ST PETERSBURG

Decline... and fall?

It's farewell to the segregated tram corridor in Moskovsky Prospect - LM-99 car 1311 speeds through a few weeks before this fine section of reserved track was closed on 11 April 2006. V. Waldin

Part two

Despite believing that recent official transport policy in Russia's former capital has been a disaster, independent transport planner **Vladimir Waldin** argues that there are grounds for hope. In the second part of his survey, he explains developments since 2005... and argues for a policy U-turn.

The short two-year period until autumn 2005 turned out to be more promising for the tramways of Sankt Peterburg (St Petersburg). A new management lifted the system out of the red and even increased traffic on some lines. The city accepted a three-year development plan, reconstructing some lines for increased speed, overhauling utilities, and purchase of new tramcars. However, events have shown that even this moderate plan has failed - the reality has been further decline.

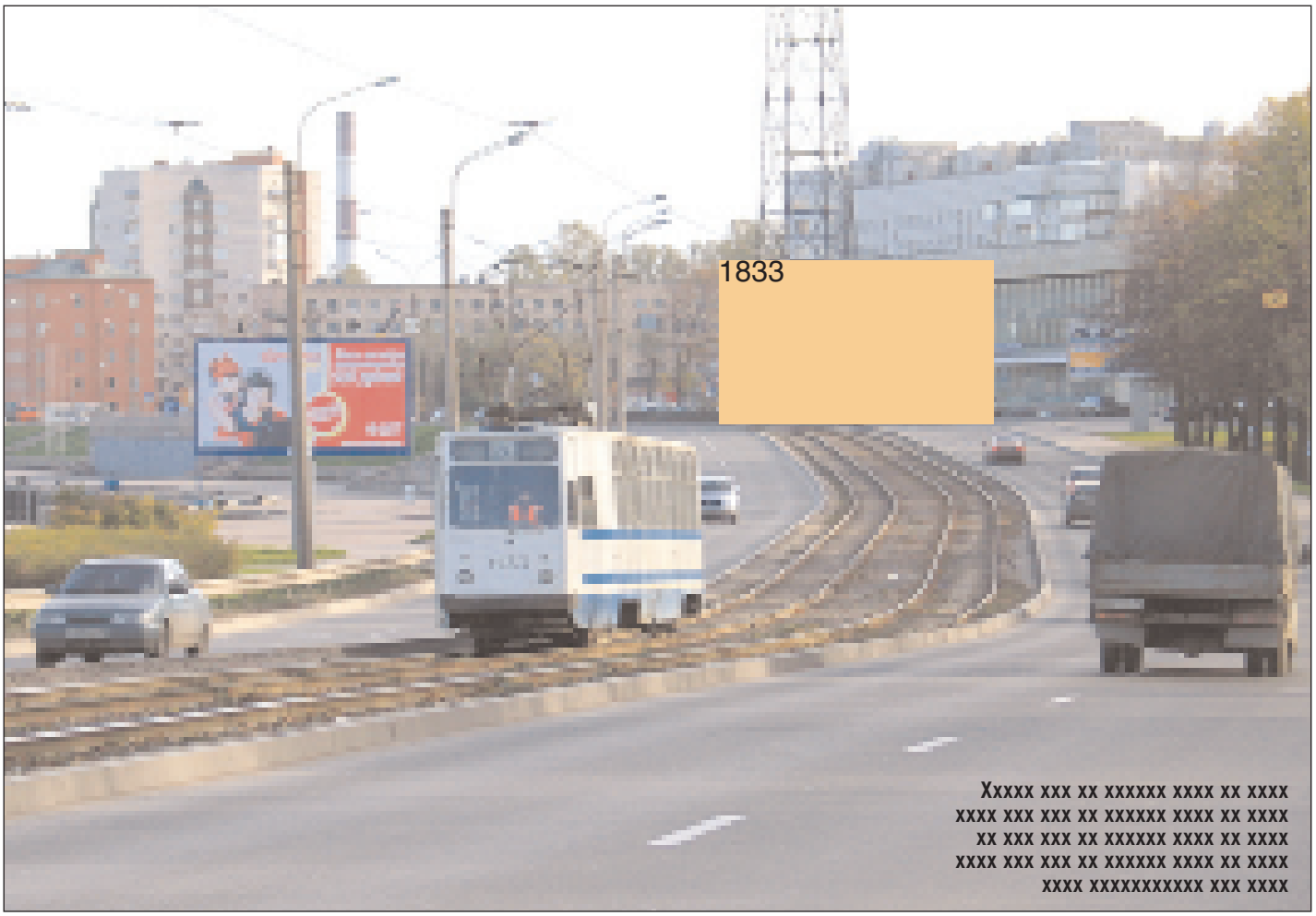
A further management change in autumn 2005 brought back the principles of the 1980s/90s and the closure of almost 8km/5 miles of tracks in the city centre. One by one three key sections, entire segments with junctions, closed to make space for car traffic. There were multiple public announcements that "trams should be taken away from the city centre", but a line also closed at Piskaryovsky Prospekt, a large residential area with no prospect of metro stations in the near future. Subsequent scrappings even included track overhauled less than five years.

