

## FOREWORD: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD

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THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD BY GERMAN AND FINNISH ARMIES DURING World War II was one of the most horrific events in world history. According to the most recent and reliable estimate, fighting in the Leningrad area from the summer of 1941 to the summer of 1944 and during the 872 days of blockade and bombardment of the city itself took the lives of somewhere between 1.6 and 2 million Soviet citizens (not to mention enemy casualties). The entire range of this estimate exceeds the total number of Americans, including military personnel and civilians, who have perished in all wars from 1776 to the present.<sup>1</sup> While no one knows how many Leningraders perished during the siege, it is reasonably estimated that within the city and its immediate suburbs, no fewer than one million civilians died, mainly during the terribly cold winter of 1941–1942.<sup>2</sup> The exact death toll, however, may have been considerably higher.

The prolonged siege possessed elements of epoch, epic, and monumental tragedy that transcend the temporal and spatial boundaries of World War II. For the USSR at war, the defense of Leningrad held strategic significance. It was one of the nation's largest centers for manufacturing munitions. More important, however, is the fact that if Leningrad had fallen in the late summer or early autumn of 1941, Germany could have redirected hundreds of thousands of additional troops and war machines toward Moscow. If Moscow had in turn been taken in short order, the war might have ended. Holding on to Leningrad and defending the eastern adjacent region of Karelia also protected the lend-lease corridor southward from Murmansk. Although American-manufactured lend-lease materials played little role in Soviet

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defense through 1942, they did greatly facilitate the eventual Soviet triumph on the eastern front.

Victory in the “Great Patriotic War” (to use Soviet parlance that has carried over to the present in Russia) became an integral part of the USSR’s self-justification and propaganda. On average, about one book per day on the war was published in the USSR between 1945 and 1991. These works, though often rich in detail, followed prescribed themes and were subjected to heavy censorship. Soviet-era books on wartime Leningrad number about four hundred. Few of them were published before the death of Stalin, who always regarded the “second capital” with suspicion.<sup>3</sup> Attention to the siege in post-Soviet Russia has dropped dramatically due to the material impoverishment of the historical profession, but the quality of research has risen sharply, particularly in the publication of previously classified documents.<sup>4</sup> Outside of Russia, the best general histories of the siege are Leon Goure’s *The Siege of Leningrad* and Harrison Salisbury’s outstanding best-seller, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad*.

A conspicuous void, however, has remained in the historical literature: description and analysis that focus specifically on the activities and attitudes of women, who made up a large majority of Leningrad’s civilian population during the siege. The diaries, letters, memoirs, oral accounts, and accompanying commentary assembled here in *Writing the Siege of Leningrad* help fill that void. Several memoirs and diaries have been published in English by female siege survivors, but what has been missing before *Writing the Siege of Leningrad* is a scholarly work in any language that attempts to define female perspectives on the siege and to trace those perspectives through a number of first-hand accounts. *Writing the Siege of Leningrad* is also a very timely book, because it contains many accounts based on recent interviews. The number of blockade survivors is dwindling rapidly, and their personal histories need to be written down while there is still time.

To understand the type of city that Leningrad was at the start of the Soviet-German War and how women came to play a major role in sustaining the city during the siege, one has to go back to at least 1929. That year marked the start of Stalin’s programs for rapid construction of the nation’s heavy industrial base in the First Five-Year Plan and collectivization of agriculture. Hundreds of thousands of peasants fled the mass starvation that followed state seizure of their land. Many were drawn to the new and expanded factories in heavily industrialized Leningrad, where they could

receive both a salary and a food ration card. Rapidly rising prices, caused by the famine and a severe shortage of consumer goods, meant that families generally needed a second salary to make ends meet. This prompted many women who had not previously worked outside the home to enter the city's work force. The expanded educational opportunities of the early Soviet decades also enabled women to seek employment in many new fields.

