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Imperial Throne Halls and Discourse of Power in the Topography of Early Modern Russia (late 17th–18th centuries)

The development of the Russian topography of power, that is, monarchical representation in palaces, cathedrals, tombs, administrative buildings etc. was completed by the mid-19th century. It was well thought out, elaborate and thoroughly centred on the tsar/emperor.

Furthermore, what we might call the Russian discourse of power was realised in the topography of both capitals and in some important outlying districts. In the “old” capital, Moscow, the important places are in the Kremlin: the Terem Palace (*Teremnoy Dvorets*), Faceted Chamber (*Granovitaya Palata*), Great Palace, the tombs of the imperial dynasties, cathedrals) as well as in some country residences (*Kolomenskoe, Lefortovo*). Here the representation of supreme power was linked to pre-imperial traditional and ecclesiastical culture. The “new” capital (St Petersburg), on the contrary, was intended to convey the perception of imperial, Europe-centered power. The complex of buildings that represented sovereign power is striking: the Romanovs’ *Letny* (Summer) and *Zimny* (Winter) Palaces, the *Anichkov, Mramorny*, and *Tavrishesky* Palaces, the Peter and Paul (*Petropavlovsky*) Fortress, the monastery of St Alexander Nevsky (*Lavra*), as well as numerous state buildings and residences in the outskirts of St Petersburg such as *Peterhoff, Pavlovsk, Garchina, Oranienbaum, Tsarskoe Selo*, and *Strelna*.

Throughout the period of Muscovite Russia (pre-18th century) and in the early period of the Russian Empire (18th century) topographical elements in the various categories of power coexisted in a mutual and interdependent way. However, at the centre were the monarch’s palaces and, more precisely, throne halls. The position of the tsar/emperor in such rooms marked the most important power zone and determined the manner of representation. The study of throne hall symbolism will add much to the understanding of the Russian idealistic concept of power.

At present it is common practice in the anthropological and cultural historiography to consider the characteristics of space. Russian studies have contributed greatly to this fast-growing field. The topography of St Petersburg is examined by many scholars who study Russian history of the 18th century (Paul Bushkovich¹, James Cracraft², Grigory Kaganov³, Lindsey Hughes⁴, Dmitry Shvidkovsky⁵). Sacred topography is subjected to careful interpretation in research on the Russian church and culture (Andrei Batalov, Leonid Belyaev, Alexei Lidov⁶). Various issues of space are also investigated in the context of imperial representation and ceremonial (Michael Fleier⁷, Richard Krautheimer⁸, Daniel Rowland⁹, Richard Wortman¹⁰). Over the last decades a number of significant publications have appeared on conventional Russian perceptions of categories such as “east – west”, “left – right” (Alexandr Podosinov¹¹, Boris Uspenski¹²).

¹ Bushkovich 2008.

² Cracraft 2003; *id.* 2004.

³ Kaganov 1997.

⁴ Hughes 1998; *id.* 2003.

⁵ Shvidkovsky 2007; *id.* 1996.

⁶ Batalov/Lidov 1994; Batalov/Beliaev 1998, Batalov 2003.

⁷ Flier 2003; Rowland 2008; *id.* 2003.

⁸ Krautheimer 1983.

⁹ Dunning/Martin/Rowland 2008.

¹⁰ Wortman 1995; *id.* 2004.

¹¹ Podosinov 1999; *id.* 2000.

¹² Uspenski 1998; *id.* 2004; *id.* 2006.

Fig. 1 Cathedral Square of the Moscow Kremlin, with the Faceted Chamber in the centre. Lithograph copy (1856) of a miniature from the book *The Election of Mikhail Feodorovich to the Throne*, 1672.



The collected data suggests that despite the diversity of monarchical images in the pre-imperial and imperial periods, one can identify certain spatial characteristics and features of the visual display of power topography which were preserved notwithstanding the political and historical change. Some of these features were crucial to the perception of power.

