

RESCUERS OF CIVILISATION

THE EVACUATION OF THE HERMITAGE DURING WWII



Miguel E. Bermudez

WORDS **MIGUEL E. BERMUDEZ @MEB3ART**

SPECIAL THANKS **THE STATE HERMITAGE MUSEUM**

WALLPAPER BACKGROUNDS **COLE & SON**

When German troops attacked the Soviet Union and besieged Leningrad (St Petersburg), during what is called in Russia the Great Patriotic War, a phenomenal heroic act was to happen. At the State Hermitage Museum, an art rescue of enormous magnitude was accomplished moments before an horrifying apocalypse of constant air raids, starvation and extreme weather. Millions of objects were sent to the Urals and kept away from danger thanks to the formidable group of workers and friends of the museum, who together with the common folk and soldiers, took care of the wreckage of the vast and empty museum during the almost two and a half years of the siege.

The events describing the siege of Leningrad and its staggering number of casualties, estimated at over three million on the Russian side, have been well documented, and the loss of life and destruction are considered to be one of the costliest in history. According to a directive sent to Army Group North on September 29, 1941, Hitler's orders were to destroy the city and its entire population: "After the defeat of Soviet Russia there can be no interest in the continued existence of this large urban centre. [...] Following the city's encirclement, requests for surrender negotiations shall be denied, since the problem of relocating and feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for our very existence, we can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population."^[1]

It would be safe to say that the Hermitage and its collection would not have survived the bombardments, battles, fires and the looting of Leningrad under a complete Nazi occupation. We can see the destruction endured by all of the palaces outside the city in many period photographs, after Hitler's orders seeking the destruction of the imperial palaces of Tsarskoye Selo, Peterhof, Ropsha, Strel'na, Gatchina and others that were outside the city's defensive perimeter, as well as for the shipping of many art collections to Germany.^[2]

The operation to protect, package and evacuate most of the Hermitage's collection, that counted over two and a half million objects, must have been one of the largest and most difficult art rescues in history. A series of events dating back to the nineteenth century contributed to the success of the speedy and "officially" unplanned evacuation. Until the last part of the nineteenth century, the Hermitage collection was considered and administered as private property of the Tsars. Access to it was restricted to a very few and, to a large extent, the collection was displayed in different

decorative groups. The lack of apparent interest in large acquisitions for the Hermitage at that time proved to be one of the events that contributed to the collection's survival.

Under Alexander II, the Hermitage was an independent government administration. During his reign, and those of Alexander III and Nicholas II, the Tsars had little involvement in its organization and acquisitions, and while the collection grew little during that time, it was still an important period for art historians, and the curators used this time to organize and catalogue the collection.^[3]

For the first time in its history, the Hermitage had a careful, detailed and scholarly itemization of its collections. Such a list was to prove crucial in any plans to package and transport millions of objects. It proved to be so when, for some unknown reason, the director of the Hermitage, Joseph Abarovich Orbeli, began to prepare for the evacuation even before World War II had started. "In 1937, the Sampson Cathedral was leased to the museum, where a team of joiners pounded boxes of certain sizes for specific objects. This work took four years. What is most interesting, is that no one knew about this, except Orbeli and the head of the special department, Alexander Tarasov. [...] But when the war began, thousands of boxes and packing materials somehow quietly appeared in the Hermitage. Interestingly, workers even knew which boxes and which exit to use to remove the pieces. Everything was very well planned: all the necessary documentation was prepared in advance, a schedule for the order and place of packing was created, a route for transporting them was developed—which stairs to go down, through which staircase, and the sequences to take them out, and so on [...]"^[4]

By the beginning of June 1941, as the Nazi troops approached Russia, Orbeli started seeking orders from Moscow as to the protection of the Hermitage's collection. Lane Bailey, in his Honor Thesis^[3], mentions that Stalin





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specifically ordered Orbeli not to start packing or even accumulating packing materials for an eventual evacuation. These actions could have given the impression of desperation or defeatism, which was to be avoided at all cost. On Sunday, June 22, 1941, the Nazi forces invaded Russia. Without any orders from Moscow, Orbeli ordered all of his employees to start packing that same evening.[5] By the time the green light came from Moscow, Orbeli and his staff were way ahead of the game with already more than half a million pieces of art taken from the museum's galleries and packed in boxes.[6]

The fact that thousands of prepared and numbered boxes secretly stored, numbered and specifically made for most of the collection already existed, together with the accumulated packing materials at a nearby cathedral, is certainly an incredible accomplishment of Orbeli and those that may have known but never discussed it. To this date, we have a detailed and highly organized list of the collection, the availability of prepared and numbered boxes, packing materials in storage and specific detailed plans for evacuating all of the boxes through the galleries. Orbeli and his staff were however to perform many more actions to salvage the art.

