

“A leader is a dealer in hope”

Napoleon Bonaparte

WORDS: David Stock

In his fifteen years as ruler and leader of post-revolutionary France, Napoleon Bonaparte completely transformed the continent of Europe. His tumultuous reign brought conflict, upheaval and lasting reform to the conquered territories and allied states of his empire. The most abiding legacy of his time in power was the Napoleonic Code, which allowed freedom of religion and made civil law more accessible.

Opponents of the Emperor thought him a tyrant and usurper with a tenuous claim to the leadership of France. A decisive victory for the Seventh Coalition at the Battle of Waterloo brought to an end Napoleon's rule and signalled the defeat of the First French Empire. France's downfall engendered widespread scenes of celebration and triumph with nations and peoples throughout the continent voicing sentiments of patriotism and pride.

In the United Kingdom and Russia, two of the heroes of the age were immortalised in stone, posthumously honoured for their telling efforts in the Napoleonic Wars. Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson, killed at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and Alexander I, Emperor of Russia were commemorated with large and imposing columns of granite, extracted from quarries in south-western England and Finland.



milestones

These non-building structures were reminiscent of the columns built in Antiquity by the Egyptians, Persians and Greeks. When the Alexander Column was unveiled in 1834 it was the largest monument of its kind in the world, a record that stood until 1843 when Nelson's Column was finished. Even after his death in exile on the island of St. Helena, the impact of Napoleon could still be felt, with the cityscapes of London and St. Petersburg altered irrevocably to remember those who repelled and defied his forces. In this edition of Milestones, particular attention will be paid to the monument built in Russia with Nelson's Column, the better known of the two, featuring in the next Discovering Stone.

The French invasion of 1812 exerted a profound influence on the national psyche and cultural development of Russia. Several cornerstones of Russian culture such as Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* detail and commemorate the nation's conflict with France, from which it emerged victorious. Ironically, the Alexander Column was designed by the French-born, neoclassical architect Auguste de Montferrand who had served with distinction in Napoleon's army in Saxony and Thuringia. The Frenchman's presence in St. Petersburg was not terribly surprising as the city's reputation for architectural splendour owed much to the beautiful neoclassical and Palladian structures that were designed and built in the eighteenth century by French and Italian architects, such as Antonio Rinaldi, Francesco Rastrelli, Jean Francois Thomas de Thomon, and Giacomo Quarenghi. These men were responsible for actualising the vision of Peter the Great, the Russian tsar who founded St. Petersburg in 1703 with the intention of transforming his nation into a modern naval power.

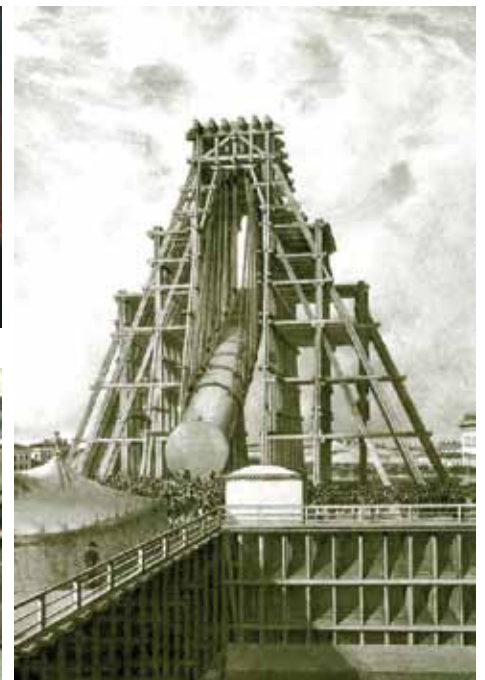
After the Napoleonic Wars had ceased Alexander I introduced what would be his most enduring architectural legacy, the Alexandrian Empire style, a Russian equivalent of the neoclassical design that had flourished in France during the reign of Napoleon. The same architectural style that had been repopularised and used to idealise Bonaparte was later endorsed by the ruler of Russia and employed by a Frenchman to commemorate the campaign that had irretrievably weakened the Grande Armée. The most famous exponent of the Alexandrian Empire style was Italian architect Carlo Rossi who designed Mikhailovsky Palace, Yelagin Palace, the General Staff Building in Palace Square, and the Military Gallery of the Winter Palace, which houses the portraits of 332 generals who took part in the war against France and her allies. Upon his arrival



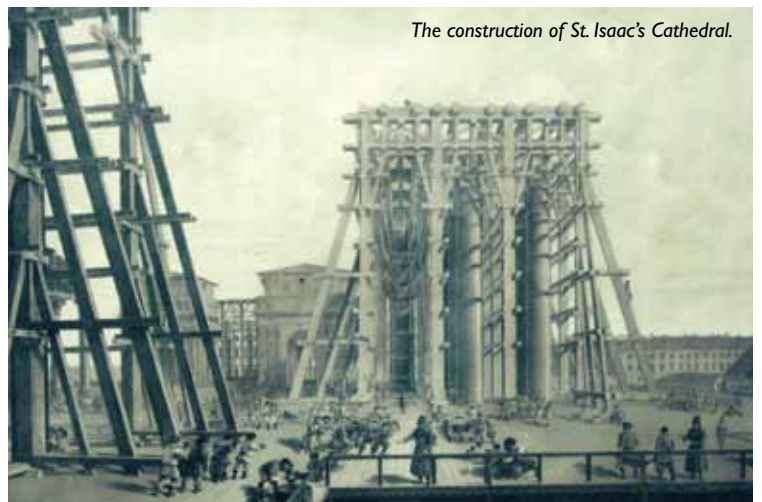
Alexander I, Emperor of Russia



Auguste de Montferrand



Raising columns for St. Isaac's Cathedral by Auguste de Montferrand



The construction of St. Isaac's Cathedral.

in Russia, Montferrand found favour with the reigning monarch who approved of his plans for St. Isaac's Cathedral. The foundation stone was laid as early as 1818 but the rest of the structure would take forty years to complete with construction ceasing in 1858 – the year of Montferrand's death.