Most important of all, imperial power was viewed and presented as sacred. The construction and functioning of imperial buildings was marked by the four cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west). Throughout the late 17th and 18th century we note the widespread usage of placing the throne on the eastern side of palaces – most often against the eastern wall of the throne hall – so that the monarch sitting on the throne had his back to the east.

This tradition had emerged already in the time of tsardom. Take for example the visual display of the tsar and tsardom in the best known representative space of the Moscow Kremlin, the Faceted Chamber (*Granovitaya Palata*)¹³. This 15th century seat of the Russian monarchs continued to be used in the imperial period for audiences, embassy receptions, banquets; it held governmental importance during the Soviet period; and it now serves as a part of the official residence of the Russian president.

This oldest surviving secular building of the Kremlin is a remnant of a great palace commissioned by Tsar Ivan III and designed by two Renaissance architects, Marco Ruffalo and Pietro Solario¹⁴. The building received this name because to its distinctive stonework façade overlooking Cathedral Square (*Sobornaya Ploshchad*) (Fig. 1).

When the hall was constructed it was the largest in the country (495 m²). Inside it was lavishly decorated with murals on biblical themes and scenes from the history of the first Russian ruling dynasty, the *Rurikoviches*.

¹³ English translation of the name can vary to the Hall of Facets or the Place of Facets.

¹⁴ Though the absolute priority was always given to the Faceted Chamber, at the end of the 17th century, there were at least four “tsar’s places” used for ceremonial purposes in state and private buildings of the Moscow Kremlin – in the Palace of Facets (*Granovitaya Palata*), the Table (Big) Room of the Quay Chamber (*Stolovaya Izba Naberezhnikh Palat*), Golden Chamber (*Zolotaya Palata*) and Terem Palace (*Teremnyy Dvoretz*) (Flier 2003, Uzefovich 1988, 98–99).



Fig. 2 Banquet in the Faceted Chamber. Lithograph copy (1856) of a miniature from the book *The Election of Mikhail Feodorovich to the Throne*, 1672.

The Chamber is square in plan with a thick rectangular pillar at the centre that carries the high vaults and constitutes a striking feature of the representational space.

In the *Granovitaya Palata* the throne of the tsar/emperor was always placed in the south-eastern corner against the eastern wall (Fig. 2). The connotation here was to the so-called “red corner” (*krasnii ugol*), the particular spot in any traditional Russian dwelling where icons were kept. The tsar sitting on the throne had his back to the east. Those entering the Chamber to meet the ruler, such as members of foreign embassies, were obliged to walk first to the south and then turn and continue towards the east. This motion was customary in the Russian Orthodox church ceremonial whilst moving around a font, a lectern or a church itself. Reproduced here inside the main throne hall, this motion symbolised the sacred nature of the ruler on the throne¹⁵. The supposition that the south-east location of the throne in the Kremlin Chamber goes back to Byzantine tradition is held generally in the historiography¹⁶.

The discourse of power required certain interdependence in the organisation and structuring of internal and external space. We note also that if one looks outside into Cathedral Square (*Sobornaya Ploschad*) one sees that on the tsar/emperor’s left stood the Annunciation Cathedral (*Blagoveschensky sobor*), the ruling dynasty’s domestic church, and on his right was the Cathedral of the Dormition (*Uspensky sobor*), the spiritual and cultural centre of the country, the venue of coronations, major church celebrations and other activities of dynastic and governmental importance¹⁷.

An imperial topography of power came into being when the Russian Empire was officially proclaimed by Tsar Peter I in 1721. Throughout the 18th century numerous throne halls were constructed including also thrones in churches, cathedrals, palaces, and administrative buildings, both in Moscow and in the new imperial capital St Petersburg which quickly grew in importance.

The notion of monarchical self-presentation changed significantly. Henceforth the non-central location of the throne was eliminated. In the 18th century, following European tradition, the

¹⁵ Pchelov 2006.

¹⁶ Uzefovich 1988, 98.

¹⁷ Pchelov 2006, 107–109.



