Lost Empire of Tartaria

The theory that a grand empire once spanned Eurasia and perhaps even North America.

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By Nick Ottens

In Steam

Asia map

1754 map of Asia by Jean Palairet

The lost empire of Tartaria is the most delightful conspiracy theory. It posits that a technologically advanced civilization spanned Eurasia and perhaps parts of North America until as recently as a century ago, when it was erased from history. What’s left of Tartaria are ornate and seemingly out-of-place structures, from opulent churches in Russia to the Shanghai Bund.

The theory stems from disappointment in modern architecture. We once had fabulous Art Deco skyscrapers, Beaux-Arts train stations and Second Empire post offices. Now everything is a glass-and-concrete box. What happened?

The theory is that Americans and Europeans didn’t build those monuments. They are the legacy of a Tartarian Empire that emanated out of Northeast Asia.

Are we supposed to believe that eighteenth-century mapmakers drew a vast “Tartaria” in that region out of ignorance? Surely not! Tartaria was real, and it was the most powerful empire of its time. The Great Wall of China was built not by the Chinese to keep the barbarians out, but by the Tartarians to keep out the Chinese.

Opinions are divided about the empire’s demise. Some believe a biblical-sized mud flood decimated Tartaria, which also explains why so many old buildings have what we now call semi-basements. Adherent of this theory suspect monuments like Saint Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow’s Red Square continue tens or even hundreds of meters underground.

Carioca Studio artwork

Carioca Studio artwork

Carioca Studio artwork

Art by Carioca Studio

Others suspect World War II was really a war of all against Tartaria, and the destruction of old Berlin, Dresden, Warsaw and other cities in Central and Eastern Europe was a deliberate effort to wipe away the traces of a rival civilization.

Berlin Germany

Berlin in 1920

Viktoria-Luise-Platz Berlin Germany

Berlin in 1920

Dresden Germany

Dresden in the 1930s

Warsaw Poland

Warsaw in 1939

Whatever the catalyst, after this “great reset” history was rewritten by the victors and the surviving Tartarian buildings were recast as the creations of contemporary architects. What had been Tartaria’s moving capital was implausibly reimagined as “world’s fairs”. How else to explain that, every few years during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, palatial complexes emerged all over the Northern Hemisphere? For entertainment? And then they would be demolished after the event was over? That makes no sense!

Exposition Universelle Paris France

Pavilions of the Nations at the 1889 Exposition Universelle

Exposition Universelle Paris France

Fountain Coutan and the Central Dome of the 1889 Exposition Universelle

World's Columbian Exposition Chicago Illinois

Grounds of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition

World's Columbian Exposition Chicago Illinois

Court of Honor and Grand Basin of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition

World's Columbian Exposition Chicago Illinois

MacHinery Hall at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition

California Midwinter International Exposition San Francisco

Administration Building of the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition

Trans-Mississippi Exposition Omaha Nebraska

Grand Court of the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition

Exposition Universelle Paris France

Palace of Electricity at the 1900 Exposition Universelle

Panama-Pacific International Exposition San Francisco California

1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition at night

1929 Barcelona International Exposition Spain

1929 Barcelona International Exposition

The fairgrounds were not the only beautiful buildings razed to the ground. The original Penn Station, bulldozed in 1963-68 to make way for the ghastly Madison Square Garden, is the most infamous American example. But it is hardly the only one.

The Waldorf-Astoria, the grandest hotel in the world, was sold and torn down in 1929, because New York high society had moved north, toward the Upper East Side. The City Hall Post Office and Courthouse of New York, built on Broadway in the Second Empire style between 1869 and 1880, was demolished in 1939 to expand City Hall Park. The Chicago Federal Building boasted a dome larger than the United States Capitol. It was razed in 1965 and replaced by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Kluczynski Federal Building.

Waldorf-Astoria New York

Waldorf-Astoria in 1899

City Hall Post Office and Courthouse New York

City Hall Post Office and Courthouse of New York in 1898

Chicago Federal Building Illinois

Chicago Federal Building in 1961

Built in stages between 1897 and 1908, the headquarters of the Singer Manufacturing Company, now Singer Corporation, in New York was the tallest skyscraper of its time. Incorporating Beaux-Arts and Second Empire elements, it was widely considered a Manhattan landmark, yet it would not receive official landmark status from the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, created amid the outcry over Penn Station’s destruction, to prevent its demolition in 1967-69. The site now hosts One Liberty Plaza, a black glass-and-steel box.

