

Foreword

No city in the history of warfare has known a catastrophe like that suffered by Leningrad in World War II. While the exact number who died during the siege by the German and Finnish armies from 8 September 1941 to 27 January 1944 will never be known, available data point to 900,000 civilian deaths, over half a million of whom died in the winter of 1941–2 alone.¹ Many other cities were devastated in World War II, but none saw death on such a scale as Leningrad. And, unlike others, it was not bombing, fighting or shelling that caused the massive number of deaths. The overwhelming majority of those who perished in Leningrad died of hunger.

That Leningrad would be besieged was unforeseen by either side in the titanic struggle that began when Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, the surprise invasion of the USSR by 3½ million German troops and their allies, on 22 June 1941. After the crushing defeat of France the previous summer, both he and the Wehrmacht high command were confident that *Blitzkrieg* would see the fall of Leningrad within a few weeks. For Stalin, the idea that enemy forces could penetrate Soviet defences and advance deep into Soviet territory had been unthinkable. Red Army commanders faced the charge of treason if they planned for defence in depth. No preparations had been made to defend Leningrad, let alone endure a long siege.

By the end of July, the fierce resistance of the Red Army, even as it retreated with staggering losses, caused Hitler to begin rethinking his strategy. The immediate task for Army Group North was now to encircle Leningrad; and, for the first time, the word 'starve' appeared in his war notes. On the Soviet side, the speed of the German advance forced Stalin and the Soviet leadership to realize that Leningrad was highly vulnerable. Thousands of volunteers were mobilized in people's militias and, with little or no training, thrown into battle alongside the Red Army to halt the Germans at the Luga River line, suffering huge casualties in the process. Meanwhile, thousands more, mainly women, were drafted to work day and night to construct extensive fortifications outside and inside the city.

It was only on 21 August, however, that Leningraders were told that their city was in danger of attack. Eight days later, the last rail line out of the city was cut, and on 8 September German forces captured

Schlisselburg, cutting its last land link with the rest of the USSR. Hitler's strategy was now decided. Rather than attempting to take Leningrad by storm and risking heavy losses of forces needed for the imminent battle for Moscow, hunger would bring the Nazis victory. The population of 2½ million would be starved to death and the city razed to the ground. The siege had begun; it would last for 872 days.

With the destruction by bombing of the large Badaev food stores on the first day of the blockade, and supplies by air or water drastically limited, Leningrad's leaders knew that disaster threatened. In the weeks that followed they cut the bread ration five times. By 20 November, it had been reduced for most Leningraders to 150 grams, a fraction of the amount needed to sustain life. Of this, half was composed of additives with no nutritional value – sawdust, cellulose, malt and other surrogates – and almost no other rations were provided. Leningraders were left to their own devices to supplement their meagre bread ration with anything remotely edible – wood glue, tank grease, oilcake, leather belts and many other surrogates – or to barter their possessions for food.

The result was mass starvation. The first such deaths occurred in late October and they grew inexorably. By November, the first arrests were being made for cannibalism. By December, death from 'dystrophy', atrophy of the vital organs, was common. Victims collapsed and died at home or work, resting or walking. With the cessation of electricity and water supply, heating and sewerage, with starving people forced to stand for hours, often at night, in bread queues, even then not always receiving their ration, and in one of the bitterest winters on record, the death rate rose in January and February to thirty times its peacetime level. Leningrad was in the grip of a famine unprecedented in its scale and intensity. The Leningrad famine in the 'Hungry Winter' of 1941–2 would belong in the same category as major famines of modern history: Ireland in 1846, India in 1876–9, Bengal in 1942, China in 1959–61.

As a description, 'Hungry Winter' is an understatement. It was, as Sergey Yarov says, the Time of Death. With the Leningrad Funeral Trust unable to cope with the huge number of dead, corpses lay everywhere – in homes, courtyards, on the streets, in improvised morgues and hospitals. When eventually collected, they were transported in lorries full to the brim, and left in piles of hundreds, sometimes thousands, at cemeteries, awaiting burial in mass graves or cremation. Not until March would the death rate begin to diminish. With increased food supplies reaching Leningrad and the evacuation of half a million people via the Road of Life across Lake Ladoga, and fewer people alive to be fed, by spring rations had reached a level capable of sustaining life. The effects of extreme malnutrition during the winter, however, would last for months. People were still dying from dystrophy, if in fewer numbers, for the rest of 1942. Hundreds of books have been published about the siege of Leningrad. Already during the blockade itself, the authorities decided that its immense human cost should be recorded in order to write its history