In the late 1930s political terror swept through Leningrad. Whether or not Stalin actually ordered the murder of Sergei Kirov, Leningrad's Communist Party leader, on 1 December 1934, he used the murder as a reason or pretext to purge thoroughly the city's party organization and industrial elite. By 1937 and 1938, the purges had become widespread in Leningrad. Most of those arrested were men, which created more jobs for their wives, widows, sisters, and daughters. Work opportunities for women increased further between 1938 and the first half of 1941, because many new defense plants were opened in Leningrad during the Third Five-Year Plan. By 1940, Leningrad was producing approximately 10 percent of the nation's total industrial output in more than six hundred factories, and women made up some 47 percent of the city's industrial work force, which comprised about 750,000 people altogether.<sup>5</sup>

Soviet histories of the war exaggerated the changes that took place following the start of the German invasion by implying that the USSR had previously been a society at peace. In fact, Leningrad's economy was highly mobilized and militarized in 1939 and 1940. The Soviet Union attacked several nations during the two years of the alliance with Nazi Germany. Leningrad served as the arsenal for the offensive war against Finland during the winter of 1939–1940 (which claimed the lives of at least 127,000 Soviet military personnel); fighting in the Winter War took place just north of the city. Once again, more women went to work in Leningrad's factories to replace men who had been drafted into the armed forces. Contending with shortages that accompanied the war economy in 1939–1941 provided specific lessons for Leningraders that would prove useful during the siege years.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, however, the fact that production of goods and services for the civilian population had been sacrificed to expand military production before 1941 made it that much more difficult for Leningraders to bear further militarization of their economy during the war with Germany.

Leningrad was experienced in preparing for war and waging it before 1941, and a series of new, massive mobilization drives commenced as soon

THE ACTUAL GATHERING OF THE PERSONAL NARRATIVES WITHIN THIS book took place during two successive summers. In 1995, Nina Perlina and Cynthia Simmons began conducting interviews in St. Petersburg and copying documents in the Russian National Library (formerly the Saltykov-Shchedrin Public Library) and the Museum of the Defense of Leningrad. Arlene Forman and Nina Perlina continued this work in the summer of 1996. The entire process of gathering, analyzing, and compiling these documents spanned approximately five years. It is apparent in retrospect, however, that the project was developing in incubation over a much longer period of time.

Born and raised in Leningrad, Nina Perlina knew the official and a good deal of the unofficial history of the Siege. American contributors to this volume (Arlene Forman and Cynthia Simmons), both children of the cold war, were less informed with respect to the particulars and scope of the catastrophe—Soviet losses in World War II were less emphasized in American schoolbooks. Yet a confluence of factors and events came to convince everyone involved of the urgency and significance of this endeavor.

Certainly the fiftieth anniversary of World War II precipitated the reconsideration of this crucial period. In many cases it has led to revisionist attacks on official history. This process coincided with what might be considered the final phase of the humanistic movement—our postmodern and millennial privileging of the individual voice. This volume will take its place among a growing number of private accounts of the war years, including those from a woman's perspective (for example, *Frauen, Women in the Holocaust*, and *War's Unwomanly Face*).

The anniversary stocktaking of World War II coincided, tragically, with war and siege again in Europe. As if the historical retrospective were not enough, television images of war in Yugoslavia fueled without fail the

## PREFACE

memory of anyone who had endured the “last world war.” Watching lines of refugees, bundled up against the cold and treading carefully over snow and ice, Nina Perlina immediately recalled her childhood in Leningrad.

Earlier yet, the phenomena of glasnost (from the late 1980s) and the fall of the Soviet Union (1991) incited researchers and private citizens alike to question the writing of history under communism. They demanded access to the official documents on which that history was (or intentionally was not) based and to other public archives that might shed light on the past. Unfortunately, the institution that was created in 1942 to serve this function, the Museum of the Defense of Leningrad (*Muzei Oborony Leningrada*), fell into official disfavor in 1949 as a result of the Leningrad Affair, and was closed in 1953 (until glasnost). The holdings of the Russian National Library, which were never officially closed, remained an obvious resource for such an inquiry. Siege documents took on greater significance as the growing interest in private accounts of history coincided with the impetus to reexamine the official history of the Siege. Of equal importance, the atmosphere of openness in Russia after 1991 also made it possible for people to convey personal reminiscences and private archives of the Siege to anyone interested to read or listen. Primary documents became more accessible at the same time that researchers were coming to value their contribution to new perspectives on the war.

### The History of the History

During the Siege and soon afterward, within the official Soviet parameters of valor and preordained heroic perfection, some *blokadnitsy* (women who suffered the Siege of Leningrad) contributed their perspectives. Anna Akhmatova was among the first of the poets to give voice to the city’s grief. Her cycle of poems *The Wind of War* (*Veter voiny*), written in 1941, captured the terror and suffering of the first months of the Siege. In *Leningrad Speaks* (*Govorit Leningrad*, 1945), Ol’ga Berggolts published poems that she wrote during the Siege. Her inspirational words were broadcast over the radio throughout the Siege and served as a lifeline among the city’s inhabitants.