Singer Building New York

Singer Building New York

Singer Building in 1913

Singer Building New York

Singer Building in 1965

The Saltair was a resort on the Great Salt Lake of Utah that burned down in a fire in 1925. The former National Surgical Institute of Indianapolis, Indiana became the Imperial Hotel around the turn of the last century. Its domes and turrets were removed in the 1920s, when it became the Hotel Roosevelt. It was razed between 1945 and 1949 to make way for a parking lot. (Such incredible reasons for demolition are another red herring to Tartaria’s believers.)

Prince Grigore Sturdza’s palace in central Bucharest was for a while used by Romania’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs before the country’s postwar communist government tore it down in 1947. The Palácio Monroe was originally constructed as the Brazilian pavilion to the 1904 St Louis World’s Fair, rebuilt in Rio de Janeiro in 1906, where it served as the seat of the Brazilian Congress and later Senate between 1914 and 1960, before being marked for demolition in 1975.

Saltair Utah

Saltair Pavilion on the Great Salt Lake of Utah, circa 1900 (Library of Congress)

Imperial Hotel Indianapolis Indiana

Imperial Hotel in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1904 (Library of Congress)

Sturdza Palace Bucharest Romania

Sturdza Palace, circa 1930-38

Monroe Palace Rio de Janeiro Brazil

Monroe Palace in in 1976

Imperial Institute London England

Imperial Institute in London, England (Imperial College London)

Winnipeg Canada City Hall postcard

Postcard of the Old City Hall of Winnipeg, Manitoba

London’s sprawling Imperial Institute, now the Commonwealth Education Trust, was almost entirely demolished in the 1950s and 60s to allow the next-door Imperial College to grow. Only the Queen’s Tower is still standing. The Old City Hall of Winnipeg, the capital of Manitoba, Canada, was destroyed in 1962.

Denver’s Mining Exchange was demolished in 1963 to make way for a Brutalist skyscraper. The Old Post Office of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was razed in 1966 to make way for another parking lot. The Second Empire-style Federal Hotel and Coffee Palace of Melbourne, Australia was lost in 1973.

Mining Exchange Denver Colorado

Mining Exchange in Denver

Old Post Office Pittsburgh Pennsylvania

Old Post Office of Pittsburgh

Federal Coffee Palace Melbourne Australia

Federal Coffee Palace of Melbourne

Destruction was even more rampant in Russia. The Bolsheviks infamously blew up Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the 1930s to make space for the never-built Palace of the Soviets. (See Unbuilt Moscow) Modeled on the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, it had been one of the largest Orthodox churches in the world. It was rebuilt after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Hundreds of cathedrals, churches and mosques were less fortunate; they are lost forever. It isn’t hard to imagine there must have been something more sinister at play than bad taste, and of course there was: an attempt to stamp out religion.

Unless that’s the cover story and these were never cathedrals and churches to begin with, but rather the palaces of Tartaria?

One street up from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the Church of the Praises of the Theotokos in Bashmaki was also demolished for the Palace of the Soviets. The Church of Saint Paraskeva was destroyed in 1928. The headquarters of the Council of Labor and Defense was built in its place, which has housed the Russian State Duma since 1994. The Church of Saint Basil of Caesarea in Tverskaya-Yamskaya was torn down in 1935, the Church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin on Pokrovka Street the following year — supposedly to expand the sidewalk. The Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was leveled in 1952.

Cathedral of Christ the Savior Moscow Russia

Cathedral of Christ the Savior, circa 1880-90

Church of the Praises of the Theotokos in Bashmaki Moscow Russia

Church of the Praises of the Theotokos in Bashmaki, circa 1912-17

Church of St Paraskeva Moscow Russia

Church of St Paraskeva in 1906

Church of Saint Basil of Caesarea in Tverskaya-Yamskaya Moscow Russia

Church of St Basil of Caesarea in Tverskaya-Yamskaya, circa 1905

Church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Moscow Russia

Church of the Assumption of the Holy Virgin in 1883

Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Moscow Russia

Unfinished Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in 1921

In Saint Petersburg, the Cathedral of the Presentation of the Holy Virgin of the Semenovsky Regiment was destroyed in 1933; the Saint Miron Church a year later. The Saints Boris and Gleb Church was converted into a warehouse in 1934 and finally torn down in 1975. The Coastal Monastery of Saint Sergius was used as a labor camp after the Russian Revolution. Its cathedral was destroyed in the 1960s.

