

“ROSE OF BYZANTIUM”, EMBLEM OF FAITH:  
“СОБОР СВ. МАРКА”

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Since the inception of their verse tradition, Russian poets, following in the footsteps of their European counterparts, have saluted, invoked, and created verbal analogues to great works of art and architecture. Viacheslav Ivanov was no exception, and, like so many of his fellow poets (to mention only Konstantin Batiushkov or Fedor Tiutchev or his contemporaries Aleksandr Blok and Mikhail Kuzmin), it was Italy which exerted a special hold on his imagination. Throughout a long creative life he often appealed to and evoked its cultural monuments, and as in the poem I will examine here, the result became not only a tribute to one of them, but on occasion a reflection of one of the poet's most cherished and hoped for dreams.

In the spring of 1892, after stops in Genoa, Rome, and Naples and a tour through Sicily, Ivanov took up residence in the Eternal City to pursue research on a dissertation on tax farming in ancient Rome. During a stay in Italy of slightly over three years, he must have visited Venice, but that once greatest of trading states and mistress of the Adriatic, like Italy itself, had to wait until 1899 to find expression in his verse. Ivanov evoked the city in two poems which, with “The Adriatic” (“Адриатика”), open the sequence of “Italian Sonnets” (“Итальянские сонеты”) in Ivanov's first book of verse (*Polar Stars – Кормчие звезды*): the gondolier's “Barcarole” (“Баркарола”) and “The Lagoon” (“Лагуна”), in which the city's walls and towers rise strangely out of the distant mists of the lagoon like a dream of proud memory (“Встает туманный град в дали завороженной, / Как гордой памяти неусыпимый сон...” – I, 614). Both poems strike the valedictory note that dominates the “Venetian theme” in European literature, which contrasts mythical ideal and corrupted reality, past glory and present impotent beauty.

A decade later, on August 1, 1910, Ivanov left St. Petersburg for Italy, where he met his stepdaughter Vera Shvarsalon in Rome. Late that autumn, the couple stopped in Venice on their return trip home. As they tarried in the city, they sensed as rarely before that the spirit of Lidia Zinov'eva-Annibal, Vera's mother and Ivanov's second wife, who had died in 1907, was guiding their own steps: "That One, who is in you and in me and who blossomed like a rose between us" ("И Та, что в тебе и во мне / И розой меж нами цвела" – II, 507). The reader very much feels her presence, like that of Vera herself, in the poems "Cradle Barcarole" ("Колыбельная баркарола") and "The Adriatic" ("Адриатика"), which Ivanov set down upon his return to St. Petersburg and included the next year in the "Various Lyrical Poems" ("Разные лирические стихотворения") section of "Rosarium. Poems on the Rose" ("Rosarium. Стихи о Розе") in *Cor Ardens* (1911). Their tone stands in marked contrast to the decidedly muted earlier Venetian poems, but celebration reaches its apogee in the magnificent "Cathedral of Saint Mark" ("Собор св. Марка"), written at the same time, and the penultimate poem of the "Sonnets" ("Сонеты") section of "Rosarium".

In the year 829 two pious Venetian merchants (or adventurers using the action to exculpate their crime of trading with the infidels) stole the body of St. Mark from its tomb in Alexandria and brought it to their native city – half sea, half land, half East, half West, poised between Byzantium and Rome, a natural funnel of intercourse between them. The theft compelled the invention of the legend of St. Mark's stranding on a sandbank in the lagoon, when a heavenly messenger pronounced to the apostle "Pax tibi, Marce, Aevangelista meus. Hic requiescet corpus tuum," and it necessitated the building of a small church worthy of housing the precious relic. That building burned down in 976, and its successor was demolished to make way for the present five-domed structure, which was erected in the eleventh century (between 1063-94) to the design of an unknown Byzantine architect (or architects), who modelled the church, it is thought, after one of the most sacred of Orthodox shrines, the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. (The Venetian Chronicles insist that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem provided the model). In the centuries that followed, the Venetians embellished and altered the original Byzantine structure, both inside and out, and the accretions of Western elements (the columns and the Italian Gothic pediments on the façade, for example, or the present domes which

replaced the original Byzantine hemispherical vaults) resulted in the unique Greco-Latin Basilica San Marco that we know today, the most flamboyant of cathedrals.