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As soon as early spring, 1942, the well-known artist Anna Petrovna Ostroumova-Lebedeva was commissioned to compile a pictorial account of the Siege for the women of Scotland. As was often the case in the Stalinist



period, her work in *The Scottish Album* (*Shotlandskii al'bom*) was appropriated for use as propaganda.<sup>1</sup> Ostroumova-Lebedeva's officially sanctioned accounts of the Siege—in her artistic depictions and in her memoirs *Autobiographical Notes*<sup>2</sup>—differ significantly from her unexpurgated diary, available in the Russian National Library, which is excerpted in this collection.<sup>3</sup> Candid personal accounts did not pass uncensored into the annals of Soviet history, because the official position on the Siege was that it was a trial not only of women and children, not only of Leningraders, but of all Russians.

Vera Inber's diary *Almost Three Years: Leningrad Diary* (*Pochti tri goda: Leningradskii dnevnik*) was published in 1946.<sup>4</sup> Her radio broadcasts of civic poetry and her recitations at poetry readings during the Siege had had a resuscitative effect on the city's inhabitants, and certainly her verses, bearing such titles as "A Woman's Nurturing Hand" (*Zabotlivaia zhenskaia ruka*), "To Woman!" (*Zhenshchine!*), and "Our Native Girl" (*Devushka rodnaia*), hailed the almost superhuman effort of the besieged women of Leningrad. Although Inber concedes in her diary that criminal acts occurred occasionally, the predominant tone of the memoir is "officially" patriotic. She describes Stalin's speech of 11 October 1941 as "one great shining consolation"<sup>5</sup> and later speaks of the irresistible quality in his voice that convinces one of his knowledge and sincerity.<sup>6</sup> As the diaries of Ol'ga Freidenberg and Liubov' Shaporina attest, such an attitude toward Stalin was not necessarily shared by those whose memoirs were never published during the Stalinist period.

In the West, accounts not strictly "Soviet" began to appear: Alexander Werth, *Leningrad* (1944) and *Russia at War* (1964); Konstantin Kripton (pseudonym), *Osada Leningrada* (The Siege of Leningrad, 1952); Leon Goure, *The Siege of Leningrad* (1962); Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (1969).<sup>7</sup> Goure described Leningrad as a city that endured "thanks to the work and suffering of women";<sup>8</sup> Salisbury's riveting history included accounts by survivors that were more revealing than anything previously published of the nonheroic aspects of Siege life (such as cruelty, crime, and cannibalism).<sup>9</sup> Yet none of the authors confronted gender as a defining issue of the Siege experience.

In the waning years of the Soviet Union, the publication in 1982 by Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin of *A Book of the Blockade* (*Blokadnaia kniga*) marked a turning point in the official Soviet account of the events of 1941–1944.<sup>10</sup> The impetus to publish the book, as Adamovich and Granin

## INTRODUCTION

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OLDER LENINGRADERS STILL REMEMBER THE BRIGHT, WARM SUNDAY when German forces invaded the Soviet Union. Many had already moved to their dachas outside the city in preparation for summer. 22 June 1941. Despite the nonaggression pact that the USSR and Germany had signed in August 1939, Soviet citizens had followed with unease the Nazi expansion into northern and central Europe and northern Africa. Still, it was hard to believe.

22 JUNE 1941. MORNING

I carried Lena out into the garden together with her colored rattles. The sun already ruled the sky completely.

A cry, the sound of broken dishes. The woman who owns our dacha ran past the house.

“Elena Iosifovna, war with the Germans! They just announced it on the radio!” she shouted, crying.

War! I am thirty-four years old. This is the fourth war of my life.

Elena Kochina, *Blockade Diary*

22 JUNE

This morning everything was as peaceful and calm as a still lake. The sun was shining and everything seemed to promise a perfect day. . . .

The fresh morning air, the sunshine streaming through the wide-open windows, and the fact that everything seemed to be going so well combined to give me a wonderful feeling of contentment and joy. . . .

At around nine o'clock, the phone rang. It was my husband calling from work. Though usually calm, he seemed greatly agitated. Without explaining why, he asked me not to go anywhere and to keep Dima at home. . . .

At noon my mother and I heard Molotov speak on the radio. So this was

it—war! Germany was already bombing Soviet cities. Molotov's speech was halting, as if he were out of breath. His rallying, spirited appeals seemed out of place. And suddenly I realized that something ominous and oppressive loomed over us.