They called on Leningraders to provide personal records of it, including diaries they were writing – or had been until they died; and many were collected. This project was brought to a sudden halt, however, in 1949–50 in the Leningrad Affair, when Stalin ruthlessly purged many who had been leading figures during the siege on the grounds of their supposed ambition to challenge Moscow's preeminence. For the rest of the Stalin period, Leningrad's role in the Soviet war effort would receive minimal attention from historians. The diaries, along with other materials, were consigned to remote corners of the archives.²

From the Khrushchev period, it became possible again to write about the siege, though almost exclusively in ways that emphasized the role of patriotism and heroism in victory over Nazi Germany.³ But it would take Perestroika from 1985, and above all the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, to open Soviet archives and make research into previously ignored or taboo areas of the siege's history possible for both Russian and Western historians.⁴

Unique among these was Sergey Yarov. In the ten years that this brilliant and original St Petersburg historian devoted to study of the history of the siege, until his untimely death in September 2015,⁵ he read hundreds of diaries, letters, memoirs, reminiscences and reports, and interviewed many survivors of the siege. His aim was to show the full tragedy of the siege, the impact that the terrible conditions in which the great majority of the population lived and died during the siege had on their attitudes, behaviour and psychology. More than anyone who has written about the siege, he showed the terrible choices that desperate and famished people could be forced to make – to feed one child at the cost of another's life, to keep the body of a dead relative in the apartment to use his or her ration cards to keep others alive, to use the flesh of a corpse to feed dependants or oneself. Was it possible to remain human in inhuman conditions? Yarov argued that, from late October 1941 to spring 1942, Leningrad saw a 'degradation' of collective morality, and that the foundations on which the ethics of daily life rested broke down. While many people strove to retain a sense of what being human meant in their relations with others – family members in particular – for others the imperatives of survival dictated very different norms. That the great majority of those arrested for cannibalism were women refugees without the right to bread rations speaks volumes about the unimaginably appalling conditions of the blockade.⁶

Sergey Yarov's book poses questions not only about the history of the Leningrad siege. How, in such appalling circumstances, would people today – we ourselves included – behave? What would the impact of mass starvation and death be on a modern city in a developed society, with a great cultural history and a highly educated population – all of which describes Leningrad in 1941. War, with all its catastrophic and unforeseen results, is a ubiquitous and unpredictable phenomenon in the contemporary world, just as hunger, malnutrition and starvation remain the fate of millions of its inhabitants. For this reason above all, the knowledge and

understanding of what the people of Leningrad suffered in the winter of 1941–2 provided in this outstanding book have a relevance and importance that go far beyond its historical interest.

John Barber

Notes

- 1 When military deaths in nearly three years of fighting in or near Leningrad – the longest battle in World War II – are added, the total Soviet death toll there may well have been as high as 2 million.
- 2 Where they would remain until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1994, when I was in Leningrad working in TsGAIPD, the former Communist Party archive, I asked an exceptionally helpful archivist, Taisa Pavlovna Bondarevskaya, for files that would show people's reactions to the German invasion and its aftermath. To my pleasant surprise, she showed me the catalogue of *blokadniki's* diaries, many of which I was able to read in the following weeks. For a detailed description of the blockade diaries, see Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad*, Cambridge, Mass., 2017.
- 3 A rare exception which included previously taboo subjects such as crime, defeatism and cannibalism, based on interviews with survivors of the siege, was Ales' Adamovich and Daniil Granin, *A Book of the Blockade*. Translated by Hilda Perham, Moscow, 1983.
- 4 Among them, Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*, Pittsburgh, 2002; John Barber and Andrei Dzenishevich, eds., *Life and Death in Besieged Leningrad*, Basingstoke, 2005; Michael Jones, *Leningrad: State of Siege*, London, 2008; Anna Reid, *Leningrad: Tragedy of a City Under Siege, 1941–44*, London, 2011; Richard Bidlack and Nikita Lomagin, *The Leningrad Blockade, 1941–1944: A New Documentary History From the Soviet Archives*, London, 2012; Peri, *The War Within*.
- 5 A professor at the European University of St Petersburg and the Herzen Pedagogical University, he was described by in a eulogy by Sergy Erlikh as 'blessed' both in his relations with students and colleagues, and for his total dedication to teaching and research: 'Zhurnal'nyi zal', *Zvesda*, No. 4, 2011.
- 6 Two years before he died, Sergey Yarov published a book on daily life in blockaded Leningrad, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' blokadnogo leningrada* (Moscow, 2013). In it, he described in detail the horrific reality that underlay the changes in morality described in the present book. Those who know Russian may wish to read about the unutterably wretched conditions in which *blokadniki* lived and died – or they may not wish to.

