

Three hundred years of Petersburg—festival's facades hide destitution

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21 June 2003

From May 23 to June 1, St. Petersburg celebrated its 300th anniversary. Preparations for this event were conducted over the course of the past two years. The scope and scale of the arrangements, which were widely reported in the Russian press, suggested that in May of this year both visitors and residents of St. Petersburg could expect something unprecedented and impressive—the city itself would be unrecognizably transformed. In reality, the Jubilee celebration was more of a vulgar window-dressing for Russian and Western officials. For the ordinary residents of this “Northern Capital”, the festivities largely passed by as little more than an unpleasant burden.

The grandiose magnificence to which the Russian authorities aspired was intended to demonstrate to the high-ranking foreign dignitaries that Russia is confidently moving closer to the West. However, the effect achieved was quite the reverse. For any attentive observer it was clear that more than 10 years after the start of “market reform”, Russia is a country with a backward economy and a destroyed social infrastructure. It is attempting to conceal, behind a facade of outward splendor, the daily poverty and abasement of its citizens.

Founded in 1703 by Peter I as the new capital of Russia and a “window on Europe”, Saint-Petersburg—Petrograd—Leningrad—earned a reputation, over the course of three centuries, as the cultural, scientific, and industrial center of Russia, a city of three revolutions, and a victor against a blockade. Based on its beauty, wealth, and diversity of architecture, it can only be compared with a few European cities—Venice, Florence, and Paris. However, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, a rapid social decline changed the appearance of Leningrad, a process that was sanctified with its being renamed as Saint Petersburg. Today, it is enough to go just a few blocks off the Nevsky Prospekt in order to see the collapsing and impoverished city center, and the deplorable conditions under which hundreds of thousands of ordinary Petersburgers are forced to live.

Following the restoration of the Alexander column in Palace Square and the Mikhailovsky Palace, the festival program included in its solemn opening ceremony, a carnival parade, an official religious service, a review of cadet corps in the central square of the city, a water festival “Nevsky Feeria”, a laser show by Hiro Yamagato, a classical musical concert in Palace Square under the direction of Valery Gergiev, a parade of brass orchestras, and a theater festival. At Tsarskoe Selo, one of the palaces located in the Petersburg suburbs, the world-famous Amber Room, which disappeared without a trace at the end of World War II, was reopened following restoration sponsored by the German firm Ruhr-Gas.

A meeting of the leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) took place on the deck of the 10-level ocean liner “Silver Whisper”, which was moored in the center of the city at the location

where the legendary Aurora—the battleship that fired the volley at the Winter Palace that signaled the start of the October 1917 Revolution—once stood. Following the CIS summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with figures from the leading governments of the European Union. He was also joined by US President George Bush. The international portion of the festivities concluded at the enchanting fountains on the Neva and at Peterhof.

However, all these ostentatious festivities were largely closed to the city's residents, who seemingly should have been the stars of this celebration. Ordinary Petersburgers were bluntly told not to show up at important events and instead, to watch them on television. The federal government, by request of the city leadership, instituted a “Jubilee Week”, giving all those who wanted to leave the city a holiday. Schools finished 10 days earlier than usual and in many universities final exams were scheduled early.

One official said, “I strongly recommend that on the day of the summit you pack your things and leave the city for someplace out of town—the dacha, the village. If you attend any of the festivities, you'll be frequently stopped and asked to show your documents. The whole planet is going to be looking at our city.”

Indeed, during the festival, movement around the city was significantly restricted. One could pass through the city center only with a special permit. Residents of Vassilevskiy Island were notified that throughout the celebrations they would be under a kind of house arrest. The Pulkovo airport was closed to regular and chartered Russian and foreign airlines for three days, with the international terminal serving only flights from important G8 states and official delegations from different countries.

On the even of Jubilee Week, beggars and homeless people, whose numbers by some estimates approach 100,000, were removed from St. Petersburg. The Russian newspaper *Izvestia* reported that in Leningrad, Oblast camps were built where people who—according to the police—looked unkempt and appeared homeless were taken. Some were also settled in dilapidated children's camps in the city outskirts. According to media reports a portion of the St. Petersburg's homeless population was sent to a number of cities in the Urals and Siberia. The worst of the deportation measures were undertaken against illegal workers from the “near abroad”—a euphemism used to refer to the republics of the former Soviet Union.

Unprecedented actions were carried out to guarantee the safety of the 48 foreign leaders invited to the summit. In addition to 20,000 local police, another 5,000 police from 25 different regions in Russia were brought in to maintain order during the festivities. The authorities also appealed for help to the leaders of the criminal underworld, who in Russia, as is well known, are not that far from the

corridors of power. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that Kremlin-level conversations took place with one of the leading criminal figures in St. Petersburg, Vladimir Kumarin. An agreement was made with gangsters that during the Jubilee they would suspend their usual “settling of scores” and that bullet-riddled corpses would not appear on the streets.

Der Spiegel also mentioned that, according to the German ministry of criminal affairs, the German firm SPAG has fallen under suspicion of being involved in a money laundering scheme with connections to Kumarin. Interestingly enough, Vladimir Putin was an advisor to this firm over the course of seven years. “Of course, I know Putin since the time he worked in Petersburg”, noted Kumarin to a journalist.