By comparison, the Alexander Column was built with startling pace and efficiency, especially if one considers the lack of modern machinery and the prodigious size of the stone. It was left to Alexander's successor, Nicholas I, to approve of Montferrand's design for the column, which he did in 1829. Nicholas was the last Russian monarch to initiate mass municipal architecture in the form of giant classical structures, which sought to proclaim the primacy of the state and the unwavering power of the Romanov dynasty. In addition to the Alexander Column, Nicholas I oversaw the building of the Customs House, the two Triumphal Gates and the Alexandrinsky Theatre. These structures noticeably changed the appearance of St. Petersburg at a time when the character and function of the city evolved rapidly. In the first half of the



Construction of the Alexander I Column. Palace Square of St. Petersburg

Palace Square of St.-Petersburg. Alexander I Column. Unveiled
1834, 47.5 metres high.



Intricate Bas-reliefs designed by Italian artist Giovanni Battista Scotti adorn the Alexander column.



nineteenth century, St. Petersburg emerged as the bureaucratic hub of Russia's empire, housing and employing a veritable army of civil servants, clerks and copyists. The physical embellishment of the city in this particular period was intended to reflect the confidence of the autocracy after the conflict with France, the Russo-Turkish War and the Congress of Vienna, which Alexander attended in person. Russia was rewarded for its efforts in the Napoleonic Wars, sustaining its rule in neighbouring Finland and assuming control of recently partitioned Poland.

Granite was used often in the building of St. Petersburg with huge quantities of the stone quarried in Finland and then transported to the Russian capital. Many structures made of granite have struggled to withstand the regional climate, an unfavourable blend of winter frosts and high humidity, which can cause irreparable damage to a caryatid or pillar if water permeates and freezes inside the stone. The extremes of Russian weather did not dissuade Montferrand from using vast amounts of granite in his greatest designs. His search for material saw his party move to southern Finland, a swampy and forested region where granite is almost ubiquitous. The distinctive red stone of the Alexander Column was discovered and extracted from the Pytarlaks quarry, near the town of Virolahti. From there it was transported to the Gulf of Finland and loaded onto a waiting vessel specially modified for the occasion. The project was imperilled at this particular juncture when

the monolith was dropped into water. Luckily, no lives were lost and due to the energy and promptitude of those involved the granite mass was retrieved and raised into the barge. When the slab arrived in St. Petersburg in 1832 it was brought ashore under the supervision of 20-year-old contractor, Vasily Yakovlev. It was trimmed by merchants and dragged to its lifting point in Palace Square with the aid of capstans and a sledge mounted on cast-iron rollers.

The dragging and hauling of the stone required the force of 400 workmen and 2000 veterans of the Napoleonic Wars. Their endeavour and toil cannot be overstated but the success of the project rested – physically and metaphorically – on the creation of a giant wooden scaffold. A similar feat of engineering was carried out during the construction of St. Isaac's Cathedral, which for more than a century was the largest Orthodox church in the world. On both occasions this process was overseen by William Handyside, an engineer from Scotland. His achievements in St. Petersburg enhanced his reputation and were the basis for a paper presented to the Institution of Civil Engineers in London. The monolith of the Alexander Column – weighing 600 tonnes – was set with such precision that no attachment to the pedestal was needed. The column is 25.45 metres (83 feet 6 inches) high, and 3.5 metres (11 feet 5 inches) in diameter.

The monument's pedestal – made of granite shipped to the city in 1831 – is famous for the wonderful bas-reliefs that adorn it. These were designed by Italian artist Giovanni Battista Scotti who had helped



A bronze angel sits atop the 25.45 metre high column of granite

to create the lavish interior of Yelagin Palace. The four bas-reliefs, produced and embellished by Piotr Svintsov, Yevgeny Balin and Ivan Lepee, were possibly inspired by the spiral decoration of Trajan's Column, a monument built in Ancient Rome to celebrate victory over the Dacians. On the side of the pedestal facing the Winter Palace, two winged figures carry a plaque extolling the deeds of Alexander I and the might of Russia's arms. Included in the composition are figures representing the Neman and Vistula rivers, positions of importance in the Patriotic War, and various symbols of Russian military history, such as the chainmail of Cossack leader Yermak Timofeyevich and the helmet of Alexander Nevsky, who was proclaimed a saint by the Orthodox Church in 1547. The three remaining bas-reliefs consist of Russian armour and Roman military symbols, as well as the allegorical figures of Wisdom and Abundance, Justice and Mercy, and Peace and Victory.

The column is surmounted by a capital of bronze, upon which stands an angel made of the same material. This solemn and reverential figure points to the heavens with one arm whilst bearing a cross with the other. A closer inspection of the angel's face reveals a countenance strikingly similar to that of Alexander I. From the foot of the pedestal to the top of the cross the monument measures 47.5 metres. It is a most impressive sight, especially on a sunlit evening shortly before dusk when the few remaining shafts of light are reflected in the polished red granite of the column. ⁶⁵



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