Preface

Lord! we know what we are but know not what we may be.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Anybody embarking on a description of morality during the siege of Leningrad must expect to be distressed by an abyss of incredible suffering, incalculable loss and inconsolable grief. It is impossible to provide a cool, dispassionate account of the nightmare that was Leningrad in 1941–2. Human beings empathize, and we must expect to be seared even today by the horror of a past lit by the glare of countless fires, set among the city's bomb-ravaged streets, and filled with images of the shocking deaths of so many Leningraders in full view of their families and friends.

To subject this era to the measured, deliberate approach and scholarly language of research methodology may seem improper, but it is the only way. If we are to understand how people endured, we have to accept them as they really were, without sparing our own feelings, without distortion or omission. Only if we see those caught in the siege in all their self-contradicting diversity, where the light is mixed with darkness, will we do justice to the ordeal they were subjected to and understand the price they had to pay to retain their human dignity.

The tragedy of Leningrad is reflected in thousands of documents. No other event in Russia's Great Patriotic War of 1941–5 has been described in such detail, literally day by day. These memoirs, diaries and letters are immensely valuable for the light they cast on the siege, but until very recently have been handled with an excess of caution. Life during the siege, as it appears from these sources, was exceptionally brutal and harsh. In the scholarly and popular literature, there has been an attempt to gloss over descriptions of human weakness and helplessness. Certain episodes have been highlighted while others were left in the shadows. This was not an easy task. Documents could be edited and toned down, but it is difficult to disrupt linked diary entries, or to patch together passages from letters deliberately taken out of context. In publications of the 1970s and 1980s, we find the authors themselves trying to rewrite their wartime diaries.

They watered down the diaries and letters to try to make them conform

to the official Soviet trope of ordeals engendering heroism, which was rewarded by victory. The myth became part of the history. Until the mid-1980s, major obstacles were placed in the way of any attempt to publish the most revealing notes and diaries. If they were published at all, it was only with severe curtailment. *Blokadnaia kniga* [*The Book of the Siege*], by Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin, could at first be published only in Moscow, by Raduga in 1983. The Leningrad censors reproached Lydia Ginzburg for dwelling unduly on the issue of food. Selection of documents for publication was biased heavily in favour of those which were predominantly optimistic and which played down distressing details of personal degeneration. Such unbiased eyewitnesses of the tragedy as Academician Dmitry Likhachev and historian Vladislav Glinka are withering in their assessment of the 'siege literature' which appeared between the 1940s and 1970s.¹

Self-censorship by other authors writing about the siege of Leningrad also hindered the presentation of a full and accurate picture. This is a sensitive topic, but we cannot just ignore it. The authors of actual documents are least guilty of this. Nearly all their reminiscences, diaries and letters are now available to researchers, and we have every reason to suppose they have tried to tell the story of what they endured honestly, if sometimes selectively. 'You've come to the wrong place if you want to hear a lot of positive stuff', one siege survivor stated forthrightly at the beginning of her interview.²

Not all descriptions of the siege reflect the dark aspects of everyday life. We can identify self-censorship wherever we find an overabundance of emotive exclamations, which are rare in most of the documents. We see it where those writing have made later deletions to their original text. We see it in rewriting intended to tone down criticism. One diarist changed her sentence, 'How rapidly we deteriorated' to 'How rapidly our canteens deteriorated.'³

Some documents have introductory notes. 'I feel I should mention that in some cases I have recorded not only facts but also "rumours", which were vital and eagerly sought out by Leningraders at a time when there were no newspapers, no radio, no telephone or postal service.' This covering letter of 9 June 1943 to the Goslitizdat publishing house, which accompanied Maria Konoplyova's diary, reads less like an explanation than an excuse for telling the truth. In other, later, cases, there is an apology for toning down some of the descriptions.⁴

A significant influence was the canonical view of the siege, which was firmly established by the mid-1960s and which many survivors saw as unambiguous confirmation of their heroism. Eyewitnesses tailored their testimony to the conventional rhetoric.