Fig. 3 St George's Hall in the Winter Palace, St Petersburg. Watercolour by Konstantin Ukhtomskij, 1862.

dominant position of the imperial throne in the Romanovs' palaces was in the centre of a wall between windows¹⁸. Likewise, imperial throne halls became more spacious and no longer had any structural obstacles preventing the view of the emperor. The old indirect ceremonial approach towards the emperor's throne was replaced by a direct one. Nevertheless, throne halls in the era of Absolutism inherited some distinctive features from previous notions of the topography of power, in particular from the Faceted Chamber of the Kremlin.

One of the most actively used throne halls in imperial Russia was that of the Winter Palace (*Zimny Dvorets*) (1754–1762, Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli). The Great Throne Hall, also known as St George's Hall (*Georgievsky zal*), was designed by Giacomo Quarenghi between 1787 and 1795 and was officially opened in 1795, on the day of St George (26 November) (Fig. 3). This great hall (800 m²) decorated with double Corinthian pink marble columns was located at the eastern end of the Winter Palace. Following old, pre-imperial tradition, a distinctive throne of the empress Catherine II with allegorical figures holding a shield beneath Catherine's monogram stood at the far end of the room, at the eastern wall. The notion of the sacred power of the monarch was further enhanced by the position of St George's Hall beside the Great Church of the Winter Palace. Thereby the emperor's throne was placed in a parallel position to the Great Church's altar, and thus one's approach toward the monarch was in alignment with the Palace's spiritual centre.

Another important issue both in the pre-imperial and imperial period was the demonstration of the continuity of power. In the Faceted Chamber of the Kremlin the throne was arranged for the symbolic justification of power. On the wall behind the throne of the tsar/emperor were murals depicting the first three Russian princes, among them Rurik, founder of the first royal dynasty (Fig. 4). Moreover, the ruler on the throne in the Faceted Chamber had at his back the Cathedral of

¹⁸ The off-centre, south-eastern corner location of the throne in the Faceted Chamber (*Granovitaya Palata*) remained intact until the end of the Russian Empire in 1917 (Boltunova 2011, 151–162).



Fig. 4 The Faceted Chamber, interior, with murals at the Eastern Wall.

the Archangel Michael (*Arkhangelsky sobor*) containing the tombs of his dynastic ancestors who, giving him, as it were, their support and authority¹⁹.

In front of the monarch was the Chamber itself, and in the wall opposite the throne was an upper window opening onto an adjoining room from which the women and children of the tsar/emperor's family, including the heir, observed the proceedings in secret. The ceremonial in the hall was organised in such a way that whoever approached the ruler could not see any female members of his family. The ruler however could see everything that was happening in front of him. Furthermore, in the broader perspective, across the square from the Chamber, on a higher level, was the

¹⁹ Nasibova 1978, 58–59; Pchelov 2006, 107–109.