The building and rebuilding and subsequent decorative embellishment of the structure of San Marco accompanied and mirrored the rise of the Venetian Republic itself and reached, with La Serenissima herself, its apogee in the thirteenth century. Then the building assumed much of its present appearance when the exterior was incrustated with marble panels and carvings and the four bronze horses were erected on its façade. All this was booty looted from Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade (launched in 1202), in which Venice had played a prominent and unprincipled part in the despoliation of the Greek capital. For the Basilica was an artistic affirmation of the *translatio imperii*, of the conquest and surpassing of Byzantium, whose sovereign magnificence and splendid emblems lived on in Venice.

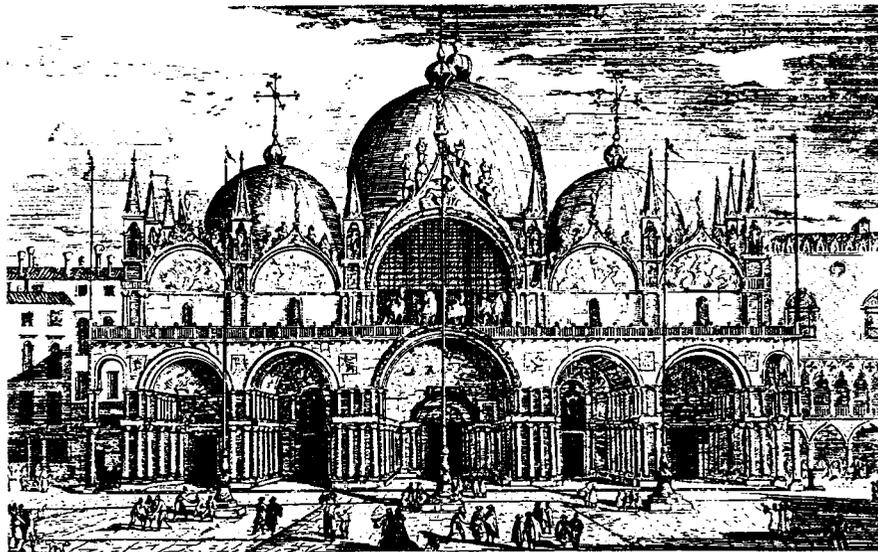
That history informs Ivanov’s sonnet “Собор св. Марка”, but untroubled by the anxieties of an architectural antiquarian, he realized that the general effect of the building, despite the additions and changes over the centuries, remained that of a Byzantine building, and the poem itself demonstrates that he, like countless other visitors to La Serenissima, had been staggered by the color and luxury of the marvelous church:

Царьградских солнц замкнув в себе лучи,  
Ты на порфирах темных и агатах  
Стоишь, согбен, как патриарх в богатых  
И тяжких ризах кованой парчи,

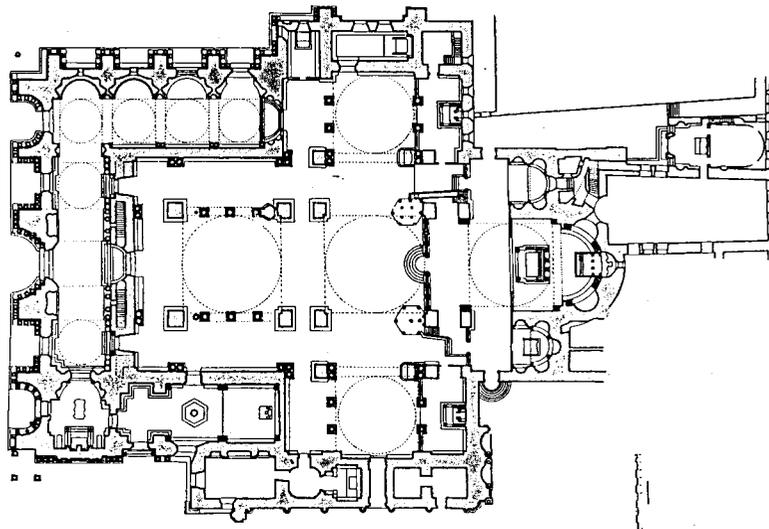
В деснице три и в левой две свечи  
Подъемлющий во свещниках рогатых, –  
Меж тем как на галерах и фрегатах  
Сокровищниц початки и ключи

В дарохранительный ковчежец Божий  
Вселенная несет, служа жезлам  
Фригийскою скуфьей венчаных дождей,

По изумрудным Адрии валам;  
И роза Византии червленеет,  
Где с книгой лев крылатый каменест (II, 498).