We barely encounter entries soberly recording minor details. What finds its way into the documents tends to be what seemed unusual or dramatic at the time, which is perfectly understandable but limits our picture of the variety of daily life.

Reticence about passing on every detail is also due to moral taboos. Not everyone is willing to describe the more extreme forms of degradation, especially if those involved are their family and friends. To do so would have seemed insensitive towards people who were victims of war, an offence against family history, or just needless unkindness. Our human sympathy debars us from dwelling on lamentable scenes of the foundering of personal integrity.

It is not only self-censorship by the eyewitnesses which complicates use of their testimony. That Leningraders are emotionally involved when talking about the war is only to be expected when we consider what they went through, but it can blind them to some nuances of events, which they replace with sweeping generalization. They want to express unstinting admiration for those who helped them when times were bad, but this can make them uncritical. Many who endured the siege observed only a small portion of what was taking place. Thousands became bedridden, and tend to generalize the actions of the few people they came into contact with as if they were representative of all their fellow Leningraders.

Thousands of citizens of Leningrad wanted to communicate what they had seen in the most vivid form possible, as works of literature, and this can lead to a chaotic and less than reliable narrative. As we ponder the testimony of those in the siege, we need to remember that the attention they pay to a particular event may be disproportionate, and that their opinions may not be representative. We need also to weigh their personal cultural level, their interests, and their capacity for realistic self-analysis. They have their likes and dislikes, and a natural wish to present their own actions in a good light. Only then will we be able to understand their behaviour objectively.

This is a book about the price that had to be paid in order to remain human in a time of inhumanity. Those who did not flee Leningrad hoped misfortune would pass them by. None could have imagined what they would have to endure. By the time they did understand the extent of the calamity they were facing, it was too late. They were to plumb the very depths of human suffering, callousness and cruelty. They were confronted by children maimed by bombing, a dying mother begging for bread in the moments before death but denied it, and an endless stream of other people, like themselves trapped in the siege and begging for help.

I dedicate this book to the blessed memory of those to whom death came only after unimaginable sufferings.

The tragedy of Leningrad

The Time of Death

1

'The Time of Death': that, according to Vitaliy Bianki, is the name given by many Leningraders to the most terrible months of starvation at the end of 1941 and beginning of 1942.¹ Starvation, the cold, the absence of civilized amenities, disease, apathy in all its manifestations, and a weakening of family ties all affected how people behaved.

In the first months of the war, despite the introduction of ration cards, until September 1941, there was no talk of starvation.² As time passed, however, it became increasingly apparent that the variety of food on offer was decreasing.³ On 12 September 1941, there was a reduction of rations, with manual workers now entitled to 500 grams of bread a day, non-manual workers to 300 grams, and children to 200 grams.⁴ The ensuing panic was predictable. It was the result of, among other things, disturbing reports from the front and 'alarmist' rumours about Leningrad's food stocks. In October, talk of starvation became more common. It was now no longer possible to buy meat without coupons, and the sugar and grain rations fell below the minimum for normal physiological needs.⁵ This was the point at which crowds of Leningraders began combing through the ashes of the Badaev warehouses, bombed in September, in search of 'sweet' earth which they could wash, strain off the mud, and use as sugar. People no longer turned up their noses at unconventional, 'gross' food. When a notice appeared in a restaurant window in October 1941 offering 'horsemeat chops' for sale, 'people just walked on by, shaking their heads. Few went in.'⁶ The next day, however, the announcement had been torn down and there was a crowd outside the door.⁷

'I usually ate hardly any meat and took my meals in a vegetarian restaurant, but now I devour it greedily and would be glad to do so every day', Maria Konoplyova wrote in her diary on 5 October 1941.⁸ The person sitting next to her in the Hermitage canteen on 9 October 1941 asked her directly whether she was hungry, and himself admitted, 'I always feel

hungry now.' 'We hear the same thing from all the young people', she notes. What Ksaveriy Seltser described as 'a constant gnawing in the pit of your stomach', is something many people mention in October 1941, and it became more oppressive with every day that passed.⁹ There was nothing that could be done about it. Everybody's stocks were running out and rations were constantly being reduced. No one could think of an answer. Scouring the shops for whatever food remained was how most people tried to find more to eat, but with little success. Nothing else came to mind and, in many cases, people did not know how to improvise. They just hoped the situation would improve soon, or at least not become more serious.