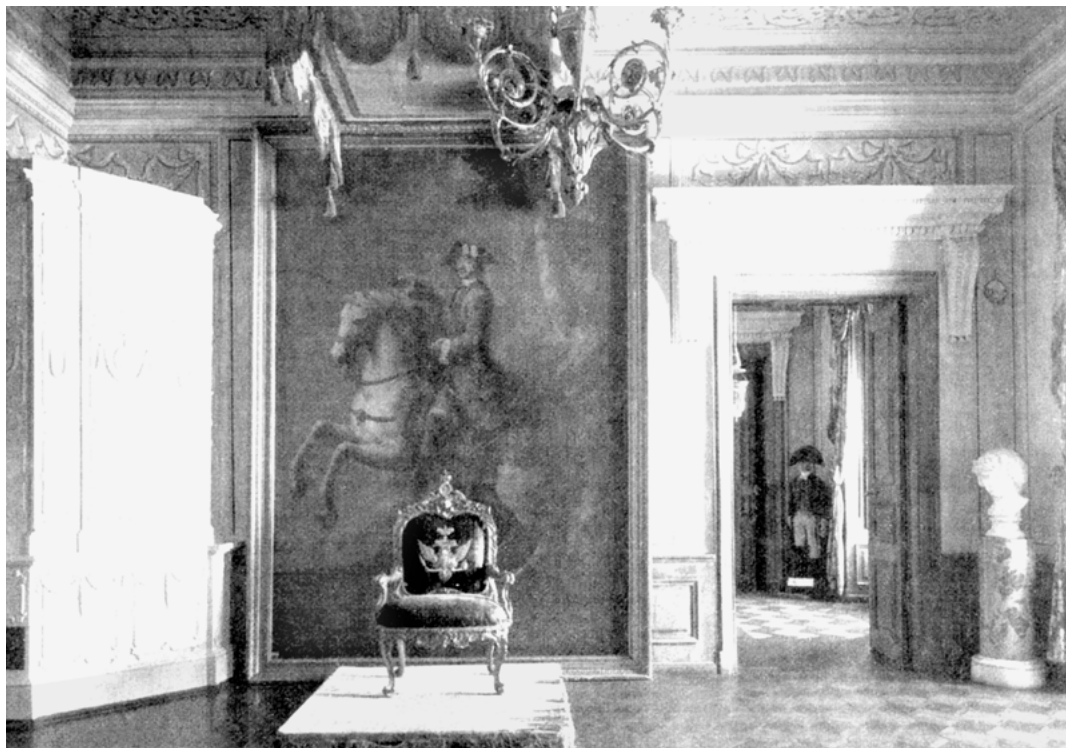


Fig. 5 Lower throne hall of the emperor Paul I, St Petersburg. Photograph taken before 1941.

Terem Palace (*Teremnoy Dvoretz*), the sovereign's residence from the late 15th to 17th century. Thus, the space surrounding the tsar/emperor, in which the discourse of power took place, was filled with his predecessors.

Reference to ancestors in zones of imperial power continued to be perceived as necessary in the 18th century. More specifically, we note that in St Petersburg the arrangement of throne halls was conceived in relation to the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul (*Petropavlovskiy sobor*), the burial place of the Romanovs in the new capital.

The symbolism of St George's Hall (*Georgievskiy zal*) in the Winter Palace followed the old pattern. Catherine II's imperial throne here was placed at the eastern wall. On Catherine's right, within the Palace, were the apartments occupied by her grandson, the Grand Duke Alexander, a potential heir to the throne; and outside was the Cathedral of Sts Peter and Paul (*Petropavlovskiy Sobor*). The position of the throne represented the ruler's relation to ancestors and descendants alike. And on her left was the Palace Square (*Dvortsovaya Ploschad*), the central space of the capital and of the entire empire, venue for events of military and governmental importance and symbol of imperial state itself. In front of the throne hall stood the Admiralty, signifying the power of the empire at sea – possibly also forward movement. Behind the throne was the Winter House of Peter the Great, founder of the empire.

Interestingly, in the 18th century the dynasty's perception of itself and crucial points of its history were restructured. In the imperial period the key figure of reference was no longer the founder of the Russian state and first prince, Rurik, nor the founder of the Romanov dynasty, tsar Michael Fedorovich, but the absolute ruler and first emperor Peter I, whose image dominated Russian symbolic topography throughout the 18th century²⁰. By the end of the century portraits of this emperor who does not seem to have had a clear perception of ceremonial space during his own rule²¹ appeared as an integral part of many throne halls. The Lower Throne Hall (*Tronnaia nizhnikh apartamentov*)

²⁰ Boltunova 2006, *ead.* 2008.

²¹ Boltunova 2008.