Overall, the last few years have seen an acceleration of the trends of the last two decades: The result is that passenger satisfaction has fallen to its lowest level, passenger numbers are also at their lowest, the reputation of being a tram employee has fallen and even those officials who support the tram are visibly abashed: what should we make of all of that?

Altogether the closures of 2005-07 affected almost 35km/22 miles of unduplicated track and led to a situation where the network is split into two, three or even four disconnected parts in the case of any renewal or disruptive traffic accident. The passenger car fleet fell to 865 by January 2007, and the average operating speed was under 13km/h (8mph), according to active regulations. Of course this further dramatically declines in the case of accident; the 2006 figure shows that the annual downtime for trams and trolleybuses caused by traffic disruptions added up to 13 221 hours, or 550 days. It is not clear whether this figure covers downtime caused by derailments due to the poor state of track and cars, which happen on average twice a day.

Is there any light at the end of the tunnel?

Next issue - a detailed account of the multi-million scheme for a brand new system, and the recent development work carried out by UK consultant Mott MacDonald.



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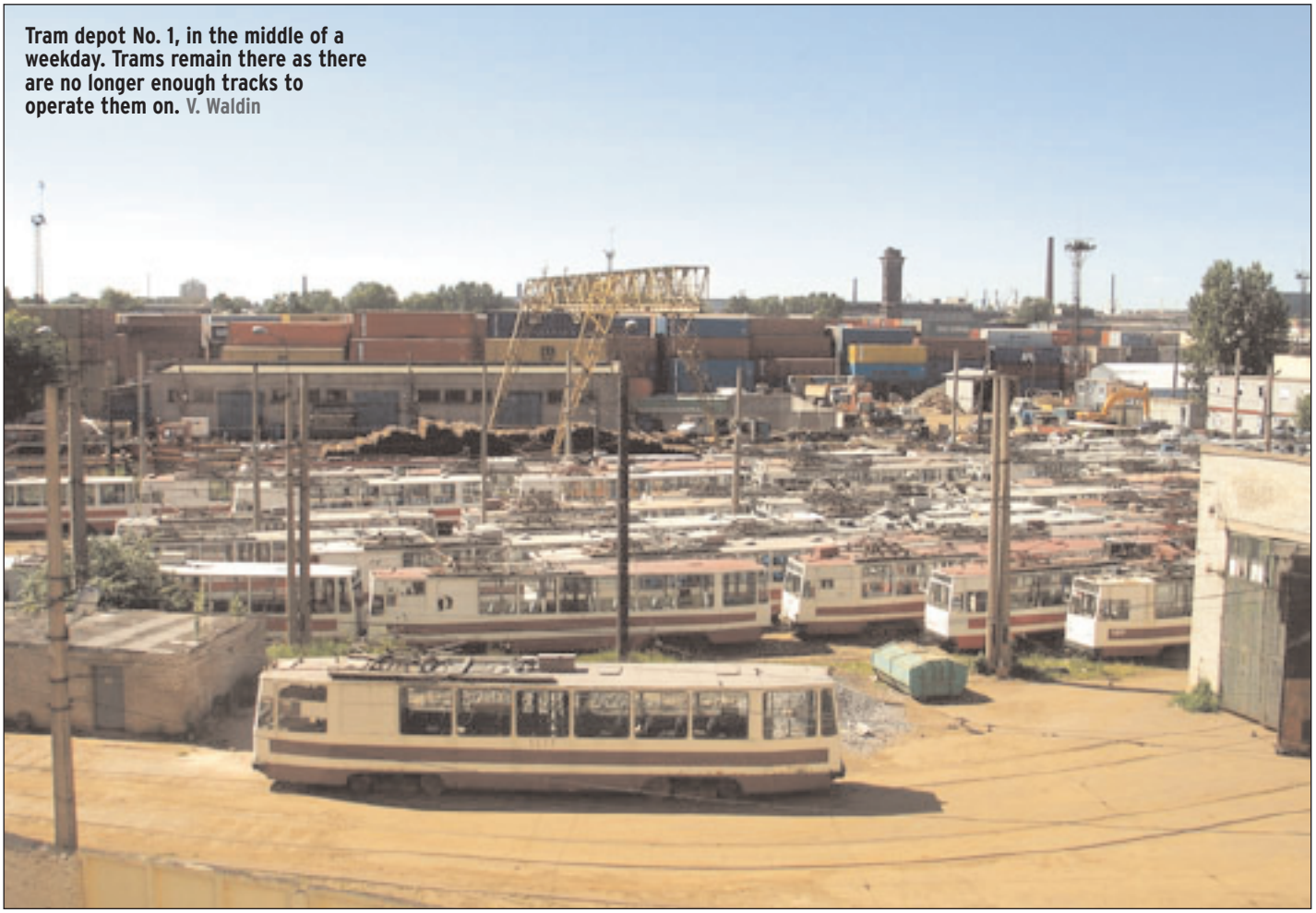
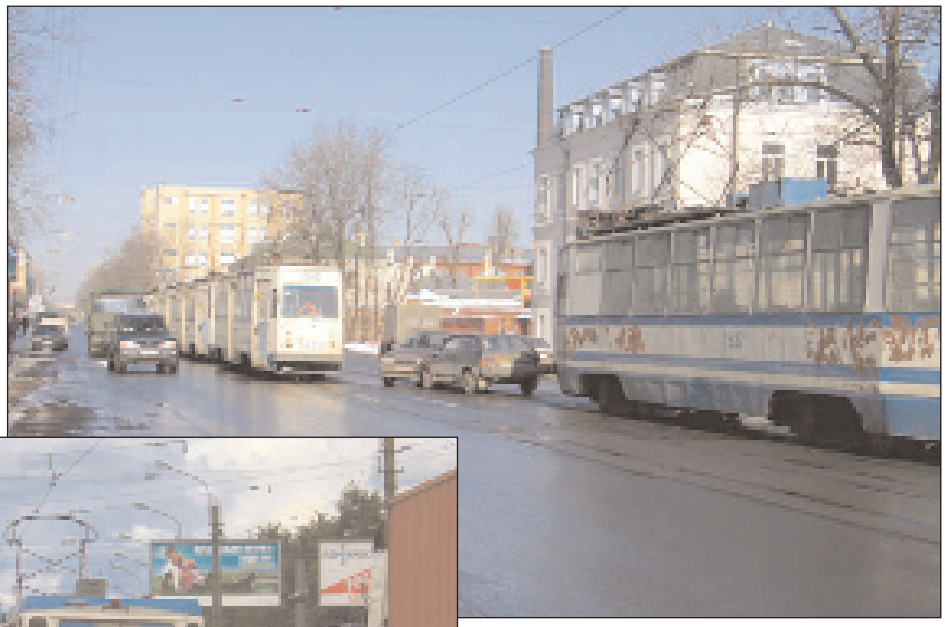


Tram depot No. 1, in the middle of a weekday. Trams remain there as there are no longer enough tracks to operate them on. V. Waldin

Right: A 'normal' traffic scene. Trams are queuing due to a minor traffic accident, waiting for police come to sort out the situation. This happens several times daily. V. Waldin

Below: This road crossing at Piskaryovsky Prospect, seen in summer 2006, shows a typical undisciplined traffic situation which hinders tramway operation. V. Waldin

Below right: Sredny Prospect, Vasilyevsky Island. This spot was once served by 11 tram routes. Only one remains now, and the street became converted to parking site for paratransit minibuses. V. Waldin



Recent months have brought personnel changes in the tram company's management, and statements made by the present director show rather more hope. However, it is hard to imagine the effort needed to bring this system truly back to life.