Hopes of being able to rely on the black market were rapidly dispelled. In late 1941 and early 1942, directors of laboratories and institutions, and skilled workers, were being paid a monthly salary of 800-1,200 rubles; a university professor got 600 rubles; middle-ranking researchers and accountants were receiving 500-700 rubles; and cleaners were paid 130-80 rubles. The official price of bread was 1 ruble 70 kopeks per kilogram, and from 1 January 1942 this was increased to 1 ruble 90 kopeks. The black-market price of 1 kg of bread in December 1941 was 400 rubles; of meat, 400 rubles; of butter, 500 rubles.¹⁰

Already, however, some vendors were refusing to exchange food for money. From January or February 1942, bread was increasingly bartered for valuables like gold or jewellery, and more often only for other foodstuffs.

The first signs of real, frightening famine became evident in November 1941, the beginning of the Time of Death, with an endless succession of funeral processions, people trying to share out tiny pieces of bread, and a feverish search for food substitutes of any description. 'Somehow the hunger accumulates and grows, and what recently would have been a satisfying meal is now hopelessly inadequate. I am experiencing an acute sense of deprivation, a nagging emptiness in my stomach. Within an hour of a fairly decent meal, I am gathering up the tiniest scrap of anything edible and scouring the pans and plates', Irina Zelenskaya wrote in her diary on 9 January 1942.¹¹

Having examined the bodies of people who had starved to death, the pathologist Professor Vladimir Garshin noted that their livers had lost two thirds of their mass, their hearts over a third, while their spleens were several times smaller than normal: 'The starvation had consumed them . . . the body had not only drawn on all its reserves, but had destroyed the very structure of its cells.'¹² Each month during this period had its particular feature, not unique to it but typical of it: sledges bearing mummy-like 'swaddlings' in December, numerous unburied corpses in the streets in January, and bodies piled up in stacks in February.

2

There were some obvious consequences of starvation, of which the most evident was apathy.¹³ This presented as impaired movement, lethargy and

the 'torpor' frequently referred to in diaries and notes about the siege.¹⁴ It was physical frailty or, more forcefully, 'decrepitude'.¹⁵ Memoirs repeatedly refer to the wizened features of famine victims, irrespective of their age. Many were unable even to move around their rooms, and would sit or lie on their beds for long periods. A. P. Bondarenko recalled her brother standing motionless for hours at the table, and her sister who just lay in bed, showing no interest in the doll beside her.¹⁶ Z. V. Vinogradova, searching for children in 'escheated' apartments where everybody had died, wrote of her shock at how indifferent survivors were: 'A person would be lying in bed beside a dead family member, in a state of complete torpor.'¹⁷

Children, just like the adults, very soon became inured to death. It was in evidence everywhere, even at a New Year celebration. Those who came to the party at the Musical Comedy Theatre in January 1942 saw an usher in livery, who had died of starvation, being carried out. 'Nowhere do you see children playing. There are never any just running about', I. I. Zhilinsky wrote in his diary.¹⁸ 'Children talked about the same things as adults: bread, and the fact that "they're going to give us some today".'¹⁹ The Time of Death left its mark even on their games. N. A. Bulatova, who then was seven years old, recalls that when they received a piece of bread 5 cm x 5 cm, she and her sister would have a competition to see 'who could eat it for longer, a crumb at a time, and at the same time we counted how many dead people there were on our and the other side of the street'.²⁰

People's actions appeared mechanical, without the least trace of emotion. 'Everybody looked very serious, nobody smiled', O. Soloviova recalled of those she met in the all but deserted streets.²¹

In late 1941 and early 1942, it became particularly noticeable that those in the siege were becoming slow and cloddish; as if no longer seeing each other, they would fail to move aside and collide.²² Some already seemed doomed: 'They had a detached look, as if already taking leave.'²³ They said nothing and lacked all emotion: surprise, joy, even acute grief. As Yevgeny Schwartz put it, life was 'losing its warmth'.²⁴ People too were losing their sense of self-preservation and danger, and their interest in other people. Their sole interest now was food, and when they ceased to be interested in that, death was imminent. In his memoirs, artist Ilya Glazunov recalls stages on the road to extinction: 'There was an extraordinary facility about moving from one state to another. Images from books you had read or of people or events you had seen came to life and took shape in your mind. You no longer wanted to eat. Your mind gradually became as confused as that of a drug addict. You might suddenly black out.'²⁵

