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A Leningrad
Library



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The Saltykov-shchedrin Library in Leningrad

By IVAN BONDARENKO (Leningrad Correspondent)

ON January 14th, 1814, (in the reign of Alexander I, the first Russian public library opened its doors in St. Petersburg. One hundred and thirty years have passed since then. This library, named after the famous Russian writer of the 19th century—Saltykov-shchedrin—possesses 9½ million books covering all subjects. With its 3½ million volumes in foreign languages containing everything ever written about Russia, and with a rich collection of ancient manuscripts such as those of Pushkin, Tolstoy, Voltaire, and archives of the Bastille, it occupies an honourable place among such libraries as the British Museum and the Congressional Library in the U.S.A.

(This month I had an opportunity of paying it a visit.

“You’re looking fine,” I said to Elena Yegorenkova, the director of the Library.

“Do journalists always start a conversation with a compliment?” she asked laughing.

But what I had said was the truth. Two years ago I saw her peaked, ghastly face and her blue swollen hands. She was wearing felt boots and a torn sheepskin coat, and was sliding along the iron sheeting of a roof. Up on that roof, in a biting wind, she and some other women had been throwing German incendiary bombs on to Nevsky Prospect. But now this elegant woman was dressed in a smart suit with her thick brown hair in a neat bob.)

(Vera Struleva, in charge of the technical books, Antonina Gromova, a theoretician in library work, Vera Karatigina, head of the reference library, and a number of other women, are devotedly guarding this world treasury of culture.)

On January 26th, 1942, the lights went out in the public library and the heating system and water works ceased to function. Nevertheless, even on that day people who came to the library for books received them, and read them in the bomb shelter by the light of tiny oil lamps as they warmed themselves around a little iron stove. German bombs and Finnish shells damaged the library to the extent of 77,000,000 rubles, but still its work continued.

After the outbreak of war, the library received only a small number of obligatory copies of books from the All-Union Book Board. Recently, a whole trainload of books came to Leningrad, bringing the remaining copies, and the library is now supplied with all the literature published in the country since the outbreak of war. The library has bought, or been presented with, a number of interesting autographs and manuscripts, among them those of Peter the Great, Suvorov, Garibaldi, Amundsen, Karamzin, Dostoyevsky, Mayakovsky, Yesenin, Blok, Kuprin, Turgenev, Glazunov and Liszt. It also possesses the archives of Laryonov, the military and naval historian and participant in the Susima events; the library of Serova, well-known collector of Russian folklore, and the second part of the archives of Pyatnitsky, Gorky’s publisher.

“A great deal of research work is also being carried on here,” Yelena Yegorenkova told me. Material that will be needed for the restoration of Leningrad is being collected. The first volume of a bibliography of Russian periodicals and the second volume of a Russian bibliography have been published. We are also working on an exhibition, ‘Leningrad in Wartime,’ and have already collected over 100,000 different documents, newspapers, books, posters, food ration cards, photographs and announcements.)

An hour later I entered the reading room. Most of the people there were in military uniform. A young aviation engineer was looking through the November issue of the magazine *Metal Progress*. A tall visitor in spectacles, with a shiny bald head, was reading the August issue of *Journal of the Franklin Institute*. Several young students were studying text books.

This reading room has issued about 60,000 books and answered over 10,000 requests for information in the last year. Periodic exhibitions are organised on the latest books and topical subjects. “Grand Alliance” was the name given to a collection of books and posters, recently displayed in the reading room, illustrating the fighting alliance of the U.S.S.R., Great Britain and the U.S.A.)

Even during the difficult days of the siege, letters from the University of California in San Francisco, by some miraculous means found their way to the library. At the present time a regular correspondence and interchange of books is maintained between these institutions.

Letters and packages arrive from the Australian Council in Melbourne, and from the Archaeological Board of Fighting France in Beyrouth. Material on the defence of Leningrad has recently been requested by the Chinese National Library.

The Saltykov-shchedrin Library's ties with world culture are growing stronger every day and will develop even more after the war.