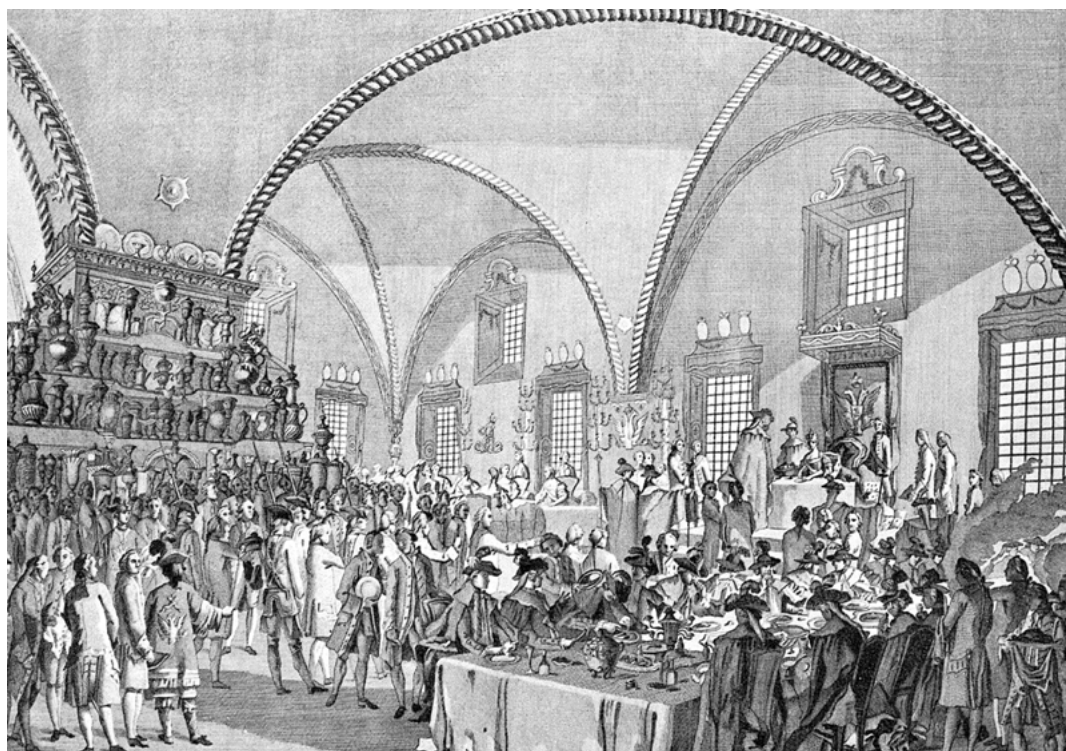


Fig. 6 Coronation banquet in the Faceted Chamber. Engraving after the drawing by Mikhailo Mahkaev, 1767.

in the palace of *Gatchina* of Paul I²² had a portrait of Peter I directly behind the throne, the place usually taken by the two-headed eagle, the empire's coat of arms (Fig. 5).²³

Russian throne halls of the 18th–19th centuries were often decorated with a whole series of the Romanovs' portraits, a parallel to the murals of the Faceted Chamber (*Granovitaya Palata*) portraying not only prophets and evangelists but also the first Muscovite princes. One of the anterooms (*avanzal*) leading to Catherine II's throne hall, in a southeast risalit of the Winter Palace, was decorated with portraits of the dynasty from Tsar Alexey Mihailovich to Catherine herself²⁴. The throne hall in the Great Palace at *Peterhoff* was a kind of imperial gallery. The portraits here were placed between windows and – a selected group (Peter I, Catherine I, Anna and Elizabeth) – over the doors. In addition to invoking the ruler's predecessors as confirmation of legitimate power, this system provided possibilities for self-positioning. Catherine II's thrones were often decorated with portraits of the empress herself. After her death, however, this custom was abandoned.

Also of interest in this period is the reevaluation of the old capital's representational space. Whilst the dynasty's country residences around Moscow were still much frequented, the Kremlin complex was now used mainly for coronations. From the beginning of the 18th century ceremonies in the Faceted Chamber (*Granovitaya Palata*) became less frequent, reflecting the emerging ideology of empire. Moreover, during the first century of the empire this major throne hall was gradually recoded from a tsarist to an imperial mode. At Catherine I's coronation in 1724 its walls were covered with tapestries; and later it was hung with dark-cherry coloured velvet with golden

²² This throne was placed on the lower level of the residence and was considered to be a secondary to that in the High Throne Hall (*Verhniaia Tronnaia*) and Golden (*Chesmensky*) gallery. We note that it was a tradition of the Muscovite Tsars to arrange ceremonial spaces on the second floor of a building. This practice survived into the time of Peter I and his descendants (Lefortov [*Petrovsky*], Menshikov, Winter Palaces, St Michael's Castle). Throne rooms were also placed on the first floor, but they were few in number and never gained significant importance.