Apathy weakened the ties between people and often led to social exclusion, which had consequences. It is as a member of the community that a person is reminded every day of moral principles, about being a decent, honest, fair, responsive, generous person. He may not always live up to these criteria, and will dissimulate, but even then he is bearing in mind how he is expected to behave. He knows that others are watching, assessing and correcting him, approving or disapproving. Ethical standards need these

interactions, disputes and emotional setbacks if they are to survive. These ‘transactions’ are no mere formality, and without them the understanding of morality becomes blurred. Standards are only felt when people are monitoring themselves, scrutinizing the motivation behind their actions, and receiving critical feedback from others. They wilt where there is no interest in books and art, and a lack of concern about the moral evaluation of actions.

A person who became indifferent to everything, who became reclusive and turned in on himself, lost the ability to feel emotions, to experience joy, surprise, fear, grief and hope. This blunting of emotion was actually seen by some as salutary: Leningrad had become a grim, cold, dark city, and the only way not to break down completely was to become aloof and immune to suffering. This is the gist of an entry on 19 November 1941 in Lyudmila Eliasheva’s diary.²⁶ The only salvation, Maria Mashkova noted in her diary a few months later, was to become brutally indifferent to human suffering.²⁷

The atrophy of emotion was evident in many episodes during the siege, but perhaps the most startling was indifference to the bombing and to death in general. The first shelling of Leningrad in early September 1941 caused great concern. Citizens needed no persuading to take cover in the bomb shelters, and were anxious to find out how many casualties there were and which buildings had been destroyed.²⁸ Soon, however, they became used to it and, only a month later, in October 1941, we read in the diary of Vladimir Kulyabko, an engineer: ‘I have little interest now in where has been bombed or how many victims there were. People get used to everything, even horror.’²⁹ Hunger rather than the shelling was soon the main topic of conversation. In the Time of Death, no one found this lack of interest in the bombardment surprising.³⁰ Some had the resilience to joke about it.³¹ The police had sometimes to fine people reluctant to take shelter, and literally force them to get off the streets. What the writer Vitaliy Bianki noted about a friend who lived in Leningrad was not untypical: ‘At first she would get everybody in her apartment out of bed if there was bombing even in the far distance, but later it ceased to disturb her. Now she gets fined for not taking cover during air raids, and doesn’t wake her children in the night if there is bombing.’³²

3

Instances, during bombardment, of some hiding from the bombs while others hid from the police, had a certain logic to them. The siege encouraged development of a phlegmatic pragmatism, with people preferring to conserve what little strength they had left by staying at home and hoping for the best. In their debilitated state, some doubted they would make it to the shelter down ice-covered staircases fouled with excrement before the all-clear sounded. Others did not want to risk losing their place in a queue, even though the shops were obliged to close.³³ It was a real enough predicament: queues re-formed rapidly, and people would have no inclination to recognize a pre-existing priority.

Leningraders in the Time of Death: human and superhuman

'The siege divided behaviour with terrible clarity into the humane and the inhumane', Vladislav Glinka noted.¹ Not all Leningraders caught in the siege were prepared to accept that, either trying not to think about the morality of what they were doing, or coming up with excuses intended to show that their actions were not immoral. Siege ethics was not a coherent system of rules which allowed clear and unambiguous judgements of behaviour, but a chaotic mix of the old moral rules with amendments designed to adapt them to the realities of wartime. The 'deterioration of morals' was neither consistent nor irreversible. For some it occurred quickly, for others more slowly, and that in itself prevented any sudden, total collapse of morality. The same person could be, at different times, generous and parsimonious, sentimental and callous, responsive and impassive. That was not explicable solely by fluctuations in the size of rations: a part was played also by the cultural level of an individual, how rooted moral standards were in them, their position in society, and their circle of friends, acquaintances and colleagues. Much depended on their state of health, how great the difficulties facing them were, and what shocks they had been subjected to.

