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### Protecting the Art of Leningrad: The Survival of the Hermitage Museum during the Great Patriotic War

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

This Honor's thesis entitled

**"Protecting the Art of Leningrad: The Survival  
Hermitage Museum during the Great Patriotic War"**

written by

**Lane Bailey**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for completion of the  
Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers

Thesis Director

Second Reader

Third Reader

Director of the Carl Goodson Honors Program

April 15, 1997

OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

PROTECTING THE ART OF LENINGRAD: THE SURVIVAL OF THE  
HERMITAGE MUSEUM DURING THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

A THESIS SUBMITTED  
TO THE HONORS COUNCIL

CARL GOODSON HONORS PROGRAM

BY  
LANE BAILEY

ARKADELPHIA, ARKANSAS

APRIL 15, 1997

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Hermitage Museum as a Tour of World History	
Goals of the Study	
2. THE RISE OF ST. PETERSBURG AND THE GROWTH OF THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM.....	8
Peter the Great and His Desire for a New Capital	
Construction Under Empress Elizabeth	
Catherine the Great's Influence on Russian Culture	
Acquisitions of the Late Romanov Period	
Changes after the Bolshevik Revolution	
3. OPERATION BARBAROSSA.....	20
Hitler's Intentions	
Nature of the Attack	
Destruction in Russia	
Jodl's Defense of Artillery Attacks	
4. LIFE IN LENINGRAD DURING THE SIEGE.....	27
Sources	
Stalin's Attitude Toward Leningrad	
Death Toll	
5. THE EVACUATION AND DAMAGE SUSTAINED BY THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM.....	32

Director Orbeli's Instructions for the Evacuation	
Evacuation Process	
Damage to the Various Galleries	
6. LIFE IN THE HERMITAGE.....	40
Hardships	
Scholarly Works	
Lack of Sources After the First Winter	
7. WARTIME DIRECTIONS, ORDERS, AND POLICY INSTITUTED BY THE STAFF OF THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM.....	46
Orbeli's Initial Instructions	
The Armament of the Hermitage	
Staff Policy after the First Winter	
Preparations for the Second Winter	
Damage of the Carriage Shed	
Lack of Sources for Last Year of War	
Critique of Policies	
8. CONCLUSION.....	53
Soviet Scholarship	
The Restoration	
Closing Remarks	
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	57

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Hermitage Museum rises from the banks of the Neva River in the center of St. Petersburg, the former capital of Russia. The complex, existing of five buildings constructed over a period of about two hundred years, houses one of the greatest art collections in the world. Although the Hermitage is best known for its collection of great paintings, including works by Leonardo, Raphael, Rembrandt, and Picasso, the museum also holds great archeological exhibits. Scholars from throughout the world conduct research in the extensive Numismatics Department, the Gothic Library, and the Department of Far Eastern Culture.

The Winter Palace, the oldest building in the Hermitage complex, was designed by the architect Count Bartolomeo Rastrelli under the direction of Czarina Elizabeth in 1753. Elizabeth built the palace to serve as a home for members of the Romanov dynasty, Russia's ruling dynasty from 1613 to 1917. Elizabeth's successors, including among others Catherine the Great, Alexander I, and the last Romanov czar, Nicholas II, expanded the Winter Palace with new buildings and acquisitions of great art and archeological items. Subsequent rulers constructed the new buildings, called *hermitages*, for varying purposes. Each has a distinctive style of architecture representing the period in which they were designed. By the time the Romanov Dynasty ended in 1917, the complex included five

buildings: The Winter Palace, Small Hermitage, Old Hermitage, New Hermitage, and the Hermitage Theater.

A tour of the extensive complex might be comparable to reading a world history book. On the third floor of the Winter Palace is a collection of Mesopotamian artifacts. From there an interested student could descend to the basements of the Small Hermitage to view Etruscan sarcophagi and Greek statues. This section of the museum also contains an extensive collection of marble Roman works. In the long hallways above these basements are countless paintings of religious themes from the Middle Ages. The hallways lead to the second floor of the Old Hermitage, which houses some of the greatest works of the Renaissance period. Michelangelo's statue, *The Crouching Boy*, is located in a room that separates the Leonardo and Raphael collections.

After studying the Renaissance in the Old Hermitage, a student might walk into the connecting New Hermitage to observe works from the Northern Renaissance and the age of Rembrandt. These halls contain the largest collection of Rembrandt paintings outside of Amsterdam. Situated at the end of the Rembrandt halls are rooms containing works by Rubens and his student, Van Dyck. These works from Low Country artists are some of the finest in the Hermitage. Included among them are great portraits of sixteenth through eighteenth century European monarchs.

The tour should then lead to the third floor of the Winter Palace. The works of art previously mentioned were painstakingly, and expensively, acquired by Romanov rulers through envoys and at auctions over many generations. A new government acquired the paintings on the top floor of the palace by a more simple process: Vladimir Lenin ordered

that they be confiscated from their previous owners, usually pre-Revolutionary Russian aristocrats, and given to the people of the newly established Communist Russian state. Here, the tour of world history continues to the Romantic era; as viewed through the works of Delacroix and Géricault. This collection also houses some of the finest examples of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings in the world. The walls hold scores of works by Monet, Cezanne, Renoir, and Matisse. At any particular time, the museum displays up to thirty-five paintings and sculptures by Picasso.

A separate tour, one that would cover the history of the Romanov Dynasty, could be conducted without leaving the Winter Palace. As stated, the Winter Palace served as the home of the czars and czarinas from Elizabeth to Nicholas II. Here a student will find the various ball rooms, dining rooms, and living quarters of the royal family. Some rooms are set aside to honor particular historical events, such as the *Gallery of 1812* which commemorates Alexander I's victory over Napoleon. Unlike the galleries of the *hermitages* which only *display* collections of historical importance, the Winter Palace actually witnessed historical events as they took place. In the private quarters of the second floor, Catherine the Great carried on her correspondence with Voltaire and other philosophes. Various Czars signed monumental decrees affecting the Russian empire here, including Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Alexander II also survived an assassination attempt when a bomb exploded in the Winter Palace's dining room. Furthermore, the Romanov Dynasty ended here in part as a result of Empress Alexandra's friendship with the eccentric Rasputin, who was a frequent visitor to the palace.



When Nicholas II abdicated in early 1917, the Provisional Government made the Winter Palace its headquarters. The Provisional Government vainly attempted to hold the empire together until October of that year, when Lenin and his Bolsheviks ordered Red Guards to storm the palace. At that point, the Hermitage was no longer a private home for the ruling family, but became a public museum under Communist administration. Over the next few years the art collection grew tremendously by the acquisition of formerly privately owned works.

Throughout its history, the museum staff evacuated the collections of the Hermitage three times. The first occurred in 1812 as Napoleon was invading Russia and the second took place during World War I. In retrospect, neither of these evacuations proved to be necessary, the invading armies did not advance on St. Petersburg. The third evacuation, however, probably saved the collections from great damage. This evacuation took place in June and July, 1941. Nazi Germany invaded Russia in June of that year and its armies had surrounded St. Petersburg, then called Leningrad, by early September. Hitler's forces laid siege to Leningrad for almost nine hundred days. Throughout the blockade, German artillery units indiscriminately fired shells into the city; thirty of these shells hit the Hermitage museum.

The siege put the Hermitage and its staff under great strain. Although most of the great paintings were evacuated, many of the collections remained. Two freight trains carrying art items escaped Leningrad, a third was being loaded when the Germans cut off the last remaining rail line. The director of the museum, Joseph Orbeli, and his staff had to make numerous decisions on how to best preserve what remained in the Hermitage and

how to protect the buildings of the museum complex. To exacerbate the problems, more than two thousand Leningraders, mostly from the academic and cultural community, made their home in the basement of the Hermitage throughout the blockade.

Some of the orders handed down from Orbeli and his staff were minor, such as where to store certain art items or how best to clean antique furniture stained by water leaking from frozen pipes. Others, such as Orbeli's decision to prepare for the evacuation despite a lack of orders from Moscow, were more memorable.

The Hermitage ultimately survived the siege, but not without damage. The staff living in the basements of the museum were responsible for the protection of the buildings and their content. It might be argued that, in light of the terrible plight of the city under siege, the staff deserves nothing other than praise for its actions -- the Hermitage stands today, with great collections and worldwide reputation. On the other hand, much was lost. Precious items of artistic and historic significance are gone forever due to German artillery shelling. Moreover, the Hermitage buildings suffered from neglect during the siege. One could claim that some of the damage was preventable. These arguments might be resolved through a detailed analysis of the decisions made during the siege by Orbeli and his staff.

Many accounts of the Hermitage during World War II have been written; however, none of them deal with the decisions made by the director and his staff that helped the museum survive the siege. Sergei Varshavsky and Boris Rest's *Podvig Ermitazha* (translated, "Triumph of the Hermitage") is the best known, and often considered the definitive, account of the museum during the siege. This work provides an excellent overview of the event, but unfortunately it was written during the Soviet era. As a result, it

contains the emotionalism and biases typical of Soviet scholarship. While it is a helpful, professionally documented work, *Podvig Ermitazha* contains virtually no information regarding the decisions that helped the Hermitage survive the war. (The Soviets frowned upon any decision not made in Moscow; that is, by Stalin.) An English-language version of the book, entitled *The Hermitage During the War of 1941-1945*, is available, but it is no more helpful than the original. The translation is awkward, and the work does not provide any documentation.

The Hermitage itself commissioned a written account in 1995 on the fiftieth anniversary of the lifting of the siege entitled *Ermitaz Spaceny: 50 Let Pobyedi v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voina, 1941-1945* ("The Saved Hermitage: Fifty Years of Victory in the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945"). As it was published by the museum, the bibliography of *Ermitaz Spaceny* contains helpful information on what additional documents might be found in the museum archives and the Hermitage Library. Unfortunately, like *Podvig Ermitazha*, this work is more of an emotional account of heroic deeds than a collection and analysis of fact.