²³ Makarov/Petrov 2007, 105.

²⁴ Ageeva 2007, 589.



Fig. 7 The Holy Antechamber, with painting “Constantine’s vision of the Cross” by Fyodor Zavyalov, 1847.

double-headed eagles. The old paintings relating the story of the dynasty in allegory as part of sacred history seemed excessive and thoroughly un-imperial (Fig. 6).

It should also be noted that the Russian topography of power in general, and the throne halls in particular, were arranged with regard to military discourse. This perception was conveyed through the name, functional usage and décor of the ceremonial space of the throne halls. On the way to the Faceted Chamber, the tsars’ visitors passed through the Red Porch (*Krasnoe Kriltso*) and then the so-called Holy Antechamber (*Sviatie seni*), a spacious, bright hall that served as waiting room. The historical murals in the Antechamber contained symbolic references to Christianity, the Orthodox tsar’s power and Orthodoxy’s inevitable victory over its enemies. All this was meant to send a clear message to foreign envoys. One of the paintings placed prominently on the wall opposite the entrance was “The Vision of the Cross seen by the emperor Constantine”. This depicted the legend of the first Christian emperor’s vision in the sky before the decisive battle of the Milvian Bridge (Fig. 7). Tellingly, this composition was restored in 1678 for the reception of a Polish embassy²⁵.

In the course of the 18th century there was a great proliferation of war symbols in lavish décor of representational space. Major ceremonial halls and also adjoining chambers often bore names with military implications, such as “Field Marshal Hall” (*Feldmarshalskiy zal*) and “Armorial Hall” (*Gerboviy zal*) in the Winter Palace (Fig. 8). Moreover, a tradition developed of naming throne halls in honour of St George, patron of the Russian military and reference to the first emperor-warrior Peter the Great who was always presented in heroic guise. In the early 19th century this practice culminated in the famous Military Gallery which contains still to-day more than three hundred portraits of generals who took part in the victory over Napoleon in 1812–1813 (Fig. 9). This gallery replaced several small rooms in the main block of the Winter Palace and was used as a waiting room. Just a few steps from the throne hall, it can be compared with the Holy Antechamber (*Sviatie seni*) of the Faceted Chamber where wall paintings were likewise intended to evoke the Russian tsar’s military power.

²⁵ Zabelin 1990, 217.