Looking up?

There is some good news on the tramcar front. LVS-2005, a brand new low-floor articulated car constructed by the tram factory in 2006 and currently existing as a single prototype, is undergoing trials. It is a real revolution compared with any present stock, where even the last mass-produced model (four-axle bogie LM-99) cars are really restyled LM-68Ms. Seeing new production cars appearing in the city's streets could start to change the generally negative public attitude to trams. It is said that the city will buy at least four more new-design trams soon, but will they make any real breakthrough when hundreds are needed?

The results of the billions of roubles promised in 2006 for track renewal are starting to be visible. Reserved tracks are being rebuilt in many, many places,but using obsolete techniques for many renewals causes some anxiety: non-standard sleepers, archaic one-point-rail switches and other outdated methods can only be accepted as stopgap measures, not a basis for the system's real redevelopment. Also, the present network configuration means that undertaking any of these repairs dramatically interrupts passenger traffic and changes routes again and again, hardly helping support a belief in trams as a means of reliable transport.

On 19 September the first section of a so-called express tramline was opened at Prospect Prosvescheniya in the north of the city. In reality it has little in common with European fast lines: there are stops every 250-300m, an ordinary body of tracks (although segregated) and predominantly the same track block signaling as the parallel car traffic.

As a centennial tribute, former route 57 is now operated as 'Express' route 100. The next to be reconstructed in the same way will lead from the city centre south to Kupchino, and work on building it is already starting. According to development plans this line should start from Sankt Peterburg's Moscow railway station; in reality there are no tracks there. Actually trams will have to struggle through a never-ending traffic jam for a few hundred metres, away from the station. The third planned 'Express' corridor no longer has a central section, as the 4km (2.5 mile) Piskaryovsky Prospekt, which would have a chain loop in the development plans, has been remodelled without provision for trams.

There are also pledges to speed up the design and building of an LRT 'Elevated Express' line in the city's south, running from Peterhof to the Obukhovo industrial site and then northwards along new residential areas. This new line will run on trestlework through built-up districts and overground in the outskirts. In spite of everything that has happened it will quite probably be integrated with the existing tram network in some way.

Time for a U-turn

Either way, two overwhelming facts remain. Once huge and serving the city properly, the current Sankt Peterburg tram system feels now like the mythical Antaeus, artificially torn from its Earth – network and passengers - and apparently being close to drowning. The city has tumbled a long way from its unique record of previous years when it had the biggest tram network in the world – Sankt Peterburg is now the only really big city presiding over a rapid destruction of its tram system. However, against all the odds and due to the immense strength built into it by previous generations, the system has not totally collapsed.

This giant 4.5-millon citizen mega-city with ten and more-storied buildings simply will not survive without a policy U-turn to dramatically cut motor traffic in favour of increasing surface passenger rail, as is already happening across the world. The local geological specifics would not allow even the minimum requirement for doubling metro lines and stations, the system length being now equal to Stockholm's, which has a third of the population and much better motor road network.

Any further increase of street space for cars would be a dangerous mistake, as has already been proven by previous events. The number of cars is still increasing by more than 100 000 per annum, and this process seems to have no discernable limit, even though there is only one remaining benefit to driving your own car: you don't have to face wearisome crowds in the metro, thus reducing the risk of respiratory diseases during epidemic periods. The city centre is a permanent jam from early morning until 22.00-23.00, and this jam spreads to all uptown areas. Even the metro's rush hour ends only between three and four hours before that.

It is obvious that one of the most beautiful cities of the Old World deserves a better destiny than this. We cannot but hope against hope that this belief will gain the ascendancy before it is too late. That is a good motto for a centennial toast, isn't it? *TAUT*