The most beneficial sources for an analysis of wartime decisions include Orbeli's written directives from throughout the siege. Photocopies of the originals may be found in the Hermitage Library. Some of these are typed, but many of the orders from the first days of the war are handwritten, indicating a sense of urgency in the museum. Orbeli, of course, was not the only person who issued orders during the war years. The staff of the Hermitage also sent out many directives. Furthermore, each department of the museum published its own standard operating procedures to be used throughout the blockade.

Copies of these documents may also be found in the Hermitage Library. Official government photographs provide an additional, and perhaps unusual, source that is extremely helpful. These photographs document most of the damage that occurred each time the Hermitage received damage from an artillery shell. Most of the photographs in the Hermitage Library files contain short captions detailing the date and location of the damage.<sup>1</sup>

The Hermitage Museum, one of the most extensive art museums in the world, suffered terribly during World War II (or as the Russians refer to it, The Great Patriotic War). Any analysis concerning how it survived the war must be preceded by a certain amount of introductory information. The collections located in the museum at the commencement of the German invasion underwent many changes as the history of Russia and the Soviet Union evolved. An understanding of these developments is necessary in order to comprehend why Russia was attacked and why Leningraders were so passionate about saving their city and their museum.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on sources, see annotated *Selected Bibliography*.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE FOUNDING OF ST. PETERSBURG AND THE GROWTH OF THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM

Prior to the reign of Peter the Great, St. Petersburg did not exist. Many historians and writers mistakenly refer to St. Petersburg as an ancient city. This is an inaccurate assessment. St. Petersburg is not even as old as Boston or New York, and these American cities are certainly not considered ancient. Peter the Great founded St. Petersburg in 1703 after taking from Sweden the territory upon which the city resides.

Early in his reign, after suffering military defeats in the south against Turkey, Peter the Great embarked on a campaign against Russia's northern neighbor, Sweden. This engagement, which came to be known as the Great Northern War, began after Peter's famous *embassy* to Europe. His tour of the West, the first by a reigning Russian czar, was the result of Peter's fascination with European institutions, culture, and technology. Peter the Great wanted Russia to join European affairs in politics and trade, and to do this he had to provide for landlocked Russia a sea port. A sea port in turn called for a navy. Prior to this period, Russia's navy consisted only of small vessels used for patrolling the many rivers that flow through Russia's heartland: the Dneiper, the Don, the Volga, and their tributaries. These waterways, which originate in northern Russia and flow south to either the Black or Caspian Seas, were the primary means of transporting goods for Russia's trade-based economy.

Peter the Great knew that in order for Russia to join the West, he must open these trade routes to the rest of Europe. His first attempt to turn Russia into a sea power, the attack on the Turkish Black Sea port of Azov, failed. Peter then turned to a body of water on Russia's northern boundary, the Baltic Sea, to meet his requirements. He used as a pretext for war against Sweden an incident at a banquet held by the King of Sweden in Peter's honor at which Peter was insulted. The war lasted for twenty-five years.

Early Russian victories in the war brought Peter the Great a small stretch of land on the Gulf of Finland, which is connected to the Baltic Sea. This territory, situated on the frigid Neva River between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland, was little more than forest and marsh land at the time of Peter's arrival. According to legend, while making his first tour of the area in 1703, Peter stood on the banks of the Neva River and drew a cross in the dirt with his boot. He then declared that this is where his new capital would be established. He immediately began sending government serfs to build canals and create islands upon which the city would be built, in the fashion of Italy's Venice, with which Peter became intrigued during his tour of Europe.

The Peter-Paul Fortress, built to protect the new city, and the Admiralty, which served as a naval port, were the first buildings constructed under Peter's guidance. Although Peter never saw the Winter Palace, it is his legacy under which future czars and czarinas would build the complex and its great art treasures. While Catherine the Great is credited with initiating the Hermitage collections, Peter's interest in Western art must be considered. Despite several examples to the contrary, including an episode in England



where Peter used his host's paintings and portraits for target practice, Peter was not as unresponsive to the arts as one might imagine.<sup>1</sup>

While in Paris, the Czar visited the Mint and the Gobelins Manufactory and proudly displayed some tapestries that Louis XV presented to him. When designing gardens for Peterhof, his new Palace outside St. Petersburg, he filled it with statues sent from Rome. He also sent envoys to the English dealers Evan and Elsen to buy 119 pictures and to Brussels and Antwerp to purchase 117 paintings.<sup>2</sup> The purchases included works by such artists as Rubens, Van Dyke, Rembrandt, and Bruegel. Peter followed other European monarchs with his interest in portraits and compositions illustrating the achievements of his own career. For Russia, this all signaled a revolutionary attitude toward the arts. For the first time, a Russian ruler appeared interested in art from beyond Russia's borders.

Prior to this period, the only art welcomed in Russia was of a religious nature. Russian painters seldom ventured far from the flat, unfeeling icons of saints and Biblical characters so common in Russia's Orthodox artistic history. For centuries, Russians had refused to celebrate secular art.

Peter the Great had many reasons to show interest in secular art. As mentioned, he welcomed illustrations of his own personal achievements, for he knew his reputation would be advanced if famous painters recorded these actions. He also simply appreciated some works for their aesthetic qualities. Peter had grown tired of icons, which differed in subject matter but not in style. The seascapes of Dutch artists aroused the Czar's interest in such

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<sup>1</sup> Robert K. Massie, Peter the Great: His Life and World (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 218.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Descargues, The Hermitage Museum Leningrad (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1961), 14.

subjects as shipbuilding. Marble statues from Rome piqued his interest in Greco-Roman history. When Peter sent his envoys to Europe to buy paintings, he also ordered them to bring back European artists with them. He wanted to fully introduce Russia to these previously unseen styles. In addition to bringing back artists, the envoys were ordered to return with Italian and French architects, sculptors, and engravers. Peter the Great was not only determined to bring European art to Russia, he intended to make Russia itself a European country.

Peter's *westernization* of Russia began, appropriately, in St. Petersburg. French and Italian architects designed the buildings of his new city in the Baroque style then popular in western Europe. To ensure the continuation of his westernizing policies, Peter demanded that Russian artists and artisans in St. Petersburg be trained by the Europeans whom he had brought into his realm.

In the fashion of Western monarchs, Peter the Great began collections of Russian antiquities. After he ordered that all ancient objects found in the ground be carefully preserved, treasures found in Siberian tombs began to accumulate in St. Petersburg. These artifacts eventually found their way to the Hermitage. Peter's appreciation for antiquities and his orders for their preservation also led to one of the Hermitage's greatest treasures, the Scythian Gold exhibit. Objects belonging to the Scythian civilization of sixth century BC, including one of the largest collections of ancient gold artifacts in the world, are not only appreciated for their aesthetic qualities, but are of great archeological importance. This policy of collecting artifacts from excavations throughout Russia continued under Catherine the Great.



Although Czar Peter did not establish the Hermitage, he did found two museums in St. Petersburg. Peter ordered the Admiralty to build a model of every ship in the Russian navy. This led to the opening of the Naval Museum in 1709. He also founded the Museum of Natural History, or *Kunstkamera*, which exhibited minerals, sea shells, a public library, and an observatory. To encourage public visitation to these museums, the institutions offered each visitor a snack and a glass of vodka.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to Peter the Great's reign, the Russian culture scarcely recognized any artistic styles from foreign lands. As the first reigning Russian monarch to travel to Europe, Peter witnessed technological advances, art forms, and architectural styles previously unseen in Russia. Russian art form had only been a continuation of the unimaginative Byzantine style of religious icons. Peter brought to Russia works of the great Western artists. The structures of his new capital city, a city whose existence was a result of Peter's desire to join Europe, were designed by architects from Italy and France. Although Peter did not witness the construction of the Winter Palace and its adjoining *hermitages*, the Czar prepared Russia for the phenomenal growth in the appreciation of the arts witnessed by future Russian generations. His successors continued the practice.

When Peter the Great died in 1725, Russia dissolved into its predictable disorder and conflicts over succession. Within sixteen years Russia had four rulers: Catherine I, Peter II, Anna I, and Ivan VI. These emperors and empresses did little to advance Peter the Great's westernizing policies. Not until Elizabeth, Peter the Great's daughter, came to the throne did the arts in Russia advance.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

Elizabeth ordered the construction of the Winter Palace, which ultimately served as a type of anchor building for the entire Hermitage Museum. For the design, Empress Elizabeth called upon the Italian architect Count Bartolomeo Rastrelli. Rastrelli was the son of a sculptor who had immigrated to Russia during Peter the Great's reign. The Winter Palace, which took eight years to build, represented the baroque style then popular in Europe. The exterior was painted green with white columns and window panes and gold leafing. The interior held 1,050 rooms, 1,786 windows, and 117 staircases.<sup>4</sup> Sitting on the southern bank of the Neva River beside the Admiralty in the center of St. Petersburg, the Winter Palace became the primary home of future Romanov czars and czarinas.

Although Empress Elizabeth is credited with constructing the first building of the Hermitage complex, historians acknowledge another czarina as the most important patron of the arts in Russia. Catherine the Great, who succeeded Elizabeth after the brief but disastrous reign of Peter III, contributed more art to the Hermitage's collection than any other ruler. Catherine viewed herself as a faithful successor to Peter the Great. She tried to emulate him in many respects. When she commissioned the sculptor Falconet to design a statue in honor of Peter, she inscribed the words "Petro primo, Catherina secunda," on the pedestal. She followed his example in many ways. The rulers shared an enthusiasm for guiding Russia and westernizing the backward country.

