

The Stalingrad Tablecloth: Background Story

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It was back in 1944 that 831 Coventry women led by then-Lady Mayoress, Mrs. Emily Smith, put their signatures on a tablecloth, embroidered them and sent it as a token of solidarity to devastated Stalingrad along with some money for the restoration of the city. One can only imagine how difficult it was to navigate wartorn Europe and how many people must have contributed to the delivery of this gift. The Soviet embassy was involved to a great extent with the help of the spouse of the Soviet Ambassador, who the British called Madame Maisky.

This was not, however, the first contact between these two cities. It was in 1942, at the very beginning of the Battle of Stalingrad, that messages between Coventry and Stalingrad began to be exchanged. One of the most famous messages sent from Coventry said: “From this city scarred and ravaged by the arch enemy of civilisation, our hearts go out to you, who now face slaughter and suffering even more fearful.”

What is most moving is that at the time Coventry itself lay in ruins. In November 1940 it had been devastated by a night-time air raid, which destroyed not only the medieval Cathedral, but also thousands of homes and three quarters of the city’s factories.

In spite of this, the people of Coventry provided medical supplies, blood stations, money, clothes for children and the suffering. Most important, however, was the shared feeling of empathy, camaraderie and close friendship that was shown despite the great geographical distance, political systems and views that divided them. They opened their “second front” long before victory and without waiting for the big politicians to do so, at a time when nobody even dared to predict the outcome of the devastating Battle. Thus a model of generosity and courage was set for generations to come.

We in Volgograd will never forget how this unique friendship emerged. It was a unique friendship in unique circumstances.

With this in mind, it was decided that it was high time for us in Volgograd to send our own token. It would be a tablecloth, but this time a different one. As Volgograd has many sister cities it was thought that the main concept should focus on the international question – the need for peace and security in the world. Then all signatures would be embroidered as in 1944.

The name, the Stalingrad Tablecloth, reminds people of that heroic past that forged the connection between the cities of Coventry and Volgograd. The new Tablecloth reflects the style of the original – in the middle there is a large circle where the names of the leaders of both cities are embroidered. In the centre lies the greeting: “From the ever-grateful people of Stalingrad-Volgograd in commemoration of the 65th anniversary of the unique friendship”.

On the 2nd of February 2008 in the year of the 65th anniversary of the Victory over fascist troops in the Battle of Stalingrad, the Stalingrad Tablecloth initiative was officially launched in the presence of Councillor Dave Batten, Lord Mayor of Coventry, and Lynn Batten, Lady Mayoress of Coventry.

The Mayor of Volgograd Roman Grebennikov, First Vice Mayor Sergey Sokolov and Chairperson of the City Council Irina Kareva were the first to sign the Tablecloth from the Russian side.

The central idea, as described above, was to give the Tablecloth an international character and to make it a symbol of friendship and goodwill. Volgograd has 18 sister cities overseas and many partner cities in the former Soviet Union republics. On that day in February 2008, many of them were visiting Volgograd for the celebrations and together with other foreign guests put their signatures on the Tablecloth: representatives from Coventry, Hiroshima, Sukhum (Abkhasia), Slovenia, France, USA (Cleveland), Bulgaria, Italy and China were willing to express their appreciation.

Signatures were also collected abroad and when Volgograd was visited by various guests. Now on the Stalingrad Tablecloth we proudly count the signatures of the spiritual leader of our city and region, Archbishop Herman, of our celebrities and Honorary citizens, ordinary citizens and veterans of war.

Furthermore, the Executive Cities and Board of Directors of Mayors for Peace also added their signatures to the Tablecloth during their meetings in November 2008, adding once again to its value as a symbol of peace and international cooperation. The Mayors of Biograd na Moru (Croatia), Florence (Italy), Granollers (Spain), Halabja (Iraq), North Olmsted (USA), and Ypres (Belgium) all signed as part of the Mayors for Peace leadership.

We were greatly honored by the support of the President of Mayors for Peace, Dr. Tadatoshi Akiba, whose message on the Tablecloth was, "Never again!"

On the 2nd of February 2009, following a special commemorative ceremony for the Battle of Stalingrad, the Tablecloth was signed by the Ambassador of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Mrs Ann Pringler, who was strongly moved by the project and said that with the Stalingrad Tablecloth, Britain too would be reminded of this unique cross-border relationship.

In a message from Mayor Akiba read out at the same ceremony, he expressed "*appreciation of the tireless efforts of the Mayor of Volgograd, Mayors for Peace Campaign Coordinator in Russia, Ms. Elena Vasilevskaya, and the rest of the staff of the Administration of Volgograd, whose work has made it a true symbol of international friendship involving political and spiritual leaders as well as citizens and celebrities.*"

His message went on: "*Never again should we bear witness to the horrific suffering war inflicted on Volgograd and Hiroshima. In less than a day, firestorms reduced the cores of our cities to charred wastelands. On an anniversary like today's, it is natural to cast our minds back and pay tribute to the deeds of the past. But we must also remember to take the concrete steps required now to ensure that such tragedies never occur again. Together, our cities are pushing for adoption of the Hiroshima-Nagasaki Protocol, a proposal that embeds our 2020 Vision for a world without nuclear weapons within a realistic framework and challenges leaders to follow through on their promises before it is too late.*"

The tragic and brutal histories of Coventry, Volgograd, and Hiroshima make clear the need for action now. I know that Hiroshima and our sister city Volgograd will never give up our struggle for a more humane world, and that world must start with the complete elimination of nuclear weapons by the year 2020."

In 1944, nobody could have appreciated how significant the tablecloth and its message would become for the people of Volgograd and Coventry in the future, but now it is a true symbol of their twinning in the 20th century.

The Stalingrad Tablecloth marks the 65th anniversary of a friendship that still lives in our hearts and will become a symbol of the new millennium – a symbol of international friendship, peace and reconciliation.

We believe in Volgograd and very much hope that our friendship with Coventry will continue to grow over the years to come.

To repeat the words that are still meaningful today of the late HM The Queen Mother, an Honourable citizen of Volgograd, in a letter to the Mayor of Volgograd, “The friendship of those days will continue in the future and that our countries can work together to ensure the new Millennium is spared the horrors of war.”

In June 2009 an official delegation from Volgograd will visit Coventry for the celebrations of the 65th anniversary and there the Mayor of Volgograd will present the Stalingrad Tablecloth to the Lord Mayor of Coventry. Thus, just as in the museum-panorama of the Battle of Stalingrad in Volgograd there is a Coventry Tablecloth, so in Coventry will be the Stalingrad Tablecloth.