

A VISIT TO RUSSIA
by Thomas T. Hoopes



DR. THOMAS T. HOOPES

In June of 1966 there was held in Moscow and Leningrad of the U.S.S.R., the fourth international Congress of Museums of Arms and Military History. As Curator Emeritus of the City Art Museum of St. Louis, I attended to represent that institution.

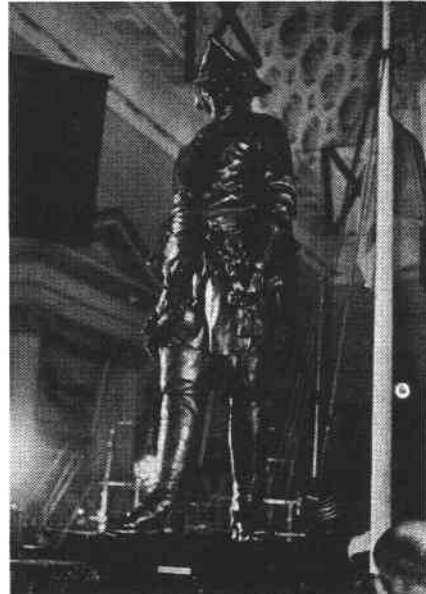
The Delegates, from arms museums all over the world, met in the Museum of the Armed Forces of the Soviet Union in Moscow. We were warmly received by the Soviet authorities, and were accorded most gracious hospitality and every professional courtesy. In the Museum of the Armed Forces we found many interesting exhibits of arms and equipment from the first and second World Wars. (The latter, however, is never mentioned in Russia; it is known only as "The Great Patriotic War" — between Russia and Germany; no mention is made of any allies on the Russian side, and from the American arms and motor vehicles exhibited in the Russian museums all markings and nameplates indicating an origin in the United States have been carefully stripped away.)

We were entertained in the handsome Officers' Club of the Soviet Armed Forces and thereafter taken to the Battlefield of Borodino, where Napoleon met his first serious setback of the Russian campaign. Returning thence to Moscow we inspected a remarkable diorama of the Battle of Borodino.

A neat small museum at the site contains memorabilia and a park of cannon collected after the hostilities. Then we were taken on a tour of the Museum of the Imperial Palace, an amazing place. In addition to the ceremonial coaches and sleighs of the Czars, the court gowns of Catherine the Great (which are in excellent preservation since she never wore a gown twice) and the beautiful enamelled Easter eggs by Faberge which the Czar used to give to his favorites. There is a stupendous collection of Arms and Armor.

Among the armor items perhaps the most important is the dated (1216 A.D.) Norman type helmet of Alexander Nevski, although it has competition from a Byzantine helmet with niello decoration of the thirteenth century and from a Polish helmet with damascene work in gold and an enamelled nasal holder. There is a sixteenth century Polish armor of chain mail, and another Polish armor a couple of centuries later which has a peculiar arm shield with a window. Among Eastern items is a char aina armor ("of the four mirrors") which is completely and richly damascened. Among the weapons should be mentioned a fine engraved and gilded lance point, many fine Oriental swords with enamelled and jewelled decoration and a Cingalese trousse with gilt hilt parts and accessories.

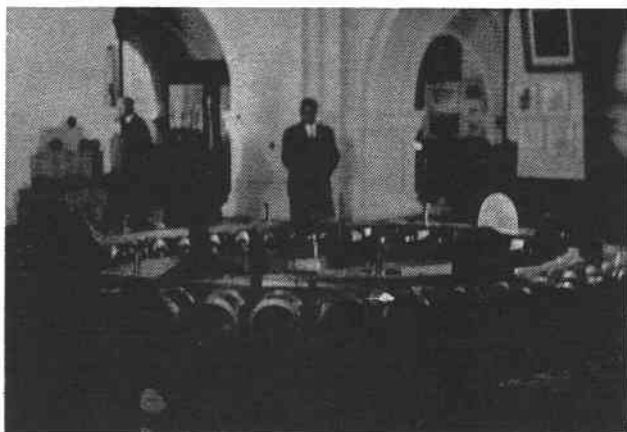
The firearms are of varied types and of uniformly high quality. A German wheellock gun has a false lockplate ajoure and gilt. A fine pair of wheellock pistols were made in the Kremlin by Dutch artisans brought there by Peter the Great. There are many wheellock type guns having Baltic snaphaunce type locks and many snaphaunce guns and pistols with revolver type multifiring mechanisms. There is a repeating flintlock by Kaspar Kalthoff with a seventeenth century date difficult to read from outside the case. There are several breech-loading flintlocks; among the signatures: "Albert Hetner a Breslau." Among many, many other finely carved and gilt firearms is one with the monogram "E. P." and a concealed auxiliary pan cover inside the base of the frizzen.



