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*Saving Stalin's Imperial City: Historic Preservation in Leningrad, 1930–1950* by Maddox, Steven.

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HOW was it that Leningraders, on the frontlines and within the blockaded city, waged war to ensure the survival of Soviet socialism, but after it found themselves rebuilding the most glittering symbols of the tsarist imperial past? The answer to this paradox is revealed in Steven Maddox’s brilliant study of the conservation and restoration of historic monuments in Leningrad and its suburbs during and after the Great Patriotic War. In a meticulously researched and fluently written book Maddox succeeds in explaining how and why a war-ravaged city suffering acute shortages invested its scant resources in protecting and reconstructing monuments. Maddox reveals a fascinating history of the successes and failures in preserving Leningrad’s historic built environment during the ‘cataclysmic upheaval and hardship’ (p. 2) of the blockade and its aftermath.

Based on a rich array of published and archival sources, Maddox explains how historic preservation became a powerful mobilizational tool, which bolstered Soviet patriotism, and was increasingly understood as a commemorative act. ‘Through restoration of historic monuments in the city’s centre, Leningraders were rescuing the country’s “glorious history” and writing the narrative of the blockade into the city’s urban fabric’ (p. 96). Restoration of the tsarist architectural heritage allowed the Soviet party-state to project an image of power and strength, but also to ‘imprint the memory of the war onto Leningrad’s historic cityscape’ (p. 197). The development of a new Soviet patriotism in the 1930s, based on the glorious Russian past, combined with the destruction wrought by fascist invaders, and the heroic efforts of Leningraders to preserve and restore monuments, transformed them from symbols of the old tsarist order into Soviet monuments invested with new meanings and symbolism, which served as a repository for local war memories.

Saving Stalin’s Imperial City begins with a survey of the long tradition of activism amongst Leningrad’s preservationist from the late-nineteenth century until the eve of the Second World War. Over this period Leningrad’s municipal authorities cooperated with preservationists to develop policies and systems for monument protection, which informed wartime responses. Chapter two examines how Leningrad’s preservationists were mobilized to protect the city’s cultural and historic landmarks, and their heroic work in extreme circumstances. The shift towards using tsarist and patriotic imagery to mobilize populations invested the historic cityscape with new meanings, which necessitated its protection. Chapters three and four guide the reader through the practical, political and commemorative motives behind the reconstruction of Leningrad’s city centre, and suburban palaces and parks. Preservationists’ enthusiasm for protecting heritage coincided with the Soviet leadership’s desire to demonstrate political power through the reconstruction. These chapters explain how preservationists persuaded decision makers of the necessity of allocating hundreds of millions of roubles, and precious manpower and materials, to restoration. Chapter five places restoration efforts within the context of creating spaces for the official memory of the blockade. Commemorative sites and events, like the Museum of the Defence of Leningrad...
and the anniversary of the lifting of the blockade, became mobilizational tools designed to educate residents about the city, its unique wartime experience, and their postwar responsibilities. Finally, chapter six demonstrates how ‘the ideological stringency accompanying the Cold War’ (p. 184) brought about important shifts in local memories and commemorations of the war and blockade. Consequently, ‘the connection between commemoration and restoration in Leningrad became a victim of the postwar Stalinist ideological clampdown’ (p. 172).

The main protagonists of Saving Stalin’s City Imperial City are Leningrad’s preservationists, and the officials in central government, and the Leningrad soviet and party who determined the fate of historic monuments. Leningrad’s preservation community emerge as skilled and experienced specialists, deeply committed to the city’s heritage, who proved remarkably effective at lobbying for reconstruction in ways in which meshed with official priorities. Maddox largely explores historic preservation from the perspective of this intellectual, cultural and political elite. These individuals saw no paradox in a socialist state recreating the tsarist past as a means of honouring blockade victims. Less clear, however, is what newly trained conservators, construction workers, and the Leningraders who volunteered or were assigned to clear rubble or fallen trees thought they were doing. Maddox gives the voices and experiences of ordinary citizens mobilized for reconstruction less attention. The available source material, of course, might not reveal whether the individuals engaged in reconstructive labour saw their efforts as a form of commemoration. Many Leningraders demonstrated a deep attachment to the city’s architectural and cultural heritage. But, if exposure to the monuments and memories of the blockade were considered necessary to inculcate civic identities and values amongst ‘native’ Leningraders and postwar migrants, and inspire them to rebuild the city, as Maddox himself argues (pp. 152–3), one wonders if historic reconstruction was always understood within the framework established by architects, planners and politicians.

Maddox’s fine study deserves to be widely read. Historians interested in Leningrad/St. Petersburg, late Stalinism, the blockade and historic preservation, as well as those familiar with the city’s architectural treasures, will find much of value here. Students less familiar with the city, and even first-time visitors, will also find their understanding of its historic urban fabric enhanced by reading this book.

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