Historians often refer to Catherine the Great as the *enlightened sovereign*. Catherine's main preoccupation centered on establishing a reputation as a liberal-minded

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 18.

and enlightened empress. While this concern did not reach the plight of Russia's peasants, it did affect the culture of the government administration and the nobility to an extent previously unseen in Russia. Her literary relationship with many of Europe's great writers and artists provides ample evidence of her enlightened character. She regularly corresponded with Rousseau, Diderot, and particularly, Voltaire. An observer once noted:

The Empress has a great love of reading and the greater part of her time since her marriage has been spent devouring those modern French and English authors who have written the most influential works on ethics, the natural sciences and religion. It is enough for a book to be condemned in France for her to give it her full approbation. She is never without the works of Voltaire...of Helvetius, the writings of Encyclopaedists and of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>5</sup>

Nothing in Catherine's upbringing signaled the love for art which she later displayed. The best explanation for her passion for the arts appears to stem from her interest in literature. Although her acquisitions prove that she appreciated fine art, many scholars believe that her main reason for collecting was to show that she was an enlightened empress.

Catherine expanded the Hermitage to a greater extent than any other Russian sovereign. Under her guidance, three new buildings were added to the Hermitage: the Small Hermitage, the New Hermitage, and the Hermitage Theater, often called Catherine the Great's Theater. In the fashion of Peter the Great, Catherine sent envoys throughout Europe to purchase art. Some of the greatest works in the museum's collection were acquired during her reign.

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<sup>5</sup> The Chevalier d'Eon; quoted in Descargues, 20.

One of Catherine's greatest coups was her decision to employ the great French philosophe, Denis Diderot, as one of her envoys. At this time (c. 1765), Diderot found himself short of funds and considered selling the library he had compiled for his work on the *Encyclopaedia*. Catherine interfered and offered to serve as Diderot's patron. This move brought immense respect for Catherine the Great from the Philosophes, who in turn became her best supplier of paintings.<sup>6</sup>

Catherine's envoys, including Diderot, were responsible for acquiring several of the Hermitage's Rembrandts, including the magnificent *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Many of the paintings acquired during Catherine's reign, including works by the Old Masters as well as contemporary Dutch art, arrived at the Hermitage in small groups of two or three paintings each. Her greatest procurement, however, included the purchase, for 180,000 rubles, of the collection of Count de Brühl of Poland. Before his death in 1769, Brühl had amassed one of the best private collections in Europe. The portion of the Brühl collection acquired by Catherine included several Rembrandts and five Rubens, including portraits of the King and Queen of Spain and the beautiful *Perseus and Andromeda*. Two Teniers, including *The Country Doctor* and *The Amorous Peasant*, also arrived as part of this collection.<sup>7</sup>

By the time Catherine the Great died in 1796, the Hermitage collection was respected throughout the world. Unfortunately, Catherine did not care to share her acquisitions with her subjects. Upon opening the crates full of art that arrived at the Winter

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<sup>6</sup> Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 336.

<sup>7</sup> Descargues, 28.

Palace after one large purchase, Catherine said “Only the mice and I can admire all this.”<sup>8</sup> The Czarina’s purchases, however, did not simply represent a practice in self-indulgence. Catherine recognized how artistic possessions may symbolize the authority of the crown. She was the *autocrat of all Russians*; therefore, she insisted on living at a level of splendor above that which any of her subjects lived.

Catherine’s successors continued to collect art for the Hermitage, though to a lesser degree. Her estranged son, Paul I (r. 1796-1801), did not reign long enough to make an important impact on the Hermitage. In any case, he allowed the works that he did acquire to accumulate without recording their origin, causing confusion and disorder for Hermitage historians. Alexander I (r. 1801-1825), who lived during the rapid change in style that occurred during the French Revolutionary period, brought modern works to the museum. He is responsible for acquiring the only work by Jacques-Louis David in the Hermitage. Alexander I also greatly contributed to the collection by purchasing many paintings that Napoleon had stolen from German owners, including Rembrandt’s *Descent from the Cross*.<sup>9</sup> He was able to do this by defeating Napoleon and befriending Josephine Bonaparte upon his triumphant march on Paris.

Nicholas I (r. 1825-1855), although a conservative and reactionary monarch, was the first to turn the Hermitage to the public. In 1837, the Winter Palace was gutted by a fire. All of the art was evacuated, but the interior rooms had to be rebuilt. After twelve years of restoring the Winter Palace to its original appearance, Nicholas decided to transform the complex into a public museum. Nicholas held an elaborate opening

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine the Great; quoted in Descargues, 29.

<sup>9</sup> Descargues, 56.

ceremony on February 5, 1853. Entrance into the Hermitage Museum, however, continued to be strictly regulated. In addition to opening the museum to the public, Nicholas added to the art collection when, after observing that the museum held an abundance of Dutch and Flemish works, he decided to contribute to the Spanish and Italian collections. During this period the Hermitage obtained several works by Goya, Ribera, and de Torres.<sup>10</sup>

Under Alexander II (r. 1855-1881), the Hermitage Museum became an independent government administration. During his reign, and those of Alexander III (r. 1881-1894) and Nicholas II (r. 1894-1917), the Czars had little involvement with the organization and acquisitions of the Hermitage. While the collection grew little during the late Romanov era, it was an important period for art historians. The curators used this time to organize and catalogue the collection. For the first time, the paintings were no longer arranged "for visual pleasure but in accordance with a thorough knowledge of the works themselves."<sup>11</sup> The collection did not grow again in significant numbers until the end of Nicholas II's reign.

The fall of the Romanov Dynasty in 1917 led to the greatest changes for the Hermitage since the reign of Catherine the Great. Changes took place not only in the inventory of art works, but also in the museum's administration. Until this time, the Hermitage was only open to the upper classes and friends of the Czar. Vladimir Lenin, in his desire to eradicate class differences, changed this considerably. Late in the evening of October 25, 1917, Lenin gave the order for his Bolshevik troops to attack the Winter

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 64.



Palace, where the Provisional Government had taken residence. They met resistance only from young students of local military schools and from a women's battalion. Before dawn, the Red Guards were no longer attacking the building; they were guarding it. Lenin ordered his troops to remain at the Hermitage in order to protect the treasures from any looting which might result from the upheavals in Russia. Almost immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution, the Hermitage collection was augmented by formerly private art treasures taken from throughout Russia.

Between 1910 and 1932 the number of paintings in the Hermitage doubled.<sup>12</sup> Instead of sending envoys to Europe to purchase art, the Soviet government simply issued orders for all private collections to be confiscated. The finer works in these collections ended up in the Hermitage. French Impressionist and Post Impressionist works comprised the greatest part of these new acquisitions. Many great works by Matisse, Renoir, Picasso, Monet, and Cezanne were added to the Hermitage collection. The Impressionist and Post Impressionist collection of the Hermitage grew further due to a reorganization of Russian museum stocks that took place between 1923 and 1930. The new government redistributed many works "in order to arrange exhibitions on a truly scholarly basis and to fill the lacunae in the collections of each."<sup>13</sup> For example, the Hermitage possessed few works by late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western European artists, while the various museums of Moscow had few works by the Old Masters. Therefore, the Hermitage sent 460 works to Moscow and received numerous Impressionist and Post

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>13</sup> Marina Bessonova; in Introduction to Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: The Hermitage, Leningrad, the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington (New York: Wing Books, 1986), 21.

Impressionist paintings.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the revolution that brought many difficult changes to Russia actually proved extremely beneficial to the Hermitage Museum. Unfortunately, the favorable attitude the Soviet government showed toward museums was almost lost after the death of Lenin.

When Joseph Stalin succeeded Lenin, the collection faced almost as much danger as a war might bring. Stalin viewed the collections as national assets. He did not appreciate the great works for their beauty nor for their historical significance. When, in the early 1930s, the Soviet Union faced severe economic problems, Stalin decided to sell many paintings on the world market. The Hermitage lost several important works by Titian, Watteau, and Rembrandt.<sup>15</sup> Stalin also sold large sections of the Scythian Gold collection. Fortunately, the directors of the Hermitage persuaded Stalin to reverse his policies. By the time World War II approached, the museum still held one of the greatest collections in the world.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Several of these works, including Titian's *The Toilet of Venus* and Rembrandt's *A Polish Prince*, were bought by Andrew Mellon, the American financier who also served as Secretary of the Treasury, and U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain. Mellon later offered his entire art collection, an endowment fund, and a building in order to establish the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.



## CHAPTER 3

### OPERATION BARBAROSSA

The summer solstice falls on June 21. On that day in Leningrad, a city situated fewer than three hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle, the sun does not set at all. The summer solstice of 1941 fell on a Saturday. On that day Joseph Orbeli, the director of the Hermitage Museum, remained at his desk until late in the evening dealing with many problems. The Hermitage had established the new *Department of Russian Culture* less than a month before, and it required guidance from the director in its early stages. Packing cases with at least 250,000 exhibits for the new department crowded the museum storage areas and blocked emergency exits. Several archeological expeditions were preparing for summer excavations at sites throughout the Soviet Union. A painters' crew had put up scaffolding to prepare for work on the exterior of the Winter Palace. Moreover, June was the busiest time of year for the Hermitage.<sup>1</sup>

A copy of *Leningradskaya Pravda*, the city's official newspaper sat on Orbeli's desk. One headline stated "Tamerlane and the Timurids at the Hermitage."<sup>2</sup> The article described two halls of the Hermitage devoted to artifacts recently uncovered from the Mongol era of Russia's history. Tamerlane (1336-1405), whose name is a European corruption of Timur Lang ("Timure the Lame"), was a Mongol conqueror who established

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison E. Salisbury, The Nine Hundred Days: The Siege of Leningrad (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

an empire stretching from India to the Mediterranean Sea, including much of southern Russia. Born in present-day Uzbekistan, Tamerlane restored the empire of Genghis Khan, whom he falsely claimed as his ancestor. When he died in 1405 his followers buried him in his capital city Samarqand, in present-day Kazakhstan.