1. The basilica of San Marco, after Luca Carlevarijs, *Fabbriche e Vedute di Venezia*, 1703.



Собор св. Марка: план и фасад.

Из книги L. Carlevarijs, *Fabbriche e Vedute di Venezia*, 1703

The opening metaphor, "the rays of Byzantine suns" (the Eastern Slavs called Byzantium "Tsargrad") and the "dark porphyries and agates" of the second line brilliantly evoke the interior of the church, its ceilings golden with glimmering mosaics by Byzantine-inspired artisans (the oldest, perhaps, were executed by craftsmen from the Greek capital),<sup>1</sup> its tessellated pavement carpeted in elaborate geometrical patterns of rare marbles, its walls incrustated with marbles and semiprecious stones. The interior gleams from pillars of variegated stones, jasper and porphyry, deep green serpentine spotted with flakes of white, and veined marbles. In the third and fourth lines, simile summons the Patriarch who heads the Venetian see,<sup>2</sup> decked in splendid brocaded and bejewelled vestments, and the breathtaking "hammered brocade" ("кованая парча") of the Basilica's façade itself, bowed, like the interior, under the weight of voluptuous textures.<sup>3</sup>

The glittering Gothic pinnacles of the roof lines of the five great vaulted porches crowned by statues on the façade, where "as if in ecstasy, the crests of the arches break into a marble foam, and toss themselves far into the blue sky in flashes and wreaths of sculptured spray",<sup>4</sup> recall to Ivanov the Trikerion ("трикирий"), the candlestick holding three candles representing symbolically the three persons of the Trinity and which is held in the right hand, and the Dikerion ("дикирий"), the double candleholder symbolizing the dual nature of Christ and held in the left hand. Both are raised high by a bishop (or

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<sup>1</sup> Ivanov's fascination with the golden background of Orthodox mosaics is attested as early as 1892. See: Вячеслав Иванов на пороге Рима: 1892 год. Пуб. Н. В. Котрелева и Л. Н. Ивановой // *Archivio italo-russo III. Vjačeslav Ivanov – testi inediti*, Daniela Rizzi and Andrej Shishkin (eds.), Salerno 2001, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> On the origins and history of the title patriarch and the Marcian patriarchate see Otto Demus, *The Church of San Marco in Venice. History. Architecture. Sculpture*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies VI*, Washington, D.C. 1960, pp. 30-43.

<sup>3</sup> Blok compared the façade to an iconostasis ("узорный иконостас") in the second poem, "Холодный ветер от лагуны", of his 1909 "Венеция". "Кованая парча" would also aptly describe the famous Pala d'Oro, the large panel of gold, enamels, and jewels, a masterpiece of Byzantine art, which hangs above the cathedral's high altar.

<sup>4</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice: Introductory Chapters and Local Indices (Printed Separately) for the Use of Travellers While Staying in Venice and Verona*, New York 1891, p. 112. Ruskin's classic study of the city was first published in London in three volumes between 1851-53.

higher clergyman, like a patriarch) to bless the faithful not in the Roman rite, but in the Orthodox, as well as in the so-called “Greek rite” worship service performed for centuries throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond.