Elena Skriabina, *Siege and Survival*

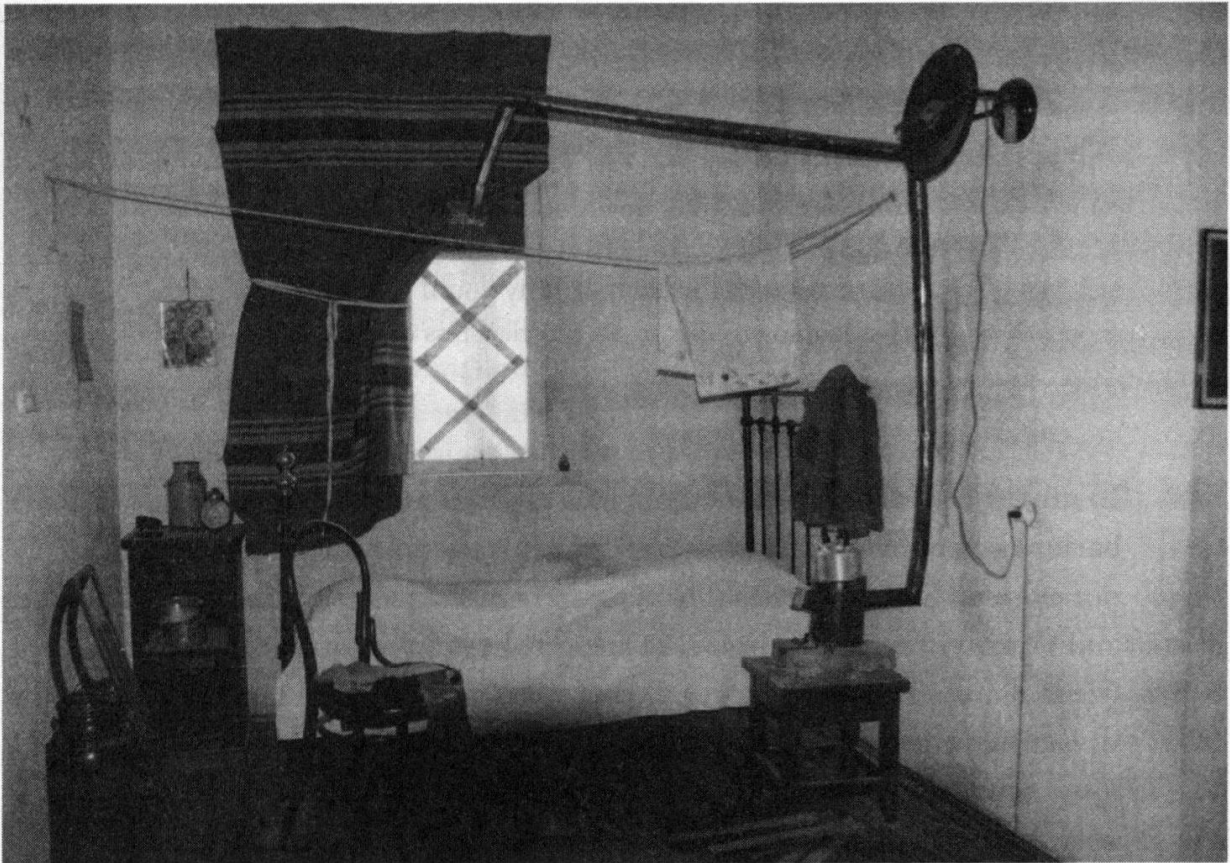
### **The City of Women**

Early in those nine hundred days, the Siege of Leningrad became a woman's experience. Indeed the battlefield was close by—so perilously close that some soldiers attempted to return to the city sporadically at night to bring a portion of their rations to their starving families. Yet the daily tasks of domestic life and labor, and the continual responsibilities of air-raid defense, were left to the women of the city. With the exception of essential military and political personnel, the city was bereft of able-bodied men under the age of fifty-five. Add to this the biological fact that men succumbed more quickly and more often to starvation. In her memoirs of the first and worst winter of the Siege (1941–1942), Ol'ga Grechina writes:

In November, according to official statistics, deaths of men over draft age (fifty-five) exceeded the normal death rate by 11,000. . . . In comparison with the number of women in the city, there were very few men, and one was immediately struck by their inability to adapt to the tragic conditions of life. They began to fall down in the streets, take to their beds in their apartments, to die and die and die. . . . The long-suffering women of Leningrad suddenly realized that on them lay the fate not only of their family, but of the city, even of the entire country.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the predominance of women in the city, deaths of men far outnumbered those of women even in the first months of 1942. The NKVD reported in January 1942 the deaths of 70,853 men (73.2 percent) and 25,898 women (26.8 percent). In February 1942, 57,990 (60.4 percent) men died and 38,025 (39.6 percent) women. Only in March 1942 did more women (42,842, or 52.6 percent) die than men (38,664, or 47.4 percent).<sup>2</sup> Exact ratios of men to women in the population can never be known. The Siege fell between





“Siege Room.” A unique exhibit at the Museum of Bread in St. Petersburg depicts the vitally important and emblematic objects in the circumscribed world of the Siege. From left to right: a water container for hauling water; the children’s sled (for hauling); the bread ration (next to the clock); the window taped to keep the glass from shattering; the window blanketed for warmth and to prevent light from attracting enemy fire; the clothes line; the *burzhuika*, a special small stove (on the stool on the right); and the typical Leningrad radio, on the wall, upper right, known as the “plate” (*tarelka*). *The Museum of Bread, St. Petersburg*

the city were kept. Researchers must piece together various reports, such as those of the NKVD above, or figures cited in other Soviet sources, such as reported by A. R. Dzeniskevich, to conclude that by 15 December 1942, 79.9 percent of all factory workers were women.<sup>5</sup> The testimonies that follow corroborate the various statistics that support a characterization of besieged Leningrad as a city of women. Together they highlight the need to study the effect of the Siege on this specific population.

## Women and War

Queen Athena—shield of our city—glory of goddesses!  
 Now shatter the spear of Diomedes! That wild man—  
 hurl him headlong down before the Scaean Gates!  
 At once we'll sacrifice twelve heifers in your shrine,  
 yearlings never broken, if only you'll pity Troy,  
 the Trojan wives and all our helpless children!

THE ILIAD (6.360–66)<sup>4</sup>

In modern warfare, the besieging of a civilian population is considered barbaric. Yet the Siege of Leningrad was not the only siege of World War II, not even on Soviet territory. And the recent tragedies of Sarajevo, Gorazde, and Grozny remind us that this ancient strategy may still be used in “civilized” Europe. It is not surprising that women and children while under siege in Leningrad were left to fend as best they could while men (and women) fought at the nearby front to defend the city.<sup>5</sup> Much has been written about what was exceptional about the Siege of Leningrad—its duration, its staggering human toll. Yet historians and other analysts have not focused sufficient attention on the realities of the Siege that make it atypical in other ways. Unlike most sieges in history, the citizens of besieged Leningrad no longer observed the historic division along gender lines between public (male front-line) and private (female home-front) reactions to war. Having embraced the role of public defenders of Leningrad, home-front women often perceived warfare, and heroism, differently. They inevitably provide a unique perspective on World War II and the Siege.

In the heroic epics of Greece, and in other prehumanist accounts of siege warfare, we are inspired to revere the acts of gods, or god-like heroes. Women's efforts are prescribed, and in the oral and written histories, circumscribed. In *The Iliad*, mortal women play predictable, and usually minor, roles. The noble women of Troy (as in the epigraph) make sacrifices to the gods and pray for victory and salvation. Occasionally they may respond, like Hector's wife, Andromache, with “womanly” timidity:

“Reckless one,  
 my Hector—your own fiery courage will destroy you!  
 Have you no pity for him, our helpless son? Or me,  
 and the destiny that weighs me down, your widow” (6.482–85).



“Stands at the forefront of a new genre of historical literature that strips away the veneer of censorship and propaganda that so dominated historical works of the Soviet era to present a starker and more accurate portrait of Soviet life during World War II. This inspiring, often depressing, but intensely human portrait of suffering, deprivation, and survival stands as a monument to the resilience of the human spirit.”

—David M. Glantz, author of *The Siege of Leningrad 1941–1944: 900 Days of Terror*

“The 900-day Siege of Leningrad called upon women to participate fully in the superhuman effort to resist a particularly vicious foe. Simmons and Perlina are to be commended for making more visible the significance of this event and the complex and often heroic stories of women survivors of the siege.”

—Rochelle G. Ruthchild, The Union Institute

“Points to the uniqueness of the Siege of Leningrad, where women, then a vast majority of the city’s population, both retained their traditional private roles as homemakers and moved beyond them into the ‘public theater of war.’”

—Kazimiera J. Cottam, editor and translator of *Defending Leningrad: Women Behind Enemy Lines*

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