Izvestia learned that representatives of the city administration had conversations in Moscow with the clique of the dead Petersburg criminal “authority” Konstantin Yakovlev about postponing his funeral to a later date so that it would not coincide with the elite’s “people’s outdoor fête” during the anniversary celebrations.

One might believe that the many inconveniences residents encountered were mitigated by the festive improvements in the city’s appearance. However, this was far from the case. Repairs to the historic center were only selectively undertaken, with the plans coinciding with the scheduled routes of VIP motorcades. Major international events took place at the Konstantin Palace, which was specially restored for this occasion.

Along the Volkhonsky highway leading to the palace are crumbling homes, dumps, and a cemetery. In order to hide these unpleasanties, large advertising billboards designed to mask the scenery were placed along the road. The cemetery was closed for two days; evidently Petersburgers were not supposed to spoil the festivities by dying.

In the midst of the repairs on the old shopping center, Gostiny Dvor, it was discovered that there was not enough paint for the rear of the building. Currently, gigantic ad billboards are covering up the broken windows and clapped-out walls of this new “Potemkin village”.

A correspondent from *Izvestia* writes about what happened when one of the heads of state who flew in for the summit suddenly decided to take a stroll along the city’s main street, Nevsky Prospekt. “A VIP-stroll was organized: public address speakers played folksy tunes, well-dressed strollers appeared on the avenue, a few clean automobiles drove up and down. The strolling premier surely had to have gotten the impression that this is everyday life in Russia’s cultural capital. For several hours all traffic on the major arteries surrounding Nevsky Prospekt was halted, passengers walked to the metro by foot, drivers abandoning their cars on nearby streets.”

Most of the festival’s reconstruction and development plans remained on paper. Such critical projects as the start of a ring road around the city, the construction of dikes to defend the city from flooding, and the restoration of the subway line that was flooded in 1996 were frozen. The construction, repair, and restoration of such important cultural and historical objects as the Kazan Cathedral, the Peter and Paul Fortress, the Admiralty, and Smolny Cathedral were never completed.

900,000 Petersburgers live in communal apartments—the curse of the city. They house residents with limited incomes and the elderly, who cannot afford to move to private apartments. Situated literally next door to the avenues for the wealthy, dark archways lead to inner courtyards full of crumbling houses with rusty sewer pipes laid out before the 1917 revolution. Nothing has changed for the people who live in these neighborhoods.

As before the Jubilee, so after it, St. Petersburg will continue to

decay and crumble. Over the past year, five buildings have collapsed killing four people and destroying the homes of 10 families.

According to official statistics, more than 150 homes and 300 apartments are in such a state of disrepair. However, nobody knows the real number of such dwellings. Theoretically, they would include all of the pre-revolutionary housing stock, none of which has undergone repairs during the 20th century. However, if Petersburg’s officials were to admit that all of these buildings are in disrepair, they would then have to find other housing for the inhabitants. Thus, they acknowledge the problem only when there is no other choice.

A speaker of the St. Petersburg’s legislature Vadim Tulpanov conceded that the deplorable state of the housing stock is due to the inattention of the city authorities, with capital repairs only financed at 7 percent of the needed amount. “Such a situation means that in 5 to 10 years all of the streets will be in a state of critical disrepair”.

Preparation for the festival was accompanied by a grandiose theft of the funds allocated to this event by the federal budget, the size of which, according to a government representative for the Russian Federation’s north-west federal district, approached 60 billion rubles (\$2 billion). Although authorities have by hook or by crook prevented an investigation of the charges, a few things have become known.

For example, nine million rubles earmarked for the restoration and reconstruction of the city’s historical center were embezzled. The Petersburg newspaper *Vash Tayni Sovetnik* reported that both an active and a former vice-governor played parts in this affair. Millions of dollars were laundered offshore through the Cayman Islands.

Deputy to the general prosecutor for the Russian Federation’s north-west federal district, Vladimir Zurbín, revealed yet another episode of embezzlement involving \$10 million. A source within judicial organs told a reporter for the Web site *Lenta.ru* that a criminal case could be opened for practically every aspect of the Jubilee.

Schetnaia Palata, a public accounting agency, inspected the public expenditures set aside for the Jubilee. The head of this body, Sergei Stepashin, announced in January of this year that \$30 million earmarked for the repair of roadways vanished into thin air. An additional misuse of one billion rubles was also revealed.

The government of Vladimir Putin tried as hard as possible to “throw dust in the eyes” of the numerous foreign guests and to use the Petersburg Jubilee as an advertisement for himself. However, even western newspapers repeat as a chorus that the Petersburg Jubilee was a sad and equivocal affair. For a majority of the city’s residents, the festivities were disappointing and even humiliating.

Another important event in the history of the city can be recalled with a similarly ironic smile—the 250th anniversary of St. Petersburg. At that time, due to the death of Stalin, the Jubilee was celebrated four years late in 1957. The festivities occurred twice—once in May and once in June because Nikita Krushchev was not able to make it to the first celebration. The 300-year Jubilee is also reminiscent of the 1980 Olympic games, which in accordance with the instructions of the Politburo in Moscow, were held without any spectators in attendance.



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