Interest in Tamerlane was experiencing a revival in Leningrad in late June, 1941. A Soviet archeological expedition arrived in Samarqand that month to examine *Gur Emir*, Tamerlane's mausoleum. Exhibits taken from the site were to be shown at the Hermitage in the fall. *Leningradskaya Pravda* printed dispatches from the expedition almost daily. On Wednesday, June 18, the Tass correspondent described the imminent opening of Tamerlane's sarcophagus: "Popular legend, persisting to this day, holds that under this stone lies the source of terrible war." Harrison Salisbury, a United Press correspondent in Leningrad, reported that many Leningraders laughed at the story -- that a war could begin by moving an ancient stone.<sup>3</sup> The archeologists opened the coffin on Friday.<sup>4</sup>

On Sunday morning, June 22, 1941, the guards and guides of the Hermitage began to arrive at the employees' entrance, across the Palace Square from the General Staff building. The weather bureau had predicted a fair, bright day. As the museum workers began to spread throughout the galleries, an air raid siren sounded.<sup>5</sup> The staff issued helmets, gas masks, and first-aid kits to the workers, and told them to wait. It turned out to be a practice drill ordered by the Leningrad Antiaircraft Defense Command. The

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>4</sup> Examination of the skeleton showed that one leg was shorter than the other, verifying the tradition that Tamerlane was lame.

<sup>5</sup> Salisbury, 85.

commander of local defenses, Colonel Y. S. Lagutkin, had called the drill without knowing that a German attack was already underway.<sup>6</sup>

Rumors of an imminent war with Germany circulated throughout Russia during the early summer. Joseph Stalin, however, refused to believe that Hitler would attack. He forbade any preparations for war despite the many indications that the Nazis were mobilizing on Russia's borders. In this period of fear when many Russians still remembered Stalin's purges of the 1930s, few were willing to discuss openly the possibility of war. As a result, Russia was terribly unprepared for the upcoming German attack.

In the spring of 1941, German military leaders had every reason to feel optimistic about *Operation Barbarossa*, the code name for the attack on the Soviet Union. The Wehrmacht had recently completed remarkably successful operations in Yugoslavia and Greece, reaching all objectives in both campaigns weeks ahead of schedule. Nazi generals believed their blitzkrieg tactics, which had already overwhelmed most of western Europe, would be equally effective against the broad, deep Russian frontier.

Nazi generals began planning the attack in December 1940. With the war against England proceeding poorly, Hitler decided that "hegemony over Europe will be decided in battle against Russia."<sup>7</sup> Careful to avoid the mistakes of Napoleon, Hitler initially intended to forego an attack on Moscow and, instead, to concentrate his forces against Leningrad and Stalingrad. These cities, Hitler concluded, were the "breeding grounds" of Bolshevism, the primary aim of the attack.<sup>8</sup> The Nazis viewed the ideals of communism as

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf Hitler, quoted in John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 746.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

their greatest threat and planned to nullify the danger by destroying Russia. Hitler announced in a March 1941 speech to his generals that,

The war against Russia will be such that it cannot be conducted in a knightly fashion. This struggle is one of ideologies and racial differences and will have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful and unrelenting harshness.<sup>9</sup>

In light of such statements it appeared that little would remain of Russia after a German attack.

The battle plan called for a three pronged attack: The North Army Group would drive through the Baltic States and capture Leningrad; the Central Group would advance toward Moscow; and the South Army Group had orders to crush Kiev and occupy the industrial city of Stalingrad. Hitler and his generals expected a short, successful operation despite the ubiquitous memory of Napoleon's similar campaign 130 years earlier.

The initial victories for the Germans were staggering. Nazi forces took hundreds of thousands of prisoners and seized bridges intact. According to one of Hitler's biographers, "There seemed to be no organized enemy resistance as German tanks burst through Soviet lines and roamed at will."<sup>10</sup> Four SS units of 3000 men each followed the advancing troops with orders to execute all Jews, gypsies, "Asiatic inferiors," and "useless eaters."<sup>11</sup> In light of the overwhelming victories and mass surrenders, Hitler began to declare victory and even invited Mussolini to visit the newly "conquered" territory.

Within weeks of the June 22 commencement of operations against Russia, however, the offensive slowed against Red Army resistance. Initial confusion among

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<sup>9</sup> Adolf Hitler; quoted in William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 830.

<sup>10</sup> Toland, 774.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 775.

Soviet leadership gave way to an organized defense of Russian territory. Despite their initial staggering victories, particularly in the Baltic states and the Ukraine, which had led Hitler and his generals to prematurely declare the defeat of the Soviet Union, Nazi forces moved into a defensive posture. Rather than drive through Russian population centers, as they did early in the war at Kiev, the Wehrmacht began to lay siege to several Russian cities. This tactic, however, proved as disastrous to the cities as a direct attack might have been. Instead of being immediately conquered and repressed, the urban areas under siege faced starvation and indiscriminate artillery bombardment. Russia's former capital and the home of the Hermitage museum, Leningrad, became one of the primary targets.

German troops encircled Leningrad in late August 1941. Contemporary military strategists and historians assign more tactical importance to the siege of Stalingrad than to the blockade of Leningrad. Many historians consider the battle for the industrial city of Stalingrad the turning point of the war on Germany's eastern front. Others, however, are more familiar with accounts of the nine hundred day siege on Leningrad.

Before the first Wehrmacht divisions deployed eastward from Germany the fate of the Soviet Union seemed grave enough. But as fighting continued, Hitler's orders became increasingly severe. On September 29, 1941, the Chief of the Naval Staff reported to his officers that,

*The Fuhrer has decided to erase from the face of the earth St. Petersburg.*<sup>12</sup> The existence of this large city will have no further interest after Soviet Russia is destroyed...

It is proposed to approach near to the city and to destroy it with the aid of an artillery barrage from weapons of different calibers [sic] and with long air attacks...

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<sup>12</sup> Emphasis in the original.

The problem of the life of the population and the provisioning of them is a problem which cannot and must not be decided by us.

In this war...we are not interested in preserving even a part of the population of this large city.<sup>13</sup>

Many historians consider the siege on Leningrad the longest, most destructive ever endured by a modern city. More than one million civilians died during the 880 days of blockade. German artillery destroyed 20,627 houses and 8,788 other buildings.<sup>14</sup> Damage to institutions and industrial equipment reached almost two billion rubles.<sup>15</sup> In a 1947 speech to the Leningrad City Soviet Deputies, Orbeli announced that he needed more than nine million rubles for renovation of the Hermitage.<sup>16</sup>

At Nuremberg, Generaloberst Alfred Jodl, Chief of the German Armed Forces Operation Staff, attempted to defend German action. He testified to the Tribunal that Nazi artillery attacks followed "a carefully worked-out system, according to which only key plants in Leningrad were marked as necessary targets..."<sup>17</sup> He claimed that ammunition for the heavy artillery was so scarce that "one had to be extremely economical in its use."<sup>18</sup> A German artilleryman contradicted Jodl's testimony in a deposition:

For the bombardment of Leningrad, there was in the batteries a special stock of munitions supplied over and above the limit to an unlimited amounts...

All the guncrews know that the bombardments of Leningrad were aimed at ruining the town and annihilating its civilian population. They therefore regarded with irony the bulletins of the German Supreme Command which spoke of shelling the 'military objectives' of Leningrad.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal, I, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Nuremberg, VIII, 114.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Orbeli, Documents and Materials (Armenia, S.S.R.: Soviet Ministry, 1980), 125.

<sup>17</sup> Generaloberst Alfred Jodl; quoted in Nuremberg, XV, 413.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Sergeant Fritz Kopke; quoted in Nuremberg, VIII, 115.



“Of course,” Jodl responded, “every artilleryman knows that through dispersion the shots can fall elsewhere.”<sup>20</sup>

Considering Hitler’s intent of erasing Leningrad “from the face of the earth,” Jodl’s defense seems futile. Hitler wanted to destroy the Soviet Union’s government and population centers. Feeding Germans, Hitler believed, was the only purpose of Russian territory. By the end of the war, Nazi forces destroyed or severely damaged 1,710 cities, seventy thousand villages, and six million buildings. They also made homeless about 25,000,000 Russians.<sup>21</sup> Among cultural targets, the Germans destroyed 1,907 Christian churches, 532 synagogues, and 427 museums.<sup>22</sup>

Yet these figures do not adequately reveal the human aspects of the war. All of Russia suffered terribly, but the residents of Leningrad endured perhaps the most difficult fate. In addition to facing continuous military bombardment, the city also experienced all of the hardships that are associated with a blockade: lack of food, medical supplies, and communication with the rest of the country. In order to fully understand the survival of the Hermitage Museum, information concerning the fate of its host city and its residents is necessary.

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<sup>20</sup> Jodl, 414.

<sup>21</sup> Nuremberg, I, 58 [from the “Indictment of Major War Criminals” submitted to the Tribunal by the prosecution on June 4, 1946].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

## CHAPTER 4

### LIFE IN LENINGRAD DURING THE SIEGE<sup>1</sup>

Although it would be inaccurate to claim that the Soviet leadership in Moscow intentionally allowed Leningrad to suffer such consequences at the hands of the Germans, some critics contend that Moscow cared little for Russia's former capital. Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin certainly showed no particular sympathy for the city. In one of the many ironic passages of the early Soviet period, the Communists turned their backs on Leningrad immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution. In the era of the birth of Soviet Communism, Leningrad was the home of many revolutionary movements. The city served as the intellectual and cultural center of Russia. Therefore, Lenin moved the capital to Moscow, fearing that if one successful revolution could originate in Leningrad (then known as Petrograd) then another, more successful movement might occur.

An atmosphere of severe prejudice toward Leningrad developed shortly after the Russian civil war among the Soviet leadership in Moscow. In the years following the Revolution the two cities struggled to be the preeminent city in Russia. On one hand, Moscow was traditionally an *old Russia* city. It contained Russia's most conservative

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<sup>1</sup> More information on this subject may be found in A.V. Karasev's Leningrad in the Period of Blockade, Dmitri Pavlov's Leningrad in Blockade, and Harrison Salisbury's The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad (see Bibliography for publishers and dates). Because the events and anecdotes recorded in this chapter may be found in any two or more of these works, only specific dates and figures will be cited. This chapter is not intended to be an in-depth study of the city under siege. The intent is to provide a summary of life in besieged Leningrad prior to specifically discussing the Hermitage during the war years.



elements: fear of the West and apprehension toward any change. Leningrad, however, was heavily foreign. Its inhabitants embraced Western styles, languages, and writing -- Western culture in general. Leningrad served as the home of Soviet Russia's artistic, scientific, and intellectual classes. Lenin was satisfied with the one successful revolution that originated in Petrograd; he did not want another.