Being well educated was no guarantee that a person would not let themselves go, become hard and insensitive, and disregard the basic values of civilized life. They could unashamedly cheat and rob those closest to them. Someone who gave away their last crust of bread to a child might, unable to stand the strain and having overestimated their strength, then break and help themselves to their children's rations.

A part was played also by the 'collective' nature of the ordeal people were experiencing. It was difficult to be the first to decide to behave immorally, but once that was being done by other citizens, immoral acts did not seem so terrible. They did not need to have become universal. The appearance of even a few unkempt people could be enough to prompt someone to go about in rags, not wash for months, or be unashamed of lapping food off a plate. Stealing, looting and cheating became acceptable to people who had previously prided themselves on their standards, not only when there was no other choice, but also if you could observe them

wherever you turned, meaning you no longer had to be ashamed or wary of what other people might say.

There was a brutal pragmatism in siege ethics: those should survive who were capable of doing so, who were more valuable and more talented. That attitude was to be observed everywhere: in kindergartens and vocational schools, enterprises and evacuation centres, in civilian and military hospitals. Thousands of people were complicit in this 'selection', and it could not but inform their behaviour and ethics as a whole. It was often claimed to be sanctified by time-honoured moral principles: was it not fair to support the best? Not to give rations to ten, none of whom would survive, rather than to one whose life that would save? Moral standards which best contributed to ensuring survival proved the most enduring. They were subjected to a kind of grinding down to adapt them to the realities of the siege, but often supported at grassroots level.

Completely disregarding traditional morality was not a good idea. If you gave nothing in return, you risked being left to die: nobody would share with you in a real emergency. Anyone who was boorish, who openly despised and humiliated others, could not expect to be given a helping hand when it was needed. A person who let themselves go, stopped taking care of themselves, whose very appearance was repulsive, could not expect anyone to take their hand if they reached out to them. You needed to be aware that people should harbour feelings of pity and compassion, since otherwise how would you even know you could turn to them for charity? If victims of the siege could not survive on their own, they needed to abide by the code of conduct generally accepted in society.

Talking about the reasons for the persistence of moral precepts during the Leningrad calamity, we need to note one feature. Something we might expect to undermine them did, at the same time, strengthen them. The endless talk about food, which was considered a sign of degeneration, in fact conspired to perpetuate the memory of a civilized way of life, with vivid, expressive details magnified by hindsight, and nostalgic descriptions of feasting. Reporting these conversations and 'gastronomic' dreams of the future in their diaries and letters, Leningraders chided themselves for falling so low as to have lost interest in literature and art, science and creativity, but that also unobtrusively confirmed the importance of moral rules. Hatred, irritation and the urge to punish are not the noblest human qualities, but they helped to drive home lessons in morality, intolerance of stealing, cheating, unfairness and callousness. Defending their place in the queue with angry shrieking, arguing with the sales assistant over ration coupons, mistrustfully checking the weight of porridge received in the canteen, Leningraders corralled themselves all the more firmly within the confines of fairness, which is an essential feature of a civilized person.

The sorrowing and mournful diaries and letters of those who registered the nightmare of the siege have brought down to us one aspect of the great, collective achievement of the people of Leningrad. Few chose to talk about their feelings as they extended help to others. An unknown,

mute multitude who uncomplainingly did their duty will never now tell us anything, and neither will those whose lives they tried to save. All of them perished.

As the abyss of the hell of the siege deepened, something was undermined in people themselves: not everyone was prepared to sacrifice themselves. Even the most steadfast could be broken. The instinct of self-preservation suggested only a few ways which might conduce to survival, and those left little room for compassion and solace. Consolation was predicated on having something to share, and where was that to come from when rations were measured in grams? Those who showed the best qualities of selflessness, generosity and kindness might, on another occasion, have no choice but to compromise their moral principles. When we talk of the tragedy of Leningrad, perhaps what mattered was not whether people were always able to show compassion, but whether they had the strength to show it at least once.

