INTRODUCTION

FEDOR SOLNTSEV AND CRAFTING THE IMAGE OF A RUSSIAN NATIONAL PAST: THE CONTEXT

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Visualizing Russia in the twenty-first century is an exercise that relies on easily recalled images of the pre-revolutionary past. We conjure up gleaming gilt, vibrant colors, onion domes, icons, tsarist regalia, pointed headdresses, peasant blouses, fairy tale illustrations, the sets and costumes of the Ballets Russes. We recognize in all these images manifestations of le style russe or russkii stil’, the Russian style that has so captivated the world’s imagination since the mid-nineteenth century. But as late as 1825 the phrase, the “Russian style” meant little and seemed something of an oxymoron.

This book elaborates the origins of the Russian style in the 1830s and 1840s and celebrates the seminal role that Fedor Grigorevich Solntsev (1801–1892) played in its development. Soviet art historians relegated this pioneering artist-archaeologist-ethnographer-restorer-iconographer to obscurity since the many facets of his talent expressed a deep belief in Orthodoxy and an unswerving devotion to the tsarist monarchy. The neglect continues even two decades after the fall of the Soviet Union, with only a few exceptions.¹ Visualizing Russia offers a wealth of evidence to establish Solntsev’s rightful position at the forefront of the movement that crafted the image of a Russian national past.

The Romantic search for a national past was a European preoccupation in the early decades of the nineteenth century and nowhere more so than in Russia. The legendary date for the founding of the Russian state was 867 C.E., after which Kievan Rus’ gained stature internationally, having received its Orthodox religion and much of its culture from the Byzantine Empire. From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the Mongols imposed their rule, cutting Russians off from their former ties. Gradually, a new state arose around a new religious and political capital, Moscow. Muscovy or Muscovite Russia began to renew relations with the outside world but remained an eastern, exotic, sacerdotal realm, backward in the eyes of the West.

Peter the Great chafed at Muscovy’s image and turned his back on it. Once he assumed full power in the 1690s, he aimed to re-create Russia and mold it into an equal political and cultural partner with the leading European nations. In pursuit of this goal, Peter established an empire, secularized his power, and modernized institutions with a far-reaching program to westernize the state and transform the elites into Russian Europeans. Catherine the Great continued this process, and Russia had never been nor would ever again be so much a part of the West as during her reign. Europeanization, however, resulted in nothing less than a cultural revolution that caused two deep fissures: a break with traditions that dated back to the ninth century; and a break between the westernized urban elites and a peasantry untouched by modernizing forces.2

Events at the turn of the century brought Peter’s and Catherine’s innovations into question and set off an ongoing debate between Slavophiles, who cherished the pre-Petrine past, and Westernizers, who championed the tenets of European modernity. The bloody episodes of the French Revolution along with Napoleon’s invasion of Russia tarnished the glow of Western innovations and dampened their generally uncritical acceptance by the elite. At the same time, the defeat of the French Emperor in the Patriotic War of 1812 elevated the status of the common people, or narod, by demonstrating that they could shape Russia’s destiny. Once its troops led the allied army into Paris, the nation emerged unquestionably as a great European power. But it did not have a great or even distinct native culture or history that could resonate both with elites and narod. Nikolai Karamzin had famously said: “We became citizens of the world but ceased…to be citizens of

2 Please consult Marc Roeff’s Preface, “The Need to Craft a National Past.”