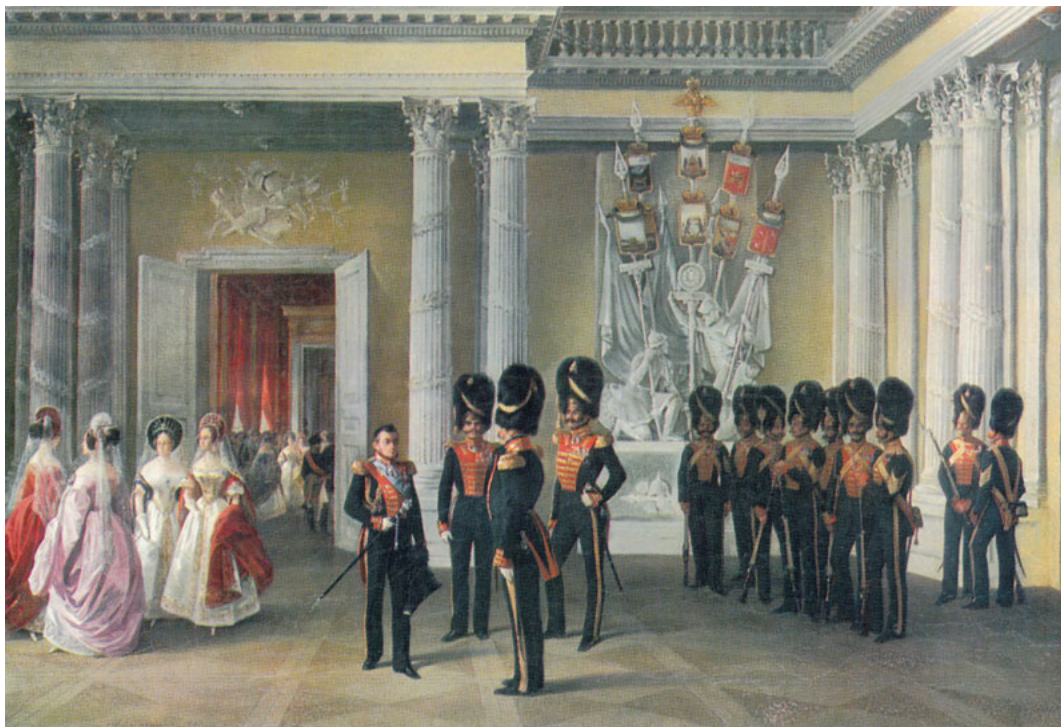


Fig. 8 Armorial Hall in the Winter Palace, St Petersburg. Painting by Adolf Ladurner, 1838.

The collected data show that the topography of power in early modern Russia was conceived not only according to principles of emblematic décor but also hierarchy of colour. Gold and red were seen as colours of the sovereign and dominated in the imperial period (interior décor, ceremonial furniture such as coronation chairs, canopies, dresses, etc). These colours were considered complementary to one another and were often interchanged. The porch leading to the Terem Palace (*Teremnoi Dvoretz*) in the Kremlin is called in the sources either the Gold or Red Porch²⁶.

Notions of solar light were also of particular significance. The place of the throne between windows in the Faceted Chamber (*Granovitaya Palata*) is perhaps the best example. The central pillar prevented the view of a monarch from the opposite side of the Chamber. Thus, those coming toward the tsar could see him only halfway along the ceremonial path, as if then beholding the appearance of the sun. The effect was certainly intentional, as ceremonies in the Faceted Chamber normally took place in the morning, with the sun shining in the windows beside the throne. This solar imagery of the sovereign is elaborated also in the literary sources of the time²⁷.

We might also remark that the arrangement of the windows meant that the eastern side of the chamber, where the tsar sat, was the best lighted, in comparison to the dimmer western side with the internal window of the Hidden Place (*Tainik*), reserved as “female space”. Later, following the great fire of 1684, the damaged Faceted Chamber was restored and the relatively small windows divided by columns on the lower level were considerably widened, providing the Chamber with better illumination²⁸.

The same tendency is observed in the arrangement of imperial throne halls in St Petersburg. The most important of these were located in the brightest and most spacious galleries, with two sets of large windows, in the upper and lower storeys of the walls on both sides. Further, the European Baroque practice of combining windows and mirrors was applied in order to enlarge the

²⁶ Vueva/Romanenko 2003, 71.

²⁷ Pchelov 2006, 107.

²⁸ Vueva/Romanenko 2003, 53.



Fig. 9 Military Gallery in the Winter Palace, St Petersburg. Painting by Grigory Chernetsov, 1827.

room visually. In the 18th century red and gold remained the primary colours of the monarch. The first palace in St Petersburg, that of Peter I's wife Catherine I, apparently situated on the place of the present-day Rossi Pavilion in the *Mikhailovsky* garden, was called the Golden Palace (*Zolotie palaty*), though the only golden element of its exterior was a small lantern on the roof²⁹.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the political changes which stressed or underplayed certain features, the Russian topography of power from the early 17th to the 18th century demonstrated great continuity in the transition from Moscow to St Petersburg, from tsardom to empire. The throne of the Russian sovereign was positioned in a way to exhibit supreme power, on the one hand linked with pre-imperial secular and ecclesiastical tradition and, on the other, strongly bound up with the notions of dynasty and military power.

²⁹ Dubiago 1963, 86–87.

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Fig. 1. 2. 4. 6. 7: Nasibova 1978.

Fig. 3. 8. 9: Tatiana Sokolova (1982), *Zdania i zali Ermitazha*. Leningrad.

Fig. 5: Makarov/Petrov 2007.