

Flag Day

Smith

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'Flag Day in Russia is a day of hope. It's a reminder of what's possible when people unite for a cause. [...] There's something about national flags. The sight of them fluttering in the wind can cause emotion in even the most jaded beings' ('Russia National Flag Day...' n.d.).

I noticed the signs advertising Russia's National Flag Day on the Saint Petersburg metro shortly after I arrived in the city at the beginning of August 2022. Although it wasn't easy for me to find out exactly what was happening, in part because my Russian isn't very good, I'm pleased to report that on Flag Day itself, I did eventually manage to find at least two relevant things. The first one was a small stage decorated with red, white, and blue balloons near Palace Square in the center of town. But nothing much was happening there, so I sat on a bench for a while and took some photographs.



The second one was the main event, which took place that evening in Saint Isaac's Square. Here was a much bigger stage, the kind you might see at a rock festival or a big political rally, populated by all kinds of performers: singers, dancers, a couple of glamorous TV-style comperes, and a troupe of young, enthusiastic synchronized flag wavers.



The area directly in front of the stage was cordoned off by a temporary metal perimeter fence. For an ordinary member of the public to access the space, they had to pass through one of the security stations that were dotted intermittently around the fence. But no one, it seems, had either wanted or been able to do that. Apart from the police and some security staff, the area in front of the stage was deserted. It seems the 'people of Saint Petersburg,' most of them, had for whatever reason conspicuously absented themselves from the whole event; had met every song and every meticulously choreographed dance routine with silence; had, six months after the 'special military operation' in Ukraine began, resisted the comperes' injunctions to identify with 'our' national story and decided to do something else instead.



The next day I discovered a short news story about the event in Saint Isaac's Square. It consisted of a headline—'National Flag Day celebrated in Saint Petersburg, Russia'; three different photographs, by Irina Motina, with identical captions: 'People participate in the National Flag Day celebrations in Saint Petersburg, Russia, Aug. 22, 2022'; and no body text. The story appeared in the Central Committee for the Chinese Communist Party's *People's Daily Online* (Wu and Liang 2022). Courtesy of *People's Daily*, I discovered that shortly after I'd left Saint Isaac's Square that evening, a giant Russian flag had been unfurled there, under which, according to one of Irina Motina's color photographs, several people do appear to have enjoyed themselves. And to the side of which, according to another one of Motina's photographs, several more people also appear to have enjoyed themselves, waving national flags and, of course, being photographed by Irina Motina.

Bibliography

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Author's bio

The author of this visual essay chose to be pseudonymized.

Something exciting happened on National Flag Day this year in Saint Petersburg. There was a big concert in Saint Isaac's Square. I went along. There was a massive stage there, a huge sound system, singers, dancers, flag wavers, and two glamorous comperes. 'This is the story of our country!' they announced. 'Our Russia!' they said. 'Tell your kids!' It was very special. I swear there was almost no one there, in front of the stage. Apart from security. The only ordinary people I saw there were people like me, rubberneckers, peering with phones through holes in the perimeter fence. Not much happened at the end of every song, including the national anthem. Not a clap or a cheer. And it was strange that no one on stage seemed to care very much. They just carried on doing their thing. All very professional. Very well done. A couple of days later I met Masha in a fancy café on Marata Street. We had breakfast together. Scrambled eggs, coffee, and ibuprofen. Masha wanted to know more about what I was planning to do. 'I'm just going to follow you around and take some pictures,' I said. 'Nothing special, no big deal. No face shots either! We'll go to the edge of town, Devyatkino, Ribatskoye, Primorskaya. Then we'll come back here and hang out in Saint Isaac's Square for a bit, where that big Flag Day concert was.' 'I see,' she said. 'The idea is that you went to the concert.' 'I did?' 'Yes, you did. Well, not you exactly, I don't know if you went to the concert or not. Did you?' 'No, of course not!' 'Right, well I'm talking about the person I want you to play in my photo story. She goes to the concert but she can't stay. She just can't. So she leaves. And goes to Devyatkino instead.' 'And Ribatskoye and Primorskaya?' said Masha. 'Exactly!' But she has to be seen to be leaving.' 'Believing in what?' 'Seen to be LEAVING!' I said. 'Absenting herself.' 'Oh, I see!' said Masha, cautiously.









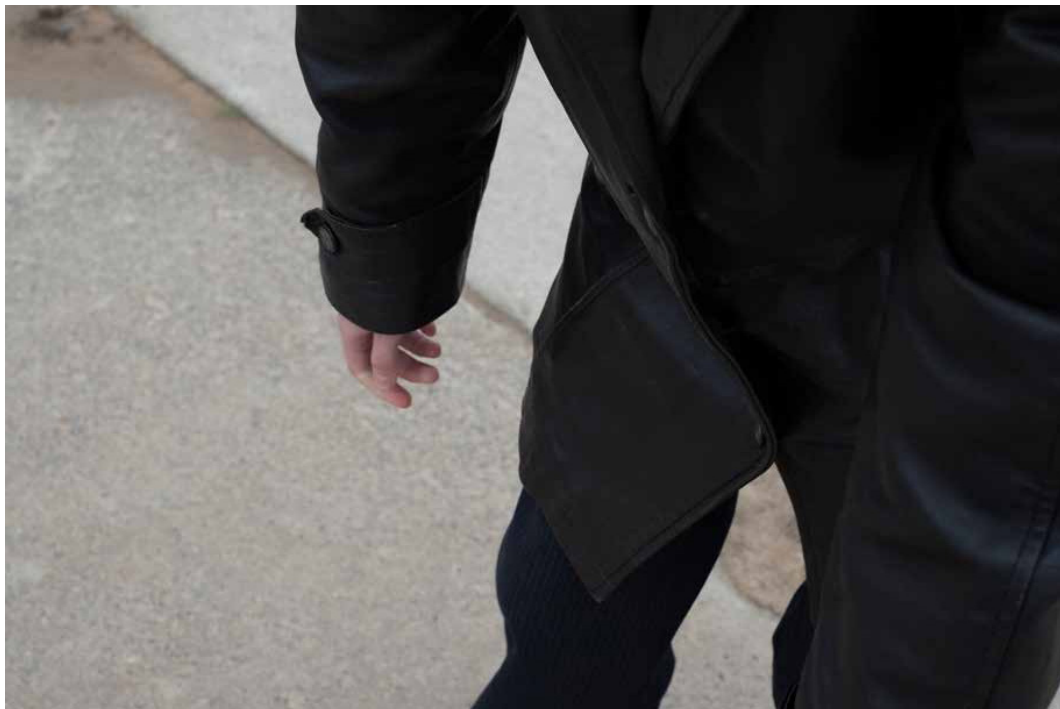
Her name's Bascia. Go Bascia!



















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