The great church is not only, of course, an image and embodiment of faith, but of the power of the Venetian state itself. It did not, in fact, become the city’s cathedral until 1807, when the patriarchate was finally transferred to San Marco; until then it had been a dynastic church, the private chapel of the Doge.<sup>5</sup> And Ivanov notes such intersection of timelessness with time in the sonnet’s seventh and following five lines, where the thematic focus shifts, as it should in a sonnet, and we move from the sacral to the secular realm, from repose to activity. The convoluted syntax of these lines, so different from the simple and majestic pace of the first six lines, seems to mimic the movement of those “galleries” and “frigates” of the Venetian military and mercantile fleets that went forth to conquer and trade from one end of the Adriatic and Mediterranean to the other. (In more straightforward syntax this part of the sentence – for the sonnet is one highly complex sentence – might read: “Меж тем как Вселенная, служа жезлам дождей, венчанных фригийскою скуфьей, несет на галерах и фрегатах по изумрудным валам Адрии початки и ключи сокровищниц в дарохранительный ковчежец Божий”). Those ships, obedient like the Mediterranean universe itself at the time of Venice’s naval supremacy to the will of the Doges, had then conveyed to the city from far and near precious objects and relics from the treasuries (“сокровищниц”) of temples and churches of other cities to enrich and adorn San Marco. (Ivanov’s verse abounds in “jewelled” epithets for things of the natural world; the “emerald” epithet for “waves” here points to the sumptuousness of the cargoes brought over the seas to the city). John Ruskin, in a memorable formulation, called the Cathedral a “treasure-heap”.<sup>6</sup> Ivanov’s dense metaphor likens it to a “divine tabernacled chest”, much like the rare twelfth-century Greek reliquary of silver in the form of a small domed church (intended originally to

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<sup>5</sup> Ruskin wrote: “I am aware of no other city of Europe in which its cathedral was not the principal feature. But the principal church in Venice was the chapel attached to the palace of her prince, and called the ‘Chiesa Ducale’”. *The Stones of Venice*, p. 11. Until 1807 the patriarchal cathedral was San Pietro di Castello, standing on the eastern perimeter of the city.

<sup>6</sup> *The Stones of Venice*, p. 111.

hold the Eucharistic bread) that we can see to this day in the Cathedral's Treasury. He forms the adjective "tabernacled" ("дарохранительный") from "tabernacle" ("дарохранительница"), the vessel, often shaped like a church, which stands on the altar and holds the Holy Sacraments ("святыя дары хранят"), and it modifies the noun "chest" ("ковчежец"), often of silver or gold, in which a church's most precious treasures may be kept. And the philologically minded Ivanov was well aware that "ковчег" (from which "ковчежец" is obviously derived) means not only "chest" (or "shrine") in Slavonic and Russian, but also "ship" or "ark". He knew, too, that to the early Christians the Church itself was most frequently symbolized under the image of a ship. The glittering cathedral, a reliquary for the earthly remains of Saint Mark beneath its high altar, rides, as it has for centuries, like a fabulous ship of the Christian faith in the midst of the lagoon.

Just as Ivanov uses vocabulary from the Orthodox and Slavonic sacred realms to image the Roman Catholic cathedral, he similarly unites East and West and insinuates the religious in the secular in the adjective and noun used to denote the unique cloth cap assumed by the Doge after his election and at his coronation: "Phrygian scufia" ("фригийская скуфья"). The brimless, soft conical cap given to slaves in ancient Rome upon being freed was called a "Phrygian cap" ("фригийская шапка") after the kind of headgear worn by the oriental Phrygians,<sup>7</sup> and was later adopted and worn as a symbol of freedom during the French Revolution (the "bonnet phrygien" or English "liberty cap"). The Slavonic "scufia," on the other hand, denotes the high, rounded, slightly conical shaped clerical head covering awarded to an Orthodox priest by a bishop for faithful service.

East and West reunite in the first line of the couplet which closes the poem. Saint Mark's Cathedral glows crimson on its square in the metaphor "rose of Byzantium," derived from the fact that the church does not have the basilican structure of the earlier principal episcopal churches in the Veneto (Torcello, Ravenna), but was built on a

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<sup>7</sup> As Vasily Rudich pointed out at the 2001 Ivanov Convivium in Rome, Ivanov would have been well aware that images of Mithras depict him wearing a Phrygian cap as he sacrifices a bull. Ivanov also knew that Mithraism, an Eastern mystery religion, had for a time been as widespread (and popular) in imperial Rome as Christianity, and that it possessed a ritual with a kind of baptism and a shared meal based on bread and wine, which was similar in some ways to Christianity.