Stalin, Lenin's successor, in particular held an inherent distrust for the city. The dictator feared all things Western. Therefore, he treated Leningrad as an insurgent territory. After Lenin's death, the city was administered by the popular Sergei Kirov. Kirov embraced Communism and was loyal to the regime in Moscow, but he treated Leningrad well and received the respect of the city's population. On December 1, 1934, probably on orders from Stalin, a young man, Leonid V. Nikolayev, walked into Kirov's office and assassinated him. Following the killing, which took place at the height of Great Purges, Stalin unleashed a wave of terror on Leningrad. On the same day as the assassination, Stalin gave his secret police broad powers of arrest and execution. All of Russia suffered during the period of purges, which lasted until World War Two, but Leningrad suffered the most. Thousands were arrested and either shot or sent to concentration camps. The purges especially focused on young people, intellectuals, or anyone who might have indicated in the past any lack of sympathy for the Soviet regime.<sup>2</sup>

Andrei Zhdanov, an ambitious Soviet bureaucrat, replaced Kirov. Although Zhdanov never achieved the popularity of Kirov he still remained mayor throughout World War II. In the early days of the war, neither Zhdanov nor any of Leningrad's military or

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<sup>2</sup> Salisbury, 127.

civilian leadership could receive guidance from Moscow. It seemed as if Moscow could not decide what to do with Leningrad. Stalin remained disastrously indecisive during that period. His advisors in the Kremlin, moreover, cared more about their own ambitions than they did for any city or battle. Some viewed the destruction of Leningrad as a welcome occurrence.

Leningrad's residents, particularly the intellectuals, were faced with a dilemma. They shared no great love for Stalin nor his regime. His defeat, however, would only mean rule by Hitler; not a viable alternative. Nonetheless, they decided to defend the city; not for the Soviet Union, but for themselves. Leningrad was *their* city, not Stalin's. Although the Germans never intended to enter the city [see Chapter 3], the residents had no way of knowing this. They prepared to defend Leningrad by block-to-block fighting if necessary.

City military leaders established a special staff for internal defense and divided Leningrad into six sectors for block-by-block defense. Soldiers erected barricades throughout the city. Groups of workers set up pill boxes and machine gun nests in strategic locations. As German troops closed in on Leningrad, young men walked through the city with pails of white paint and began to paint over street signs and house numbers. It was hoped that this would cause German troops to become lost among the intricate road and canal networks of Leningrad. Russia's Baltic Fleet remained in place on the Neva River with orders to prevent an amphibious landing from the Gulf of Finland.

As Nazi forces surrounded the city in late August, 1941, the food supply in Leningrad began to run low. To make matters worse, the city's food warehouses were the

first buildings destroyed by German artillery fire. This occurred as winter approached. An attempt to feed the city by convoying food across the frozen Lake Ladoga failed due to German bombers and breaking ice. The daily food ration for residents was placed at four grams of bread per person, per day. People began to eat dogs and cats. Salisbury wrote that the children of Leningrad "grew up not knowing what dogs and cats were."<sup>3</sup> A black market for bread flourished -- people traded pianos for a loaf of bread. Children suffered the most. Many were killed for their ration cards and others who disappeared were rumored to be victims of cannibalism. In January, 1942, the worst winter of the siege, Nikolai Markevich, a correspondent for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, wrote the following passage in his diary:

The city is dead. There is no electricity. Warm rooms are most rare. No streetcars. No water. Almost the only kind of transport is sleds...carrying corpses in plain coffins, covered with rags or half clothed...Daily six to eight thousand die...The city is dying as it has lived for the last half-year -- clenching its teeth.<sup>4</sup>

The death toll has, for many years, been difficult to establish accurately. The Soviet leadership deliberately understated the military and civilian death toll for security reasons. Had the general population of the USSR known the actual numbers, Stalin feared the government would face political repercussions. Moreover, any realistic account of Russia's wartime losses would have revealed the true weakness of the Soviet Union as a political, economic, and military power during the politically turbulent era following World War II.

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<sup>3</sup> Salisbury, 477.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Markevich; quoted in Salisbury, 446.

It is known that Leningrad had a population of 2,500,000 at the start of the blockade. By the time German troops withdrew, the figure stood at 600,000. These numbers do not actually denote, as it would seem, that 1,900,000 died in Leningrad; it must be remembered that many residents were either evacuated or entered military service. The most accurate surveys indicate that 800,000 to 1,000,000 died of starvation, and an overall total of 1,300,000 to 1,500,000 civilian and military deaths occurred in Leningrad during the war years.<sup>5</sup> Regardless of the actual figures, which will probably never be known with all certainty, the losses were devastating. As Salisbury wrote:

More people had died in the Leningrad blockade than had ever died in a modern city -- anywhere -- anytime: more than ten times the number who died in Hiroshima [129,558 killed, injured, or missing; 176,987 homeless].<sup>6</sup>

The liberation of Leningrad remained a low priority among the Soviet leadership throughout the war. The primary concerns of the Red Army included preventing Nazi forces from reaching Moscow and saving Stalingrad from imminent attack. Unlike Stalingrad, there was no great *Battle of Leningrad*: German losses in central and southern Russia led to the liberation of Leningrad. As Hitler's troops in other campaigns faced defeat, Berlin lost interest in the northern city, as Moscow had done early in the war. Eventually, Russia's broad, deep frontier and its cold winters led Hitler to face the same fate as Napoleon had in the previous century.

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<sup>5</sup> Salisbury, 516.

\* For twenty years the Soviet government insisted that the total loss of life in Leningrad stood at 632,253 (Salisbury, 517).

<sup>6</sup> Salisbury, 513. The figures from Hiroshima are from "Hiroshima," Microsoft ® Encarta. Copyright (c) 1993 Microsoft Corporation. Copyright (c) 1993 Funk and Wagnall's Corporation.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE EVACUATION AND DAMAGE SUSTAINED BY THE HERMITAGE

By the time World War II approached, the Hermitage was well established as a public museum. The acquisitions made during the early Soviet period -- those works which formerly belonged to private collections -- had substantially increased the museum's holdings. In 1941, the Office of the History of Russian Culture reported that the collection held 2,500,000 exhibits. This number included 15,000 paintings, 12,000 sculptures, and 60,000 drawings. The museum also housed more than 600,000 archeological monuments and over one million coins and medals.<sup>1</sup>

If Hitler was not interested in preserving the residents of Leningrad, he certainly was not concerned with the city's cultural sites. Nazi forces invaded Russia on Sunday, June 22. The Hermitage traditionally closed each Monday. Hermitage Director Joseph Orbeli canceled the next "free day" in a directive to all museum employees on the first day of the attack.<sup>2</sup> He also ordered the immediate evacuation of all art objects. On Sunday, Orbeli attempted to telephone the State Committee on Arts in Moscow six times in two hours, trying to get instructions concerning an evacuation.<sup>3</sup> The director decided to

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Rest and Sergei Varshavsky, *Ticket to All Eternity: An Account of the Hermitage* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1981), 479.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Orbeli, Director of the State Hermitage, "Instructions, 22 June 1941" (Leningrad: The State Hermitage, 1941), handwritten directive.

<sup>3</sup> Salisbury, 129.

proceed with the evacuation despite a lack of orders. Hermitage employees, with help from soldiers and sailors, began packing works of art less than twenty-four hours after Operation Barbarossa began. Immediately, the most precious treasures -- the Leonardos, Raphaels, Rembrandts, and Rubenses -- were taken from the walls and carried down to the stone vaults in the cellars. Using packing materials stockpiled by Orbeli during the months preceding the attack, museum workers stripped the galleries of 500,000 exhibits within ten days.<sup>4</sup> This incident has become folklore in Leningrad. Stalin had explicitly ordered Orbeli *not* to stockpile packing materials or make any other preparations for war. This, Stalin considered, signified a defeatist attitude and unfaithfulness in the Soviet regime. When Moscow gave the evacuation order and discovered Orbeli's stockpiles, the director was not reprimanded for disobeying the Stalin's orders.

The war-time needs of Leningrad made all of Orbeli's preparations more difficult. He often received orders to provide personnel and supplies for the defense effort on the outskirts of Leningrad. The City Soviet sent him one telegram stating:

We ask you to mobilize from those physically able to engage in defense work seventy-five men. All those mobilized must be provided with shovels, picks, crowbars, saws and axes. Each must carry five days' food supplies, and a cup, spoon and pot, a change of underwear, warm clothing and money. Advise all those mobilized that they will be on the assignment not less than two weeks.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the lack of manpower, Orbeli continued to oversee the evacuation process. After workers packed the exhibits and labeled each crate, they stacked the boxes in the Hall of Twenty Columns, where the treasures awaited transport to the train station. The staff

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<sup>4</sup> L. Y. Livshitz, ed., *Ermitazh v Gody Voyny* (Leningrad: Publishing Council of the State Hermitage, 1987), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Salisbury, 805.



loaded the crates under heavy guard on a hastily assembled train consisting of two locomotives, an armored car for the most valuable objects, four Pullmans for other special treasures, and twenty-two freight cars filled with canvases and statues. Two flatcars with anti-aircraft batteries and one passenger car filled with military guards provided security for the train.<sup>6</sup> The train quietly departed on July 1, preceded by a separate locomotive to clear the tracks. In the interest of security, the train's engineers did not even know their final destination. The train eventually arrived near Sverdlovsk (Yekaterinburg), a Ural Mountain city in south central Russia, where it remained until August, 1945.<sup>7</sup>

Many other Leningrad institutions were also evacuated during July. More than 360,000 of nine million items of the Leningrad Public Library were removed. The government also ordered the removal of Voltaire's Library, the Pushkin Archives, and exhibits in the Russian Museum. Before German troops surrounded Leningrad, members of the Pushkin Drama Theater, the Mariinsky Opera and Ballet, and the animals of the Zoological Gardens left Leningrad. Ninety-two institutions eventually escaped the besieged city.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, packing continued in the Hermitage. A second train carried away another 700,000 exhibits on July 20, but more than one million artifacts remained in storage. Orbeli ordered preparations for the evacuation of the final collections, but curators had only packed 350 crates by mid-August when work stopped.<sup>9</sup> German troops

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>7</sup> This particular train had originally been set aside to evacuate the Kirov Defense Plant. Evacuation of the plant was delayed for the Hermitage (Salisbury, 148).

