspaper reports such as those published in the “*Malen’kaia gazeta*” may be, they are frequently and also in this case nearly the only reports on the inner life of a slum like “Vasia’s Village”. The method suggested by this article was an approach to the world of the urban poor by looking at concrete places. Beyond stylistic devices, both types of sources provide us with information about places which were important to their inhabitants and which they regarded as ‘their own’. In this way, it may be possible to confine an investiga-

93 Ibid., p. 271. In respect of petitions, this view is also shared by Jahn (cf. note 62).

94 IURKOVA, 2011, p. 89.

tion not just to an analysis from the outside, but to outline perspectives from the inside as well and to demonstrate the importance attached to such places by their inhabitants in spite of their social marginalization.

At the same time such an approach by means of places makes it possible to show internal heterogeneities and inequalities. The analysis has revealed the existence of inner power structures between owner and inhabitants, men and women as well as between 'itinerant' and stationary traders. Not only does this fact prevent a subsequent well-meaning romanticization of the everyday life of the urban poor but above all it allows us to have an amplified and differentiated look at the 'Russian poor' which were in fact more than the "black people" (*chernyi narod*) as they are usually called in Russian. In contrast to such generalising opinions the examples outlined in this investigation present the poor inhabitants of the city as people who were actively engaged in dealing with the precarious conditions they faced.

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