

Russia: University building collapses in St. Petersburg

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On Saturday, a building of the National Research University of Information Technology, Mechanics and Optics (ITMO) in St. Petersburg collapsed. Eighty-six people, mostly students and professors, had to be evacuated. No casualties were reported. It is the second major building collapse in Russia in less than two months. On December 31, a gas explosion led to the collapse of a two-tower apartment building in Magnitogorsk, claiming the lives of 39 people.

The building's roof as well as the second through fifth floors collapsed on Saturday while weekend classes were in session. The collapse covered about 1,000 square meters. The causes for the collapse remain to be determined. Reports indicate that violations of safety procedures during repair works may have triggered the collapse. The repair works were conducted with the approval of the city administration.

According to the Russian business daily *Kommersant*, a renovation of the old building was already planned for May 2018. An internal report from late January 2019 indicated that the first and second floor were "in a state of disrepair" and that there was "a danger of collapse." Despite the advanced stage of decay of the building, it was planned to conduct repairs while continuing to use it. Local media reported that over three other faculties of the university are housed in buildings in a similar "state of disrepair."

As of 2010, every sixth building in the historic city centre was classified as dangerous to live in because of the ageing infrastructure. Walking on the streets of St. Petersburg, people frequently see signs warning them that walking beneath or next to a particular building comes "at their own peril," because bricks may fall down.

The university building collapse in St. Petersburg comes only a few weeks after a horrific gas explosion

in the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, a centre of the Russian steel industry, led to the collapse of a 10-storey apartment building, killing 39 people and provoking mass outrage.

Similar horrific building collapses, gas explosions and fires, both in residential houses, scientific institutions and at factories, have become an every-day occurrence in Russia, claiming hundreds of lives every year. Last March, a disastrous fire in a shopping mall in the mining city Kemerovo killed at least 64 people, among them many children, while fire exits were blocked.

In all of 2018, according to RIA Novosti, at least 18 major explosions and fires occurred at factories and plants. In January alone, at least three major fires were reported.

The situation is arguably most dire in residential housing. In November 2019, officials acknowledged that over 110,000 fires had occurred in the previous 10 months. Among the victims were 311 children. Most often affected by fires in residential houses and apartments are poor working-class families.

Scientific institutions have also been partially destroyed due to the decrepit infrastructure. Most notably, in January 2015 a fire at the Academic Institute for Scholarly Information on Social Science (INION) library destroyed the library's building and several irreplaceable historic books.

The epidemic of fires and building collapses in Russia is the direct result of decades of systematic social plunder by the oligarchy that arose out of the Stalinist bureaucracy's destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism. The oligarchy has invested close to nothing into maintaining, let alone expanding, the country's infrastructure. Industrial, housing and social infrastructure, in particular, have

been entirely neglected. In historic cities like St. Petersburg, only a few select buildings that are considered chief attractions for tourists are renovated on a more or less regular basis while scores of other historical buildings are left to decay.

Educational and scientific institutions as well as social institutions like hospitals are starved of funds, and basic safety requirements—including the installation of fire alarms and exits—are regularly disregarded during construction and repair works, without the companies responsible having to fear any repercussions. According to the consulting company Ernst & Young, the quality of Russia's infrastructure was ranked 93rd in the world in 2014, lower than that of China (74th) or India (85th).

While the danger of explosions and fires at workplaces or at their homes haunts the lives of millions of working-class Russians, about 20 million of whom have to live on less than \$174 a month, the oligarchy has been shuffling billions of dollars out of the country. According to a study titled *From Soviets to Oligarchs. Inequality and Property in Russia, 1905-2016* by Filip Novokmet, Thomas Piketty, Gabriel Zucman, the Russian oligarchs have directed as much wealth out of the country as the entire Russian population possesses inside Russia.

Russia is now the most unequal of all major economies in the world. The top 1 percent own as much as one thirds of the country's net wealth, and the top 10 percent of income earners own two-thirds. Meanwhile, the bottom 50 percent of the population own less than 5 percent of the country's net wealth.



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