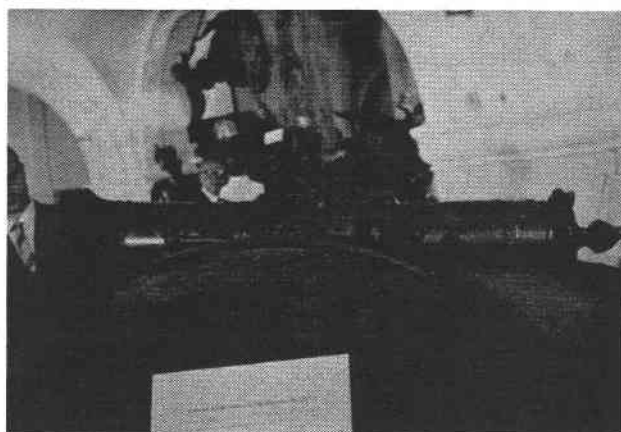
STATUE OF PETER THE GREAT
AS A NAVAL OFFICER, MARITIME
MUSEUM, LENINGRAD, U.S.S.R.

From Moscow the Congress moved on to Leningrad. My wife and I found ourselves sharing a sleeping compartment with two other male delegates. As one of them came equipped with a flask of excellent Bourbon we had a jolly trip! Upon our arrival we visited a number of specialized institutions including the Maritime Museum (full of beautiful ship models including one made by Peter the Great himself), the Museum of Military Medicine, and the Artillery Museum. In this last there were some fascinating exhibits. One multi-shot cannon consisted of a number of small bombards mounted around the periphery of a

horizontal ring. A small swivel gun of 1661-73, inlaid with brass, has a breech-loading mechanism with a right-and-left-sliding breech block operated by a rack and pinion. A bronze cannon dated 1753 has an oval, horizontal bore; another bronze cannon has a rifled barrel, while still others have bores of oval, rectangular, and complicated fantastical shapes. One extraordinarily weapon known, we were told, as "The three Snakes Gun" consisted of three small swivel guns welded together, end to end. There is an excellent exhibit of machinery for shaping and boring bronze cannon.



REVOLVING "ORGAN BATTERY" ARTILLERY MUSEUM, LENINGRAD, U.S.S.R.

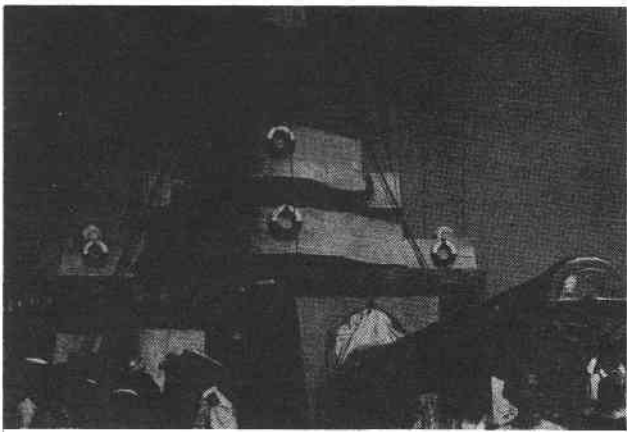


BRONZE CANNON, ARTILLERY MUSEUM LENINGRAD, U.S.S.R.