<sup>8</sup> Salisbury, 258.

<sup>9</sup> Orbeli, "Instructions, 20 August 1941."

had cut off the final railway line connecting Leningrad to the rest of the country, preventing the third train from leaving the city.

By early September, when Nazi forces had encircled Leningrad and cut off all avenues of escape, museum workers began concentrating their efforts on protecting what remained in the Hermitage. Military experts concluded that the wall and arches of the lower floors of the Winter Palace could withstand air attacks and artillery bombardment.<sup>10</sup> Workers transferred all remaining artifacts to these lower floors.<sup>11</sup> Engineers also constructed bomb shelters in this area. More than two thousand people, including local artists, scholars, scientists, and their families lived in these shelters throughout the siege. Orbeli organized air warning posts for all residents and employees of the Hermitage.<sup>12</sup>

The first artillery shell damaging the Hermitage burst near the bridge crossing the Winter Canal on September 8.<sup>13</sup> The blast knocked out windows throughout the museum. Nazi artillery forces had designated the Hermitage as “target number nine” on their maps of Leningrad.<sup>14</sup> According to rules of warfare, the museum should not have been a German target. Not only was it, of course, a cultural monument, but Leningrad’s military leaders had also removed all military equipment from the vicinity of the museum at the beginning of the war.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the siege, however, the museum sustained damage from thirty German artillery shells.

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<sup>10</sup> Livshitz, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Orbeli, “Instructions, 8 September 1941.”

<sup>12</sup> Orbeli, “Instructions, 2 July 1941.”

<sup>13</sup> State Hermitage, caption from government photograph, State Hermitage Library file no. 11-6149.

<sup>14</sup> Untitled, State Hermitage Library file no. 224.

<sup>15</sup> Nuremberg, VIII, 130.



The attacks resumed on December 29. On that day three shells caused considerable damage to the museum. One hit the southern wing of the Winter Palace and exploded near the kitchen. The second exploded in front of the Winter Palace facade facing the Admiralty. The third hit the portico of the New Hermitage. Throughout the siege, shock waves from each blast destroyed most of the windows in the museum. Soldiers replaced the glass with wood paneling.<sup>16</sup> On March 18, 1942 three thousand windows shattered when six shells hit the Winter Palace.<sup>17</sup>

Museum curators and art historians valued the group of tsarist carriages as one of the most important collections in the Hermitage. There had not been room on the trains to evacuate them. On June 18, a seventy millimeter shell exploded inside the carriage house, destroying seven carriages and causing heavy damage to the rest of the items in the rare collection.<sup>18</sup>

The attacks continued throughout 1943 to the winter of 1944. Even shells that hit near the museum caused considerable damage. On January 24, 1943, a high explosive bomb hit the Palace Square in front of the Winter Palace. Hermitage security chief Pavel Philippovich Boubshovski described the blast:

The Winter Palace shook like a frail boat in a stormy sea. The monstrous blast was absorbed by all Hermitage buildings. The blast went through the Hanging Garden [in the Small Hermitage], burst into the Pavilion Hall, and knocked out the remaining window panes, even those facing the Neva. Dozens of windows were again yawning with emptiness. During the night the blizzard began. It formed together with shattered glass, forming a solid crust of ice.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Untitled, Hermitage Library file no. 228.

<sup>17</sup> Livshitz, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Untitled, State Hermitage Library file no. 11-6581.

<sup>19</sup> Pavel Phillipovich Goubshovski; quoted in Livshitz, 8.

This ice in the museum led to additional problems in the following months. Damage to the Hermitage during the siege was not always a result of artillery bombardment. In the spring of 1943, after a particularly harsh winter, water from melting ice flooded many parts of the museum. Orbeli claimed that “dampness was on the offensive” in the Hermitage.<sup>20</sup> As the ice-covered walls thawed, liquid saturated the air, condensing polished wood and molding upholstery. Sofas and armchairs were covered with a “repulsive yellowish-greenish material.”<sup>21</sup> Mold deteriorated the gilding of arched ceilings and cornices. The painted ceiling of the Ambassador’s Staircase turned black from saturation. The peeling paint fell from the ceiling and scattered on the marble steps below.<sup>22</sup>

After the spring thaw, renewed German shelling compounded damage from the flooding. A high explosive shell destroyed several canvases in the book depository of the Division of Russian Culture on May 12.<sup>23</sup> During the summer and fall of 1943, the Twenty Column Hall, the Rastrelli Gallery, the Numismatics Department, and the Gothic Library sustained damage from German assaults.<sup>24</sup> On December 12, the Heraldic, Field Marshals’, and Petrovsky Halls and “other Hermitage locations rich in artistic and historical decor” were damaged.<sup>25</sup>

On January 2, 1944, the last, and most destructive, of the thirty German artillery shells exploded in the Heraldic Hall of the Winter Palace. The blast penetrated the floor of

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<sup>20</sup> Orbeli, “Instructions, 30 March 1943.”

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Untitled, State Hermitage Library file no. 168.

<sup>23</sup> Untitled, State Hermitage Library file no. 235.

<sup>24</sup> Untitled, State Hermitage Library file no. 138, 165, 9585, 235 [respectively].

<sup>25</sup> Libshitz, 9.

the hall. The Rastrelli Gallery, located directly below, could be seen through the hole. A massive bronze chandelier had fallen and shattered the gallery's parquet floor.<sup>26</sup>

After this final assault, the targets for German artillery turned outward from the city. Soviet forces arriving in mid-January attacked the Nazi lines surrounding Leningrad. The battle lasted a relatively short time; by the end of the month German troops began retreating westward. On January 27 Russian forces fired a 324 cannon salute marking the liberation of Leningrad.<sup>27</sup>

The renovation of the museum began almost immediately after the war. Days after the siege was lifted, the museum's custodians decided to organize an exhibition of art that had remained in the city. Employees and volunteers cleaned the Pavilion Hall, the Romanovsky and Petrovsky Galleries, and adjacent halls and staircases. The curators removed chandeliers from the basement and polished the tarnished bronze and dull glass. The exhibition of the nearly empty Hermitage opened on November 9, 1944. On August 23, 1945 the Soviet government decided to return the evacuated exhibits to Leningrad. The trains arrived on October 10.<sup>28</sup>

In light of all the atrocities committed by Hitler and his forces, the damage to the Hermitage seems relatively insignificant. While the destruction of millions of rubles' worth of art and architecture does not equal the destruction of millions of lives, it does illustrate the psychology of the attackers. The ordeal of the Hermitage serves as one more piece of

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<sup>26</sup> Untitled, State Hermitage Library file no. 265.

<sup>27</sup> Salisbury, 566.

<sup>28</sup> Livshitz, 10.

evidence that, when consolidated with all Nazi crimes against humanity, must be recorded in the history of World War II.

Considering the number of Russian buildings that the Nazis destroyed during World War II, the Hermitage appears to have been fortunate (see Chapter Four). The thirty artillery shells caused considerable damage, but they were not enough to destroy the museum. Furthermore, renovation took only a few years. When the trains returned from the Ural Mountains the inventory of cases indicated the same quantity and codes as were recorded in the original lists of items evacuated.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to many aspects of Soviet culture, the Hermitage remained remarkably unchanged.

The account of the damage sustained by the Hermitage, however, provides only a detached, impersonal view of the museum's ordeal. Those living in the museum suffered through much more than artillery attacks. They faced starvation, freezing winters, and the many other residual hardships of war. The plight of the museum staff and its fellow residents must be understood before discussing the wartime directions and policy instituted by the Hermitage leadership.

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<sup>29</sup> Livshitz, 10.

## CHAPTER 6

### LIFE IN THE HERMITAGE

On January 8, 1942, Joseph Orbeli received two requests -- one from the Union of Architects and another from the Museum of Ethnography. Both institutions wanted the Hermitage to build coffins. During the first winter of the siege, the packing materials Orbeli had stockpiled before the war were being used for this new purpose. Orbeli was not able to fulfill the request -- the resident carpenter at the Hermitage had died. Moreover, no one else on the staff had the strength to build a coffin. From this point forward, when someone at the Hermitage died, museum employees carried the corpse outside where, every few days, a military truck would carry the body away.<sup>1</sup>

This episode serves as one of the many grim examples of how difficult life had become in the Hermitage. The museum complex remained virtually defenseless throughout the blockade. The staff set up two air raid posts on the roof at the beginning of the war, one above the Hall of Arms of the Winter Palace and another on the roof of the New Hermitage. These defenses, however, provided little protection. Nazi forces made little use of the German air force over Leningrad. Most of the attacks came by way of artillery, for which there was practically no defense.

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<sup>1</sup> Salisbury, 434.

Those who lived in the Hermitage during the siege endured more than artillery attacks. The basements of the museum were overcrowded. The staff had placed all of the art items that were not evacuated in these lower levels. Moreover, all of the museum employees, their families, and many members of Leningrad's artistic and scientific community -- numbering more than two thousand people -- resided here. The scientists continued to conduct experiments. The artists produced new works. All of this occurred under miserable conditions, for the Hermitage was without water and electricity from the earliest days of the siege. The people attempted to live a relatively normal life in the darkness. Cots were laid out in the bomb shelters. Candles sat on tables to allow the scientists to write their scholarly papers, using ink that was close to freezing.

