

Contexts: St Isaacs and the city of St Petersburg

Frederick Lawrence reflects on the building and the city founded by Peter the Great, 300 years ago, as Russia's 'window on the West'

UNLIKE MOSCOW, WHERE THE SKYLINE is punctuated by seven 1930s-style high tower blocks, built on the order of Stalin, and the anonymous modern tower buildings from the Khrushchev era and later, the centre of St Petersburg is dominated by one building, St Isaacs. It was in this building that President Putin welcomed some 40 Heads of Government on 30 May this year to celebrate the tercentenary of the founding of the city by Tsar Peter I (born 1672), commonly called Peter the Great.

Modernisation or, in effect, Westernisation, has been a sporadic theme in Russian history for several centuries as the character of rule has swung, sometimes violently, from autocratic, repressive apparatchik-based government to desperate attempts to imitate developments in the West. It was, therefore, unsurprising and appropriate that the current modernising President was the host of the events to mark an achievement of, arguably, Russia's greatest reformer.

Peter I became co-Tsar with his half-brother in 1682 and it was not until 1689 that he had unrestricted power. By then he had met with, and learned from, many foreigners,

notably the Swiss Lefort and Patrick Gordon from Scotland, learning that was furthered by two extended visits to several countries, including England, in 1697-8 and 1716-17.

To foster contact and trade with the West, Peter began the construction of the city at the East of the Gulf of Finland, on land where formerly Sweden had a naval base (*smolna* is Swedish for tar, used for the maintenance of hulls). In 1712 he made the city his capital and so it remained until moved to Moscow in 1918 during civil war between the Bolsheviks and counter-revolutionaries (the Whites), a war won by Trotsky's Red Army.

A planned city built on marsh, incorporating over 40 islands, it has been called the Venice of the North. It is thought, by many, to be one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Earlier buildings, such as the Winter Palace and the Smolny Convent, are in the Baroque style but, overall, neoclassicism is dominant. Peter obliged all noblemen, who wished to attend his Court, to build a residence there.

St Isaacs, which is now a museum, replaced stone churches built successively in 1727 and 1768, and took 40 years to construct, 1818-58, to the design of a



Frenchman, Auguste de Montferrand. The 48 largest pillars, each 114 tons in weight, required the construction of a special railway for their transport from the quarry in Finland while the dome is covered by 40 kgs of gold.

The site of the February and October revolutions and the assassination of Kirov in 1934, after which the Stalinist purges began, St Petersburg is a city vibrant with culture, industry and its history, not the least of which was the German siege, Aug 1941-Jan 1943.

Left: St Isaacs, as seen from Vasil'yevskiy island in the River Neva, at the far side of Decembrist Square (the site of the failed 1825 coup d'état), with the Admiralty (finished 1823) to the left: on the opposite side of the square are the Senate and Holy Synod buildings Above: the building on a misty early morning (in 1968)

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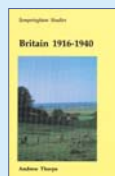
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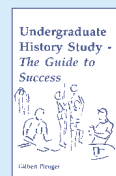
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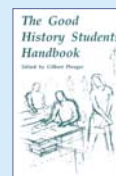
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