ground plan of a Greek cross.<sup>8</sup> Throughout “Rosarium” Ivanov, following a tradition stretching back at least to the Middle Ages (and echoed in Rosicrucian symbolism, a deep interest of his at the time), connects the Rose with the Cross (see, for example, “Rosa in Cruce” or “The Rose of the Winds” [“Роза ветров”], whose concluding line is “И Розой Крест объемлет – Красота”).<sup>9</sup> The final line of the final poem of “Rosarium” (“Eden”) affirms that “The Rose is the cradle of the Cross” (“Роза – колыбель Креста” – II, 533). Merging of another kind, the sacral and secular, occurs in the last line of the sonnet in an allusion to the saint of its title. When the apostle Mark became patron saint of Venice, the winged lion became the patron beast of the city and Venetian state, whose ships sailed under his banner. One such lion, gleaming in gold and clutching an open book, crowns the central arch above the main entrance to the church facing the Piazza San Marco, while not so distant, on the Piazzetta, rises the most fanciful of all his numerous brethren in the city. It, too, no less than the Cathedral, represents the unique Venetian blending of cultures East and West. High atop a massive oriental granite column brought from the Eastern Mediterranean in the twelfth century, eyes of agate regarding San Marco, there stands a fourth-century pagan chimera from the Levant which was converted by the Venetians to the saint’s lion companion when the Holy Book was inserted under its fierce paws.<sup>10</sup>

Just as the Cathedral, in its architectural design, mediates the unification of two styles, Greek and Western, so Ivanov’s sonnet form itself here effects a reconciliation of two sonnet traditions. While the octave follows the canonical rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan or Ita-

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to think that Ivanov knew that on St. Mark’s Day, every Venetian husband is to present his wife a red rose, symbolic of undying loyalty.

<sup>9</sup> II, 494. See too Ivanov’s later, but very similar view as fixed in the notes of Olga Chor (Deschartes): “Говорили об особенностях вячеславова розенкрейцерства. Есть ‘племя’, кот<орому> разрешать соединение розы и креста дано в форме соединения Греции с христианством. М<икель> А<нжело> взял мрамор Эллады, потом розу как купол <собора св. Петра в Риме>, кот<орый> поместил на ‘греческом’ кресте – Roma quadrata” (note for 30 January 1932). Сентенции и фрагменты Вяч. Иванова в записях О. Шор // *Archivio italo-russo III*, p. 138.

<sup>10</sup> A few years later, in the second poem (“Ему же”) of the three-part “Современники” (*Прозрачность*), Ivanov again described the animal standing on its column by the Palace of the Doges: “Взлетит и прыгнет зверь крылатый. / Как оный идол медяной / Пред венетийскою палатой – / Лик благовестия земной” (I, 777).

lian sonnet (*abba/ abba*), the concluding sestet observes that of the Shakespearian or English sonnet: *cdc/dee*. Similarly, Ivanov places this sonnet in the cycle at the intersection, as it were, of two traditions, Christian and pagan, whose essential continuity was always emphasized by his syncretic vision: "Собор св. Марка" is preceded by "Roses at Subiaco" ("Розы в Субиако"), with its allusion to the Christian Saint Francis (red roses were said to have sprung from his blood when he threw himself on thorns at Subiaco to mortify his flesh), and followed by "The Poet" ("Поэт") in which an unnamed Orpheus is linked with the rose.<sup>11</sup> And it is precisely reconciliation, continuance, and unity that Ivanov salutes in this sonnet and the other poems of "Rosarium", which bears the dedication "Единой и нашей Вере" (an allusion, of course, to Faith and Vera Shvarsalon).

In his October 1930 letter to Charles Du Bos, with its merciless critique of Bolshevism and a complacent Western European civilization too exhausted even to realize, much less face up to the menace that it posed,<sup>12</sup> Ivanov explained how he had overcome his own "pessimism" and taken the step that a voice from within had long been urging: acceptance of Roman Catholicism. That personal affirmation of faith at a time of chaos and doubt, an action performed in a ceremony according to the "Greek rite" in St. Peter's on March 17, 1926, represented not a rejection of Orthodoxy, but of the schism that had divided the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity for centuries. Only then, he wrote to Du Bos, did he lose a feeling of "deprivation" and "for the first time feel myself Orthodox in the full meaning of the word".<sup>13</sup> The imagery and language of Ivanov's letter at

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<sup>11</sup> See Pamela Davidson. *The Poetic Imagination of Vyacheslav Ivanov: A Russian Symbolist's Perception of Dante*, Cambridge 1989, p. 211, 215-216.

