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‘The Train Didn't Stop’

St. Petersburg is shaken but strong after a deadly subway bombing.

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A woman lights a candle at an entrance of the Sennaya Ploshchad subway station after an explosion in St. Petersburg, April 3, 2017. **Yevgeny Kurskov / AP**

Russians are a famously tough people, but nobody gets used to terrorism. The people who emerged Monday afternoon from the St. Petersburg subway, bloodied and bruised, were visibly shaken, after an explosion ripped apart a train car traveling between two busy stations.

The bomb went off after the train left Sennaya Ploshchad station. Smoking and damaged, it then pulled into Tekhnologichesky Institut station, which serves as a major transport hub, connecting two major subway lines.

“First there was black smoke and then the crowd rushed out,” said Sergei, a mobile phone salesman who was near the station at the time of the blast.

“I had to move out of the way because there were so many people. First there were firetrucks, then ambulances, then the Investigative Committee, then the OMON [special forces].”

False reports of a bus explosion on St. Petersburg’s Petrograd Side quickly spread throughout the city, as locals tied up phone lines, trying to call loved ones, to make sure they were safe. All fares on public transportation were lifted for the afternoon and evening, as the subway system — the city’s lifeblood — was temporarily shut down.

“I passed out when I heard about it on TV. My daughter was there. She was supposed to travel from the subway station. She was there for her job,” said a woman named Anastasiya Ivanovna, a pensioner who lives near Sennaya Ploshchad.

“I was so worried,” she said. “It’s a terrible thing. Why did it happen? I don’t know. It’s terrifying. The people traveling were defenseless. They didn’t expect anything.”

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Seven years ago, Moscow experienced a similar deadly attack, when two women walked into the Moscow subway and blew themselves up, taking 41 passengers with them and wounding dozens more. There was only one explosion in today’s attack in St. Petersburg, but police say they also discovered and disarmed a second bomb (reportedly five times more powerful).

An eyewitness in St. Petersburg on Monday told the news agency RBC that she was in the adjoining train car when the bomb went off.

“The train car was crowded; people were sitting and standing,” she said. “The explosion happened on the track between two subway stations. There was a thundering clap, then a strong smell: smoke. We went to the other end of the train car. People crowded together. Two women passed out.

"All of this happened while the train car was in motion — the train didn’t stop. Everyone left the train at Tekhnologichesky Institut station. There, we saw that the neighboring train car was shattered, the windows broken, there was no light, and there was blood everywhere.”

Seven years ago, there were reports that Moscow taxi drivers gouged customers trying to get to (and away from) the bombed subway stations. On Monday, it was a different story in St. Petersburg, where taxi services and rideshare companies offered free rides to customers near the blast site. The city’s public transportation also suspended all fares.

Even more impressive, Internet users launched a campaign using the hashtag #домой (#home) to help coordinate free rides for people trying to get back home. More than a hundred ordinary people shared their contact information, offering help to total strangers. The effort was organized on multiple social media, including Telegram, Vkontakte, and Google Docs.

At Sennaya Ploshchad, people from across St. Petersburg set up a makeshift memorial, laying flowers for the victims of the bombing. The city governor also declared a three-day period of mourning.

By Monday evening, hard as it might be to believe, normal life was already returning to St. Petersburg, though unusually bad gridlock paralyzed downtown streets — an eerie reminder of the tragedy that occurred just hours earlier.

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