

ABSTRACT

THE CURSE OF THE FORBIDDEN CITY:
HAIM LENSKY'S ST. PETERSBURG SONATAS AND THE IMAGES
OF ST. PETERSBURG IN RUSSIAN AND HEBREW LITERATURE

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After arriving in Leningrad, formerly known as Saint Petersburg, in 1925, Haim Lensky wrote many poems dedicated exclusively to the city which shortly before had been the capital of the Russian Empire and the main site of the communist revolution. The extensive representation of the imperial capital in Lensky's poems was almost unprecedented in the history of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, usually anchored in towns within the Jewish Pale of Settlement. Therefore these poems must be examined through the prism of the Russian poetics of Empire. This article shows that Lensky's poems directly correspond with canonical texts in Russian literature, and in particular with poems by Aleksander Pushkin and Osip Mandelshtam, which deal with imperial monuments in the urban space and with Saint Petersburg's status in Russian history and culture. Yet unlike the Russian poets, Lensky avoided presenting Saint Petersburg as a sublime object, and even used carnival techniques such as curses and parody to undermine the city's central status in the Russian imperial project. Instead of eulogizing the imperial metropolis, Lensky promoted supra-ethnic local patriotism in the Western reaches of the Russian empire, while utilizing Hebrew-language poetry for the benefit of all the victims of Russian imperialism, regardless of their identity.