<sup>12</sup> No one seems to have remarked that several paragraphs of the "Lettre à Charles Du Bos" echo polemically Aleksandr Blok's "Двенадцать". At one point, for example, Ivanov writes of the Bolsheviks as "des apôtres de la Haine. La cause du prolétariat n'est que prétexte ou méthode: réellement, il s'agit d'étouffer Dieu, de l'extirper des coeurs humains. Que chacun opte donc pour l'une ou l'autre des *deux Cités* en guerre!" – III, 422, 424. The letter to Du Bos was first published in the journal *Vigile* (Paris 1930, IV-me cahier), together with a French translation of the famous epistolary debate between Ivanov and Mikhail Gershenzon *Переписка из двух углов* (1921).

<sup>13</sup> The original French text reads: "je me sentais pour la première fois orthodoxe dans la plénitude de l'acception de ce mot" – III, 426. For a more precise Russian

times recall “Собор св. Марка”: “the boat of the Fisherman is the only ark [“ковчег”] of salvation”, “treasure” (“сокровище”). So does its conclusion: “Only Christianity, being an absolute religion, is capable of resurrecting the ontological memory of the civilizations which it had replaced, and therefore Christian culture (i. e., Greco-Latin culture, in its two aspects, Eastern and Western) inevitably finds a universal character”.<sup>14</sup> It was precisely such universality which Ivanov, a deeply religious thinker, saw in the Basilica San Marco, an ecumenical emblem,<sup>15</sup> in its harmonizing of Greek and Latin cultures, of the continuity and unity of faith to which VI. Solov’ev, a “great and holy man” in the words of the letter to Du Bos, had appealed. In the spring of 1926, sixteen years after he had saluted the “rose of Byzantium” in his great sonnet, Ivanov, in his own reunification within himself of the tragically divided churches, at last reached the goal to which Solov’ev had dedicated the final years of his life.

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translation by D. Ivanov see: *Вячеслав Иванов: Архивные материалы и исследования*. М. 1999, сс. 81-92.

<sup>14</sup> “Le christianisme seul, étant la religion absolue, a la force de faire revivre la mémoire ontologique des civilisations auxquelles il se substitue, si bien que la culture chrétienne (qui est la culture gréco-latine dans ses deux aspects, ceux d’Orient et ceux d’Occident) revêt nécessairement le caractère universel” – III, 428. Ivanov used similar language in a vigorous rejection of “Eurasianism” as “grundfalsch”. Letter to Ernst Robert Curtius of 27/28 February 1932 // Vjačeslav Ivanov. *Dichtung und Briefwechsel aus dem deutschsprachigen Nachlass*, Michael Wachtel (ed.), Mainz 1995, SS. 59-60.

<sup>15</sup> After reading this paper at the 2001 Roman meeting of the Ivanov Convivium, Pamela Davidson drew my attention to an article by Pierre Pascal. He cited “Собор св. Марка” in French translation and wrote only: “Le poète avait sans doute reconnu dans la cathédrale extraordinaire, byzantine et pourtant romaine, la figure, les prémices et peut-être le lieu de la nécessaire réunion des deux Eglises”. Trois poètes russes à Venise au début du XXe siècle // *Venezia nelle letterature moderne*. Atti del Primo Congresso dell’Associazione Internazionale di Letteratura Comparata. Civiltà Veneziana, 8. Carlo Pellegrini (ed.). Venezia-Roma 1961, p. 222. This may also be the place to note that Ivanov certainly knew of another intersection of Eastern and Western spirituality in Venice. The huge anthology of religious writings dating from the fourth century to the fifteenth called the *Philokalia*, one of the pillars of Orthodox spirituality, was first printed in Venice in 1782 in a typographer’s shop located but minutes away from the San Marco. Its publication was instrumental in sparking a spiritual reawakening throughout the Orthodox world, most notably, after its translation from Greek into Slavonic and Russian, in nineteenth-century Russia.