Hermitage Director Joseph Orbeli tried to carry on as if the situation were normal. He continued to make his daily inspections of the galleries as long as he was physically able. Throughout the war Orbeli attempted to sustain the morale of his staff. He remained optimistic about the city's chances for survival. According to one account, on the first day of Operation Barbarossa, June 22, 1941, Orbeli looked at his calendar and stated, "Napoleon, if I am not mistaken, attacked Russia also in June -- was it the twenty-fourth of June?"<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the thought of Napoleon helped Orbeli in his determination to survive.

In a show of his resolve, Orbeli ordered that the museum remain open throughout the siege. Many accounts of the blockade record the story of one of the Hermitage guides, Pavel Gutchoivsky. Whenever soldiers came to the museum to clean after an artillery attack, or replace windows with plywood, or to retrieve bodies, Gutchoivsky would take

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Orbeli; quoted in Salisbury, 130.

them on a tour. As he led them through the galleries, he described in detail the paintings that previously hung in each empty frame. According to one source, “His descriptions were so vivid that they [the soldiers] could almost see Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son* [sic] and Da Vinci’s [sic] *Madonna*.”<sup>3</sup>

On December 10, 1941, Orbeli went ahead with the Tamerlane exhibit.<sup>4</sup> The event marked the five hundredth anniversary of the Timurid poet, Alisher Navoi. As part of the exhibit, Orbeli invited Leningrad poet Vsevolod Rozhdestvensky, who had entered the People’s Volunteers Army, to speak at the museum. As Orbeli welcomed the poet, the director spoke of “Leningrad’s brave spirit, its unquenchable will, the humanism of Soviet science, the city’s suffering, and the fact that Germany thought it a city of death.”<sup>5</sup> One of Orbeli’s former teachers, Sergei Zhabelev, also attended the exhibit. Upon greeting Orbeli, Zhabelev said, “I am so glad that science continues to develop with us even under such difficult conditions. This is the way we scholars fight Fascism.”<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the war, Orbeli prepared a work on the achievements of Leningrad science during the blockade. The volume listed more than one thousand scientific discoveries and contained contributions by 480 authors. Although it was never published, two proofs were preserved. One copy may be found in the Academy of Sciences and the other in the Leningrad Public Library.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Rod MacLeish, *The Hermitage: A Russian Odyssey*, (volume three: “From Czars to Commissars: A Museum Survives,”) produced and directed by John Baehrend, 55 min., Home Vision, 1994, videocassette. [From Transcript by this author, 2.]

<sup>4</sup> Salisbury, 429.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>6</sup> Academician Sergei Zhebelev; quoted in Salisbury, 430.

<sup>7</sup> Salisbury, 581.



In addition to scientific discoveries, museum employees produced works of art in the basements of the museum during the siege. Alexander Nikolsky, the chief architect of the Hermitage, drew a series of sketches of daily life in the museum. Historians often refer to Nikolsky as the resident chronicler of the basements during the blockade. Nikolsky's works depict artillery explosions in the various halls of the museums, empty frames lining the galleries, and starving scientists at their work stations in the cellars. One night in December, 1941, Nikolsky invited fellow members of the Hermitage staff, and friends and acquaintances living in the museum basements, to an exhibition of his works. As the people gathered at Nikolsky's corner of bomb shelter number three, the artist/architect said,

To yield our city is impossible...Better die than give up. I am confident that soon the siege will be lifted, and I have already begun to think about a project for an arch of triumph with which to welcome the heroic troops who liberate Leningrad.<sup>8</sup>

One of Nikolsky's most sobering works was his *Daily Ration of Bread*. By this time the daily bread ration in Leningrad was 125 grams per person. This sketch depicts a thin, bony palm stretched out holding four small crumbs of bread. The fingers are long, thin, and crooked, perhaps representing the rheumatism that many Hermitage workers, including Directory Orbeli, suffered from throughout the siege.<sup>9</sup>

The workers of the Hermitage found some unexpected sources to help them supplement the minuscule food rations. Just before the war began, Orbeli had ordered large quantities of linseed oil for redecorating parts of the museum. During the siege the oil was used to fry bits of frozen potatoes that workers dug out of garden patches on the

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Nikolsky; quoted in Rest and Varshavsky, 156.

<sup>9</sup> A collection of Nikolsky's sketches and commentary was published in 1984. See Bibliography under "Nikolsky."

edge of the city. The museum also possessed vats of joiner's glue which was previously used to make frames. The staff used the glue to make a type of edible jelly. As one source stated, "The siege had become a test of the human spirit."<sup>10</sup>

One of the most revealing aspects of life in the Hermitage as the war progressed may be found in the number of historical sources that exist. For example, there are many diaries, commentaries, and other accounts of Leningrad under siege from June, 1941, through April, 1942. This period covered events from the commencement of Operation Barbarossa until the end of the first, and most difficult, winter of the siege, that of 1941-1942. The sources become scarce after April, 1942, the worst month of the war in which 102,497 Leningraders died.<sup>11</sup>

After the spring of 1942, most of the historical sources that may be found are official government documents. Even these are of a different character than those issued at the beginning of the siege. In the first months of war, for example, orders and directives issued by Orbeli, the Hermitage staff, or the Leningrad City Soviet are full of patriotic calls to duty or praise for heroic action. After the first winter, however, the documents become succinct, providing only that information which was essential.

The diaries kept by those living in the cellars of the Hermitage contain fewer poetic descriptions of the situation after April, 1942, than they did before the first terrible winter was endured. The residents were losing their energy, and all resources were reserved in the interest of survival. Nikolsky did not draw as many sketches after the winter of 1941-42. Orbeli lost his flair for garrulous directives. In many cases, the only descriptions of damage

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<sup>10</sup> MacLeish, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Salisbury, 513.

inflicted on the Hermitage by artillery attacks may be found in official government photographs.

It must be remembered that the city suffered through two more winters after the difficult one of 1941-1942. Because those living in the Hermitage were either out of energy, tired of writing, or had simply lost the will to record their plight, few personal accounts of the last two years of the war exist. It can only be assumed that the situation remained difficult; indeed, it probably became much worse. The Hermitage remained under the shadow of German guns from August, 1941, until after the liberation of Leningrad in January, 1944; yet little is known about the residents' plight after April, 1942. Perhaps the most revealing source of daily life in the Hermitage during this period is simply the lack of sources. In other words, the situation was so terrible that it could not even be recorded.

## CHAPTER 7

### WARTIME DIRECTIONS, ORDERS, AND POLICY INSTITUTED BY THE STAFF OF THE HERMITAGE MUSEUM

Throughout the nine hundred days of the siege, Director Orbeli and his staff released notices concerning daily activities at the Hermitage. The directives covered many different aspects of life in the museum, from protecting certain art items to the type of scientific experiments that were allowed to occur. Some of the orders provided generalized instructions, such as “Directors [of each section] will do everything that is possible to make the situation better.”<sup>1</sup> Others, however, were much more defined. Photocopies of the various documents distributed by the staff exist in the Hermitage Library. Although they have been filed in no particular order, a chronological analysis provides insight into how the staff managed the museum during the war.

Orbeli’s first written order arrived on Sunday, June 22, 1941, the day the Germans attacked. He immediately repealed the “free day” that Hermitage employees usually enjoyed on Mondays.<sup>2</sup> In the days following the Nazi invasion, the Director sent many more notices to his staff. The nature of the directives appear extremely detailed for a director to issue. For example, on June 28, Orbeli released instructions concerning lunch

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<sup>1</sup> Notes from staff meeting, 2 April 1942, State Hermitage file no. 2653.

<sup>2</sup> Orbeli, “Instructions, 22 June 1941,” State Hermitage file no. 168.

hours for particular offices of the museum and how many hours per day he expected each employee to work.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, most of the commands of the Director throughout the first months of war dealt with minute aspects of the war effort, such as establishing air raid posts<sup>4</sup> and small working parties.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most important decisions made by Orbeli and the leaders of Leningrad during this period concerned the armament of the Hermitage. During the first summer of the war, soldiers placed machine-gun nests on the roof of the Winter Palace to fire into the Palace Square in the event of a Nazi paratroop attack. Orbeli and the Leningrad Command decided to remove them in late September, 1941, in order not to give the Germans an excuse for attacking the building.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, the leaders ordered the removal of all forms of armament from the area. At Nuremberg, when Hans Laternser, counsel for the General Staff and High Command of the German Armed Forces, asked whether Russian artillery batteries were stationed near the museum buildings, Orbeli responded,

On the whole square around the Winter Palace and the Hermitage there was not a single artillery battery, because from the very beginning steps were taken to prevent any unnecessary vibration near the buildings where such precious museum pieces were.<sup>7</sup>

The overriding character of most of the instructions issued during the first months of war appeared reactive. Like the Soviet Government in Moscow, the leaders of the Hermitage had been caught off guard by the Nazi invasion. Several months passed before Orbeli and his staff instituted any concrete policy concerning the safety of the museum and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., "Instructions, 28 June 1941," State Hermitage file no. 178.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., "Instructions, 2 July 1941," State Hermitage file no. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., "Instructions, 21 December 1941," State Hermitage file no. 308.

<sup>6</sup> Rest and Varshavsky, *Podvig Ermitazha*, 64.

<sup>7</sup> Orbeli; quoted in *Nuremberg*, VIII, 130.

its contents. Orbeli and his staff issued few orders establishing long-term rules for the protection of the museum during the first, most difficult, winter of the siege (see Chapter Six). From June, 1941, until March, 1942, Orbeli and his staff appeared to be concerned only with survival. Most of the notices published during that period were desperate reactions to the German threat.

In April, 1942, however, the character of the Hermitage's leadership changed. Orbeli issued fewer personal instructions than he did in the first months of the war. Most of the directives released after this period resulted from staff meetings. The leaders of the Hermitage began to institute specific policies regarding the management and survival of the museum. Although many of these policies were still necessarily reactive in nature, for the first time they began to establish long-range plans for the museum during the blockade.

