The Nazi-initiated Siege of Leningrad (St. Petersburg) lasted 872 days, from September 1941 – January 1944. Over 1 million civilians died from air raid shelling, fires, and starvation. The two-and-a-half year siege caused the greatest destruction and the largest loss of life ever known in a modern city. The Red Army refused to surrender to Hitler. They had one supply road into and out of the city and brought in rations for workers and the military. Half of the food rations literally consisted of sawdust and reports of cannibalism were frequent. In the midst of this uncivilized chaos and needless destruction of humanity, The Hermitage Museum packed up its massive collection of art (from antiquity to 1941), to be sent to Siberia in 3 enormous train shipments. Anything that could be moved was, including everything that the Nazis wanted for Hitler’s planned art museum.

It is here that Debra Dean places the protagonist. Though a fictitious account by many standards, Dean’s novel seeks to portray one of the women that stayed behind to help pack up the museum. When we meet her, Marina is reliving her youth as an embattled lover of great art and indeed, the everyday beauty of life. Though she has grown old now and her mind falters, she can remember the days before and during the siege with lucid clarity. She recalls how she would not cede that the museum was lost, though the galleries emptied out one by one. With other docents, she started to mentally catalog the collection, creating a memory palace. Eventually, after the siege has ended and many of Marina’s family are dead and gone, she gives a final tour to several young naval cadets and their captain. With undiminished gusto, she recreates the vivid paintings with her words, the real, mythical and biblical subjects springing to life. Though only the gilt frames remain, Marina reaptures the cherished art collection for the boys, who are symbols of Russia’s future. For this she has toiled tirelessly, becoming a savior and madonna of Leningrad herself. Image of The Hermitage reproduced from The Rape of Europa (DVD) directed by Richard Berge, c.2007.
Discussion questions

- Could you envision the art Marina/Dean described so clearly? And/or have you ever been to The Hermitage?

- How is art portrayed in the novel as a means of survival? Is this realistic? Comforting?

- What description of a work of art stood out to you most?

- This novel is the first for Debra Dean, a former New York theatre actress. What did you think?

- Did you have an emotional response to the high art at the museum contrasted with the debasement of human existence during war? If so, tell us why.

- The “memory palace” is much like the mandala of Buddhist and Hindu tradition, where multidimensional structures are created out of imagination. How do the constructions of memory palaces affect different people in the story?

- What is the importance of continuing to tell stories of World War II? What is the relevance to the political situation in the United States, or around the world, today?

Further Reading