Cathedral of the Presentation of the Holy Virgin of the Semenovsky Regiment Saint Petersburg Russia

Cathedral of the Presentation of the Holy Virgin of the Semenovsky Regiment, circa 1900

Saint Miron Church Saint Petersburg Russia

St Miron Church prior to 1901

Saints Boris and Gleb Church Saint Petersburg Russia

Saints Boris and Gleb Church in the early 1900s

Holy Trinity Cathedral Coastal Monastery of Saint Sergius Russia

Holy Trinity Cathedral of the Coastal Monastery of St Sergius, circa 1864-71

Lesser cities weren’t spared. Nizhny Novgorod lost its Saint George Church on the Volga Embankment in 1932 to a hotel. The Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tomsk was demolished in 1934 to make way for a square. The Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bryansk was torn down between 1933 and 1935. The Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos, or Blessed Virgin Mary, in Krasnoyarsk was lost in 1936.

Saint George Church on Volga Embankment Nizhny Novgorod Russia

St George Church on the Volga Embankment of Nizhny Novgorod, circa 1900

Holy Trinity Cathedral Tomsk Russia

Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tomsk in 1899

Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord Bryansk Russia

Church of the Transfiguration of the Lord in Bryansk, 1895

Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos Krasnoyarsk Russia

Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos in Krasnoyarsk, 1899

Local authorities in Vyatka, now Kirov, tried to save the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral by proposing to turn it into a theater or other public space, but they were overruled. The cathedral was destroyed in 1937. The city’s smaller Holy Trinity Cathedral was demolished as well.

Rostov-on-Don lost several churches. The Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the tallest building in the city at the time, was destroyed in 1930. The Saint Alexander Nevsky Church was torn down in 1937 for the sake of an apartment building.

In 1939, the construction of the Uglich Dam flooded the old town of Kalyazin, north of Moscow, including its Saint Nicholas Church. Only the belltower remained above water, which is now a tourist attraction.

Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Vyatka Russia

Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Vyatka, circa 1910-17

Holy Trinity Cathedral Vyatka Russia

Holy Trinity Cathedral in Vyatka

Saint Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Rostov-on-Don Russia

St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Rostov-on-Don

Saint Alexander Nevsky Church Rostov-on-Don Russia

St Alexander Nevsky Church in Rostov-on-Don, circa 1900-10

Church of the Holy Mother of God Rostov-on-Don Russia

Church of the Holy Mother of God in Rostov-on-Don

Saint Nicholas Church Kalyazin Russia

St Nicholas Church in Kalyazin, 1903

The original Transfiguration Cathedral of Odessa was destroyed in 1936, but it was rebuilt around the turn of the millennium. The Christ the Savior Cathedral in Borki, near Kharkiv, was destroyed in 1943. The Church of Saint Mary of the Perpetual Assistance of Ternopil, Ukraine was demolished in 1954 to make way for a shopping mall. Saint Mary’s Church in Grodno, Belarus was turned into a warehouse during World War II and demolished in 1961.

Transfiguration Cathedral Odessa Ukraine

Transfiguration Cathedral in Odessa

Christ the Savior Cathedral Borki Ukraine

Christ the Savior Cathedral in Borki

Church of St Mary of the Perpetual Assistance Ternopil Ukraine

Church of St Mary of the Perpetual Assistance in Ternopil in 1913

St Mary's Church Grodno Belarus

St Mary’s Church in Grodno, circa 1915-18

Secular buildings survived the demolition craze, and indeed some were (officially) built in Soviet times.

The Palace of Farmers in Kazan was erected in the over-the-top neoclassical style favored by Joseph Stalin. It now houses the Ministry of Agriculture and Food of the Republic of Tatarstan. Next to it are three improbably elaborate Beaux-Arts “apartment buildings”.

The 500-room Tampa Bay Hotel, now a museum, was allegedly built by railroad magnate Henry B. Plant in the late 1800s, when the New York Waldorf, one of the largest hotels in the world, had just 450 rooms. The banks and trading houses of the Shanghai Bund were built by Europeans in the early twentieth century, who enjoyed legal and trading rights there under unequal treaties imposed on China by force. Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker built the government quarter of New Delhi in a mix of European and Mughal styles.

Palace of Farmers Kazan Russia

Palace of Farmers in Kazan

Tampa Bay Hotel Florida postcard

Tampa Bay Hotel in Florida

Bund Shanghai China

The Bund of Shanghai at night

Viceroy's House New Delhi India

New Delhi in the 1920s

Another odd sight the theory of Tartaria explains is that of sumptuous public buildings seemingly appearing out of nowhere in the wilderness. Lutyens’ Delhi is one example. The American West has more.

As the United States expanded westward, and the Frontier was tamed, ornamental city halls and state capitols were often the first buildings that appeared in the middle of planned future cities. The truth, according to believers, is that these palaces predate modern America and were the far-flung outposts of the Tartarian Empire.