

## The city next door

The former president of Finland, J.K. Paasikivi once said in reference to the geopolitical pessimism which arose during the fraught years immediately after the Second World War that Finland can do nothing about its geography. He could just as easily have said: Finland can do nothing about St Petersburg. When the city was founded 300 years ago, for Finland it automatically became a magnetic centre point of sorts, around which the political compass needle often spun in unexpected directions.

Finland's destiny has long been tied to St Petersburg. The city was founded on sparsely populated land plagued by floods and swamps, where Finns and other Finno-Ugric peoples had once lived – at least, this is how Alexander Pushkin described the legend of the city's birth in his poem *The Bronze Horseman* – and was built largely upon the bones of Finnish prisoners of war. To protect Russia's new coastal metropolis, Finland's eastern border was moved many times from the 16th century onwards, first to the bay of Viipuri (Vyborg), then to the Kymi river and finally as far back as the Gulf of Bothnia on the west coast, when the whole of Finland was subjected to St Petersburg's sphere of interest and at the same time, in 1809, gained unprecedented autonomy protected by the tsar himself.

Thus Finland's new capital city, Helsinki, was built as a front garden for St Petersburg, its *cour d'honneur* exuding neoclassical coolness and austerity, slightly more modern and functional, cleaner and more open than its model.

Alongside its newfound freedom, there also grew a tension, and all that remained of the promises of the emperor's grandfather or great-great uncle was a thin, symbolic memory, when at the end of the 19th century the process of russification was due to commence. In Eino Leino's handsome resistance poem from February 1899, a choking, poisonous fog smothers the gleaming image of St Petersburg and finally consumes the statue of the 'liberator' Tsar Alexander and his tyrannical division marching across the square. Several decades later a Finnish science-fiction writer was prepared to blast the whole of St Petersburg from the face of the earth with an enormous bomb.

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It is unfortunate that the 300th anniversary of St Petersburg has not got many more Finnish historians and writers on the move. For instance, the story of post-war Leningrad, which became the first destination for mass tourism from Finland and a favoured place of study, has never been told. *S:t Petersburg – metropolen bakom hörnet* ('St Petersburg, the metropolis round the corner') depicts another side to the city.

The book, written by three young Finland-Swedish authors with many ties to post-communist St Petersburg, is a rather romantic, anecdotal work, though it does provide a good number of addresses and contacts. It is also one of the first guides to St Petersburg to open the door to finding further information by listing a variety of interesting websites.

The text is characterized by an unprejudiced approach, a freshness of ideas and a love of the city, which has become their second home. It takes the reader to the city's trendy nightclubs, on guided tours of a prison, to the gambling clubs of the *nouveau riche*, describes terrible memories of the 900-day siege and famine and the landscape of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Most impressive are perhaps the chapters dealing with living in St Petersburg: life in a former luxury house, under the constant beady eyes of greedy estate agents, now shared between a number of different families, a description of the time of Stalin's 'new Leningrad' and the arrival of the wealthy middle classes to the former bastion of party cronies.

The depiction of life in villas (*dachas*) on the outskirts of St Petersburg, in formerly Finnish villages, is particularly charming. Reading this section of the book, one cannot help thinking that it is in precisely these communities of equal villa inhabitants, the idyll of shared duty and communal responsibility, that the future civil society of Russia may first emerge.

*Translated by David Hackston*