We visited the cruiser "Aurora" which on October 25th., 1917 fired the first shot against the Winter Palace of the Czar and signalled the outbreak of the Communist revolution. It is now permanently moored in Leningrad, and serves as a Museum of the military participation in the revolution. We also saw the "Smolny" (formerly a monastery) where the first meetings of the Supreme Soviet were held, and the enormous cemetery where lie buried the three hundred thousand citizens of Leningrad who perished during the siege of the city by the Germans in the "Great Patriotic War." We visited the palace of Pedrovoretz, built by Peter the Great in 1726, with its spacious park and 146 different fountains. This palace had been completely destroyed by the Germans during the siege, but the Russians had good plans, photographs and measurements, and they have restored it exactly as it used to be.

At last we came to the Hermitage museum, an almost incredible institution. It has over eighteen miles of exhibition galleries, plus many more of storage and study rooms. The official in charge of the collection of arms and armor, Mr. Leonid I. Tarasyuk most graciously offered us the courtesies of his installation, supplying us with a work bench and tools and permitting us to examine and disassemble specimens from the collection. It was a never-to-be-forgotten opportunity, and our only regret was that so little time was available, due to our busy schedule.

In honor of the Congress the Museum had prepared a special exhibition of one-hand firearms which included a beautiful Portugese type wheellock pistol with a stock of carved ivory, a pair of the characteristic wheellock pistols from Ripoll with encasement of ajoure silver, and many other fine pieces. But of course the main attraction was the permanent exhibit of arms and armor which, though not the largest, is one of the finest in quality in the world. There are some 42 suits of armor, including, a Gothic suit (apparently somewhat composed), and two fantastic suits of the XVI century, one with a closed helmet with bird-beak mask, the other imitating the puffed and slashed civil costume of the period with an anthropomorphic helmet frontal. There is a fine suit of jousting armor for the Deutsches Gestech or German style joust without a barrier.



THE CRUISER "AURORA" WHICH FIRED THE FIRST SHOT OF THE COMMUNIST REVOLUTION



THE "GREAT CANNON OF THE KREMLIN" CAST 1584, BORE 36", NEVER FIRED

Continuing at random, a note of some of the treasures in the Hermitage Collection: there are 36 helmets and 16 shields, including magnificent embossed parade specimens of both. There are 94 swords and some 59 firearms. Among these is a magnificent wheellock gun with the stock completely overlaid with ivory. The lock and barrel are chiselled in the fashion typical of the Sadeler family, with a representation of Orpheus charming the birds. There are wheellock guns for three shots superimposed, also for two shots. There are magnificent examples of the chased and gilded Landesknecht daggers of the "Holbein" type. There is a fine swept-hilted rapier, the hilt carved with battle scenes in high relief. There is a whole case of guns and pistols in the Cominazzo style, and mounted with wheel, snaphaunce and flintlocks. Examples of the rare Sardinian flintlocks are to be found with both brass and steel mountings. A rare throwing axe not too unlike a tomahawk is German, XV century. A repeating flintlock gun in the Danish style is signed: "Cousin a Paris." An elaborate snaphaunce gun from about 1605-1610 was probably a "Masterpiece" — made to demonstrate a journeyman's qualification to become a master gunsmith. There is a fine matchlock revolver gun, and a beautiful Oriental quiver and arrows of the XV-XVI centuries.

In the reserve collection, where I could study the specimens in detail, I found a peculiar flintlock musket in which the frizzen swings outward, to the right, instead of forward toward the gun-muzzle. A finely-carved wheellock rifle signed by J. A. Mahr has internal gearing to increase the speed of revolution of the wheel. A wheellock rifle dated 1553 has the cheek side of the stock overlaid with plates of staghorn engraved with designs after contemporary printed engravings; a group of men contending at single-stick, and a scene in a women's bath house. And Harry Knode would have enjoyed a case containing miniature flintlock rifle, fowling piece, blunderbuss, pair flintlock pistols and pair flintlock revolvers.

But all too soon our time was up, and the Congress adjourned. Together with about a dozen of the delegates my wife and I stayed on in Russia for another week, visiting the cities of Klev and Tblisi. However, although we visited a number of museums and military monuments we saw little of great significance in the history of arms and armor.