



Semen Aronovich Rotnitski

(1915 - 2004) b. Minsk, Byelorussia
(Belarus), Russian Empire

The Impassioned Years:

Partisans of Pskov 1975-1990

oil on canvas

Painted later in the artist's life, this monumental canvas draws on Semen Aronovich Rotnitski's own experiences in the Soviet military during World War II. As a soldier, Rotnitski witnessed firsthand one of history's most devastating conflicts.



This painting shows a group of Partisan fighters. The Partisans were underground guerilla fighters who secretly worked to resist Nazi occupation in their homeland. They worked tirelessly to slow and incapacitate the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, working to disable tanks, damage railway bridges, and derail enemy trains. They blew up ammunition dumps and German transport and communications facilities, sabotaged factories, and ambushed small German units. Additionally, they obstructed Nazi communication networks, gathered intelligence for the Allied armies, and published anti-Nazi underground newspapers and leaflets.

The group of Partisans pictured here is from the city of Pskov, which had been under German occupation from 1941 to 1944. Its proximity to Leningrad (modern-day Saint Petersburg) placed it near the frontlines of one of the war's longest and deadliest sieges. In 1941, German invaders cut off Leningrad's land routes, preventing food and supplies from getting to the people within the city border while simultaneously bombing the city. Many residents starved during the winter of 1941-1942, and the Soviets had to deliver supplies to the city by air or by ship over Lake Ladoga. When the lake froze over in the winter, they built a highway on the lake and named it the "Road of Life."

After 872 days, the siege was officially broken in January of 1944, with Pskov similarly reclaimed in July of that year. The toll on civilians in both cities was staggering; in Pskov, a large portion of the population perished, while Leningrad lost more than 1.5 million people making it possibly the deadliest siege in history. It was thanks in part to scrappy Partisan groups, like the one depicted here, that the Soviets successfully ousted the Germans from Pskov and Leningrad.

The painting's expressive brushstrokes convey the emotion of a people determined not to surrender: farmers turned fighters, teenagers with captured German machine guns, and soldiers moving through a sparse, cold landscape. Beyond recounting military strategy or victory, Rotnitski's work is an act of remembrance. It honors not just battles won, but the lived realities of those who resisted occupation, suffered siege, endured loss and pressed onward.

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