Two full trains were able to leave Leningrad with the Hermitage's treasures. The first one quietly departed on July 1, 1941, after the crates having been loaded under heavy guard. It was a hastily assembled train “consisting of two locomotives, an armoured 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.” The separate locomotive was meant to clear the tracks and, in the “interest of security, the train's engineers did not even know their final destination.” The train eventu-

ally arrived near a Ural Mountain city in south-central Russia, where it remained until August 1945.[6] The second train departed with 700,000 objects on July 20, whilst more than one million artifacts remained in storage at the museum. Orbeli had ordered preparations for the evacuation of the remaining objects but curators had only packed 350 crates by mid-August when work had to be stopped. [7] A third planned train was to never depart with the Nazi troops closing all access to the city. Nearly one and a half million objects were evacuated to Sverdlovsk, 1,500 miles away from Leningrad.

All remaining objects were transferred to the lower floors, basement and hastily constructed bomb shelters prepared for the staff and their families, and others in the academic and cultural environment. The evacuated art returned to the Hermitage on October 10, 1945.[6]

One collection of objects however could not be moved from their assigned places within the galleries. The fabulous set of monumental Russian Empire style vases that were so large and heavy (some of them weighing more than ten tons) remained. Made of Russian semi-precious stones mounted in gilt-bronze, these vases took years to produce: “Once the stone had been selected—rich dark-blue lapis lazuli, jasper, pink rhodonite or various porphyries from the Ural Mountains—a craftsman would begin to turn the stone into designs sent by the Tsar's Imperial Cabinet. Often, these designs would be the work of the foremost architects of the day. When completed they were exhibited in the Jordan Staircase of the Winter Palace at Christmas and Easter. The Tsar would pick the pieces he wanted and the rest were given away as presents. Among the most treasured of these vases were those made of lush green Russian malachite, created in a laborious mosaic technique.”[8]

Over two thousand people lived in the shelters of the Her-





mitage and the rest of the Winter Palace during the siege. After each bombardment, soldiers and those that lived there boarded the destroyed windows, cleared the debris and tried to salvage chandeliers and ornaments from the walls. Orbeli and other guides managed to give tours to the soldiers describing the paintings that would have been hanging from the empty frames in the different galleries. One example of the situation inside the Hermitage's shelters was narrated as follows: "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 rheumatism that many Hermitage workers, including Orbeli, suffered from throughout the siege".[9] There were countless acts of bravery displayed to protect and salvage the art collection during those months. Ludmilla Voronikhina, an art historian at the Hermitage tells one of them: "In the winter, freezing water from a burst pipe flooded the cellar. A team of elderly museum guide ladies came to the rescue, descending to the ice-cold underground lake in total darkness, treading gingerly in rubber waders to avoid crushing the submerged vases, dinner services, and Meissen shepherdesses underfoot."[10] The Hermitage lost some treasures and sustained enormous damage during the siege, but the incredible foresight, planning, organization and hard work of a very small staff that was helped by soldiers, sailors and citizens of Leningrad, saved one of the most important art collections in the world. A visit to the State Hermitage Museum today should also be a celebration of the human spirit, and gratitude for the many that helped build, preserve and protect an immense collection in the face of darkness. Orbeli's words summarize that spirit in a short entry of his diary: "On June 22, 1941, all employees of the Hermitage were called to the museum. Hermitage researchers,

security personnel, and technical employees all took part in the packing, spending no more than an hour a day on food and rest. And from the second day, hundreds of people who loved the Hermitage came to our aid... We had to force these people to eat and rest by order. The Hermitage was dearer to them than their strength and health."[11]. ■

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3. *Protecting the Art of Leningrad: The Survival of the Hermitage Museum during the Great Patriotic War*. Lane Bailey. Honor Theses. Ouachita Baptist University. 1997.
4. *The revival of the Hermitage after the war: secret boxes, ruined halls and a feat of museum workers*. Prepared by Alla Bortnikova / IA Dialog. April 8, 2019.
5. Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Nine Hundred Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).
6. L. Y. Livshitz, ed., *Ermitazh v Gody Voiny* (Leningrad: Publishing Council of the State Hermitage, 1987).
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10. Sebastian Harcome, *Labour of Love, Art in Russia*. New-Stateman America, August 8, 2005.
11. Director of the Hermitage Academician I. A. Orbeli. *Hermitage during the blockade*. Archival material. Science and culture. Nonfictional Tales of War. October 3, 2014.