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Oreshek, the Nut That Peter the Great Cracked

By Yelena Minenko

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The medieval fortress was once a political prison that housed Ivan VI. **Yelena Minenko**

ORESHEK, Leningrad Region — Mysterious, half-forgotten and little visited by tourists, the medieval fortress of Oreshek is situated at the source of the Neva River in Lake Ladoga, about 50 kilometers from St. Petersburg. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the small island with majestic fortifying stone walls has guarded the outlet from Lake Ladoga to the Neva for more than 600 years, during which it has seen an extraordinary number of historic events.

Oreshek is now open to the public and makes a fascinating trip. In its present-day form, the fortress is a classic example of 16th-century fortification, though the date of its foundation goes back to the 1320s when the Neva's banks were the territory of the Novgorod principality.

The site was desirable for both the Russians and the Swedes because of its advantageous location on the crucial trade route between Russia and Western Europe. The fortress, founded

by Alexander Nevsky's grandson Yury as Russia's response to the Swedish outpost of Vyborg, founded in 1293, solved the question of trade relations and strengthened the economic position of the ancient Russian state.

"In peacetime, trade ships entered the fortress through the gates in the water, merchants paid fees and the town grew and flourished; and when it became too cramped to live there, two neighboring villages were founded: The present Morozov and Schlisselburg," said Sergei Tsherbovich, a historian and local tour guide.

Sweden attempted to capture the fortress of Oreshek on many occasions, causing it to change hands several times. The Swedes succeeded definitively at the beginning of the 17th century when Russia sank into dynastic discords known as the Time of Troubles. When the Swedes occupied the fortress, they translated the name Oreshek into Swedish and named it Nöteborg, meaning "nut town."

"There are two versions of the origin of the name," Tsherbovich said.

"One is that there were a lot of nut trees on the island, but as you can see there aren't any now, so the second version is more believable: That the nut-like shape of the island gave the fortress its name."

Ninety years of Swedish occupation ended at the beginning of the 18th century when Peter I started the Great Northern War in a desire to regain the Neva's territories and an outlet to the high seas. In 1702, Peter took the fortress after a bloody battle. Hundreds of Russian soldiers died in the attack, and are buried in a mass grave on the island. Peter I would later say that "the nut was indeed rather hard, but happily cracked." He renamed the fortress as Schlisselburg (from the German Schlüsselburg, meaning "key town") as it gave him an outlet to the Baltic Sea.

With the construction of the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg and the fortress of Kronstadt on Kotlin Island, and the expansion of Russian territory, Schlisselburg lost its military importance. After Peter's death the fortress became a political prison.

The fortress was a very convenient prison, being located not too far from St. Petersburg and yet hidden from curious eyes. With its six-meter high walls, insular location and armed garrison, Oreshek was something of a Russian Chateau d'If, from which it was impossible to escape. Certainly, no one managed this feat during the 200 years of the prison's existence.

The walls of the former barracks once contained within them Russia's Man in the Iron Mask: Ivan VI, the emperor crowned as a child and soon dethroned, who spent all his life imprisoned and was killed during an attempt made to free him in 1764. Other prisoners included the Decembrists, who waited for their departure to Siberia from the so-called Secret House, and the Narodnaya Volya (People's Will) terrorists who assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881.

The members of the People's Will organization were kept in the New Prison, built in 1884 especially for their life imprisonment. Almost half of them died or were executed in imprisonment, some went mad, and several others killed themselves. Only a handful managed to survive and live for any significant period of time after amnesty in 1905-1906, most notably Nikolai Morozov, who survived 20 years in prison, two revolutions, the civil war

and World War II, and eventually died at the age of 92. A nearby village on the right bank of the Neva is named after him.

Today, the Oreshek museum offers tours of the territory of the fortress, as well as excursions to the so-called New Prison and Old Prison (Secret House), with restored 19th century interiors.

The New Prison houses solitary cells and a display devoted to the revolutionary activity of the prisoners and the conditions in which they were kept.

World War II brought with it a new chapter in the island's history. In 1941, the Germans entered the town of Shlisselburg, located on the left bank of the Neva opposite the fortress, but encouraged by their swift success — by taking Schlisselburg, the Germans closed the circle of their siege of Leningrad, as St. Petersburg was then known — and didn't bother to occupy the fortress. Soviet scouts soon worked this out and placed a garrison there. The defense lasted for 500 days, with the medieval fortress ultimately proving resistant to modern weapons, though it was severely damaged.

Oreshek sustained more damage during the 500 days of artillery shelling than it had during all of the past six centuries.

During Soviet times, restoration work continued mainly because Alexander Ulyanov, Lenin's elder brother, was hanged on the island in 1887 after being sentenced to death for plotting against Alexander III. The outer walls and towers were restored, which was a huge amount of work, but the restoration work required by the museum now is even greater.

Last year, the State Museum of the History of St. Petersburg, whose branches include the Peter and Paul Fortress and Oreshek, received a grant under the "Castle to Castle" project for the creation of a multifunctional information center at Oreshek, which is due to start work in 2014. The museum is currently in search of an investor.

The Oreshek fortress is open to the public daily from May 1 to Oct. 31 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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