

Leningrad under Water: Writing an Urban Environmental History of the Leningrad Flood of September 1924

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This paper reflects on a current book project, in particular the challenges of trying to write an urban environmental history of the Leningrad flood of 23 September 1924. That afternoon hurricane strength winds tracking along the Gulf of Finland pushed a huge wall of water back up the River Neva, flooding its delta and two-thirds of Leningrad. At its peak the Neva rose 380 centimetres above normal level. This paper seeks to do two main things, first to briefly introduce the wider book project, explaining in the process how Leningrad, its citizens, and the wider Bolshevik party-state responded to this emergency. Critically, the flood hit at a troubling moment of flux and transition in the Revolution and in city's story and self-identity. The floodwaters can therefore serve as a prism for exploring the history of 1924 and the years of the New Economic Policy. Second, the paper focuses on a key chapter of the book, which rethinks the flood as a "natural" disaster and moment of crisis. Flooding was a normal part of this environment, rather than something that was exceptional. The paper therefore examines the long history of flooding in this landscape, and the environmental forces that produced regular urban flooding. Rather than a crisis produced by climatic forces on 23 September 1924, this flood was the result of the confluence of geography, landscape, and centuries of human decision making about urban planning, land use, and construction in a water-logged and low-lying natural environment.