Several reasons account for the change in the management style of the Hermitage at this particular time. Nazi forces had shelled the museum buildings sporadically from September, 1941 through March 18, 1942 (see Chapter Five). The Hermitage then enjoyed a two month respite from the attacks. This allowed the staff to organize and take inventory of what needed to be accomplished. Residual damage to the buildings further necessitated a change in managerial style. In April, the water pipes that had been frozen throughout the winter began to leak. The melting water was causing considerable damage to the infrastructure of the Hermitage and to many of the art items that remained after the evacuation.

On April 2, 1942, the staff issued several pages covering the new policies. The first page stated “that the main idea is to secure museum treasures, equipment, and buildings.”<sup>8</sup> By *secure* the leaders meant they intended to repair what had suffered damage and to prevent further harm. The staff immediately restricted the use of flash lights and candles in the hope that this would prevent German artillery units from targeting the Hermitage.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, they stopped all scientific research that was not related to the war effort. This order was intended to conserve the physical strength of those living in the museum.<sup>10</sup> Each department of the museum then received directions to take inventories and report all damage to the staff.<sup>11</sup>

When the reports were completed, museum employees began to repair the damage inflicted by the artillery attacks and the spring thaw. The workers then took all furniture, carpets, and fabrics that had been covered by layers of mold after the pipes leaked to the Winter Palace’s courtyards to dry in the sun. The Hermitage employees worked throughout the summer and autumn cleaning 1,696 art objects (ceramics, jewelry, etc.) and 1,141 prints.<sup>12</sup> The employees who had been engaged in scientific research prior to the moratorium on their work also participated in the cleaning effort. The misplaced scientists collected glass, removed garbage, and pumped water.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Meeting with Safety Officers, 2 April 1942,” State Hermitage file no. 2625.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> “Orders on Conservation, 2 April 1942,” State Hermitage Library.

<sup>11</sup> “Conference with Scientific Staff, Bookkeepers, and Librarians, 2 April 1942,” State Hermitage Library.

<sup>12</sup> R. P. Klysharova and H. D. Myhaleva, eds., *Ermitaz Spaceny: 50 Let Pobyedi v Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voine, 1941-45* (Saint Petersburg: Slavya, 1995), 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



With the new policies in place, the residents of the Hermitage suffered less during the second winter of the siege than they did during the first. Workers had stockpiled firewood throughout the summer and fall. The staff also had the foresight to plant gardens in the courtyards during the spring. Vegetable plots replaced rose beds and lilac bushes.<sup>14</sup> One of the most successful parts of the winter policy was simply keeping the residents busy with extra work throughout the winter. The work kept their bodies warm and their minds off of the misery. It also allowed them to accomplish much needed tasks. The winter work details cleared footpaths and roadways, mended the roof and windows, and cleared broken glass. By January, 1943, workers had sealed 7,700 square meters of windows and removed thirty-six tons of broken glass and snow.<sup>15</sup>

One predominant aspect of the notices issued by the staff was praise for the hard work of the museum employees. The leaders of the Hermitage recognized the difficulty of the working conditions and the monumental size of the problems at hand. In one memorandum the staff wrote,

[Your] works are completed in these difficult conditions of the blockade, in the presence of many hardships. The collective workers realize their place in the determination [of the survival] of Leningrad. You understand the importance and place delight in the mission. The State recognizes your exceptional work in ensuring the safety of the buildings, art collections, and cultural monuments.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the hard work and praise, however, the museum continued to suffer in the remaining days of the siege. On June 18, 1942, a seventy millimeter shell exploded inside the carriage shed of the Winter Palace. The Hermitage's rare collection of ornately

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<sup>14</sup> Livshitz, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Klysharova and Myhaleva, 41.

<sup>16</sup> "Explanatory Memorandum, April 1942," State Hermitage Library.

decorated horse carriages received considerable damage. Catherine the Great's magnificent coronation carriage had been evacuated, but seven of the remaining carriages were destroyed.<sup>17</sup> This event represents one of the few instances in which the staff might be held accountable for the loss of precious items. The carriage shed was a relatively unprotected building located at the entrance to the main Winter Palace courtyard. The staff made no mention of this collection in its April, 1942 reports. Although the cellars of the Hermitage were overcrowded, government photographs indicate that sufficient space remained for at least a few of the carriages.

After January, 1943, evidence of reports from the staff becomes scarce. Although the blockade continued for one more year after this date, it is difficult to trace the policies and directives of the Hermitage leadership. This decline is remarkably similar to the reduction of accounts of life in the Hermitage after April, 1942 (see Chapter Six). Perhaps the photocopies of the orders have been lost in the Hermitage archives or libraries. This is not likely, however, because there is no evidence that they ever existed. The most probable explanation is comparable to the reasons noted in the previous chapter. The staff of the Hermitage probably ran out of the resources and energy to publish reports, issue orders, and make policy. The leaders of the Hermitage were required to focus all of their activities on mere survival.

A critique of the policies set forth by the leadership is equally difficult to produce. The problems faced by the Hermitage staff are hard to comprehend. The residents were existing on 125 grams of bread per day, suffering through winters without heat, and living

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<sup>17</sup> Livshitz, 8.

under sporadic barrages of artillery attacks. In light of these terrible conditions, it is remarkable that they held any competent decision making capacities. With the exception of losing part of the rare horse carriage collection, the Hermitage staff probably cannot be held accountable for any damage suffered during the siege. Following the first period of confusion when the war broke out, the staff made timely, appropriate decisions.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

The study of Russian history now occupies a pivotal era. Seventy years of Soviet scholarship is currently being reviewed and critiqued. The opening of formerly restricted libraries and archives to foreign researchers offers many new opportunities to search for the truth. If those who control access to Russian documents continue to allow more freedom in research, Russian and foreign scholars will be able to work together to correct the errors made during the Soviet period.

The need for a new, professionally written account of the Hermitage during the siege of Leningrad certainly exists. The Soviet works that comprise the existing versions contain the worst elements of Soviet scholarship. The accounts contain ample evidence of government censorship. The policies and orders implemented by the leadership of the museum are ignored in favor of directives released from Moscow. A large number of the passages exemplify an unprofessional, unnecessarily emotional character. Furthermore, the writers filled the works with the typically Soviet habit of asking the reader questions. For example, Livshitz's account of the evacuation of the museum contains the following

passage: “Where did these hundreds of cases of every size, as big as an elephant, rolls of packing paper, tons of cotton wadding, kilometers of cloth come from?”<sup>1</sup>

None of the Soviet accounts contain an analysis of the policies that allowed the Hermitage and its residents to survive. Even if Soviet writers had attempted to produce such a work, government censorship probably would have prevented the publication of an unbiased account. Additionally, with the exception of Rest and Varshavsky's *Podvig Ermitazha*, the Soviet books on the subject are poorly documented. In many cases they contain no citations at all. This had made future scholarship extremely difficult.

The Hermitage Museum has survived several wars, three evacuations, a great fire, and political turmoil. One of the most difficult tasks in recording its history, besides that of locating primary sources, is writing with the absence of bias. Some forms of historical writing are often criticized as being too romantic or anxious to record heroic deeds. Today's professional scholarship style calls for stoic observation and analysis of fact. Yet the account of the survival of the Hermitage museum during World War II is all but impossible to record without the infiltration of some traces of romanticism. It remains difficult to find fault with any decisions made during such hardship. Only the most imperturbable writer could document the work of the Hermitage employees without portraying them as heroes.

Given Hitler's intention of destroying the city, it is remarkable that the Hermitage survived relatively intact. The Soviets quickly began restoring what had been damaged. On November 9, 1944, fewer than ten months after the siege was lifted, the staff opened

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<sup>1</sup> Livshitz, 3.

an exhibition of the art that had remained in the city. At the opening ceremony of the exhibition, Orbeli told the audience that “What you are going to see today in the several halls of the Hermitage represents just a first step on the way to a complete restoration of the greatest museum of our Motherland.”<sup>2</sup> Eventually, the government restored the museum its original character. On January 16, 1947, Orbeli reported to the Leningrad City Soviet that the restoration was complete at a cost of 5,400,000 rubles.<sup>3</sup>

The most engaging feature of the account of the Hermitage during the siege, however, is the survival of the museum’s residents. An attempt to trace the primary sources regarding their lives during the siege provides insight into how difficult the situation became. The sources simply disappear (or at least become terribly scarce) after the first winter of the blockade. This silence gives more information than might be revealed in volumes of publications (see Chapter Six).

*The survival of the Hermitage during the siege on Leningrad is indeed a heroic story. With very few exceptions, Orbeli and his staff made all of the appropriate decisions that could be expected from them. Today, many Russians like to say that the Hermitage Museum stands as a monument to Russia’s survival of World War II. The story of the museum certainly represents many of the aspects that allow a nation to survive a war: strength throughout hardship; initiative; proper decision making; and sacrifice. In this regard, the Hermitage’s current director probably offers the most appropriate words:*

I would like to believe that, after all the disasters and bloodshed of the war, people keep in their memories not sentiments of vengeance and hatred but feelings of gratitude for those who preserved the honor and cultural heritage of their country.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>3</sup> Orbeli, *Dokumentii ee Materiali*, 126.

The Hermitage struggled to survive during the siege, in Leningrad and in faraway Sverdlovsk. Under bombardments it lived and functioned -- preserved its exhibits and buildings, organized conferences and hosted coming excursion groups for surrealistic lectures to empty halls.

The story of the Hermitage during the war stands as a symbol of the invincibility of our culture.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to embellish on the Director's remarks. The protection of artistic and historical items during a war might seem insignificant in light of human tragedies. Yet the existence of national pride and the protection of cultural monuments sometimes provides the stimulant for a people to fight for their survival. The story of the Hermitage is one of history's greatest examples of this phenomenon.

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<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Piotrovsky; quoted in Rest and Varshavsky, Podvig Ermitazha, from the Introduction.



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