These people had, after all, nothing more than a handful of millet and a tattered shawl in which to wrap themselves against the cold. No amount of bombardment was able to destroy the citadel of the human spirit for as long as there was even one person who, themselves on the verge of starvation, raised the fallen to their feet and gave comfort to the despairing. Leningrad saved itself through redeeming actions great and small: the dedication of hundreds of people who sought out orphans, or took a glass of hot water to a helpless neighbour. The baton of human goodness was passed on by the strong and the weak, by relatives and strangers, through encouragement and censure, through hatred and gratitude. Leningraders knew they were more likely to survive by not sharing with anyone, but share they did. They knew they could never be repaid, but gave what they could. Themselves starving, they found the strength to give food to others. The price they paid to enable others to live was sacrosanct, life itself. There can be no greater love than that.

Now, through the testimony of these eyewitnesses, we have looked into the very depths of the hell that was Leningrad during the siege. Every day, not one or two but thousands of human beings were dying from starvation and illness. Their deaths were protracted and terrible: they died in delirium, often begging for bread, and they died among others who had none, who were as malnourished and suffering as they were themselves. They died one after another, the closest, dearest family members, forcing citizens to become accustomed to something no one should ever get used to. Every day seeing the suffering, every day subdividing a tiny piece of bread, every day standing hopelessly in long queues, every day seeing the tears and hearing the pleading of starving children. That was the abyss they lived in.

Every detail of life under the siege, like a leaden weight, pounded people down into the mire. How then were they to be open to compassion, charity and love? And yet, there was compassion. We see gathered round the bed of the dying those of their family and friends who were still alive. And

there was charity: bread one was keeping for oneself which found its way into a child's outstretched hand.

But there was another emotion, which anyone who reads these writings from the siege feels, and that is anguish. There can be no plainer evidence of human compassion. Anguish from start to finish. Anguish in the diaries and letters; the anguish of the dying and of those seeking to save them; the anguish of yesterday and today. Everywhere, anguish.

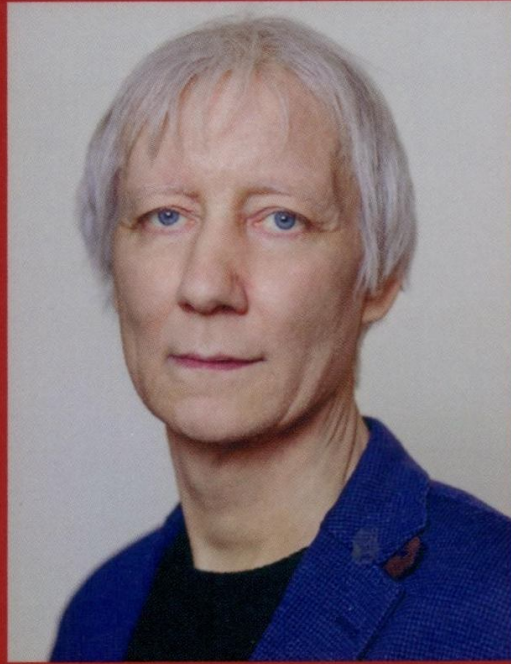


image © Sofia Razumovskaya

Sergey Yarov (1959–2015) was Professor of History at the European University, St Petersburg, and Herzen Russian State Pedagogical University, as well as Senior Research Fellow at the St Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. His work focused on twentieth-century Russian history, and the siege of Leningrad in particular. He was awarded the Likhachev Foundation's Antsiferov Prize in 2012 and the Dynasty Foundation's Educator ('Prosvetitel') Prize in 2014.

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'St Petersburger Sergey Yarov was, until his cruelly premature death, one of Russia's leading historians, and in this spare, searing analysis of his home city's greatest disaster, he is at the height of his powers. Unlike conventional eulogies to siege heroism, Yarov's retrospective anthropology, drawing on hundreds of diaries and documents, shows us what he calls "real people, irate, resentful, but still imbued with a sense of compassion". Amid the horrors of disintegration and degradation, he testifies to how "Leningrad saved itself through redeeming actions great and small". An intensely moving and unforgettable book.'

Catriona Kelly, University of Oxford

'Unlike many historians of the siege who tend to minimize the negative features of people's behaviour, Yarov shows both the self-sacrifice and the selfishness, the heroism and the egoism that were displayed at all levels of society. *Leningrad 1941-42* is an outstanding book and one which sheds much new light on how people behave in extreme conditions. It will be of great interest to a wide readership.'

John Barber, University of Cambridge

'When most people in a great city were dying of hunger, some died faster than others. Some lived by privilege, by crime, or by the goodness of others. Some were empowered to decide which others would live or die. What does this tell us about their morality – and about our own rules of ethical behaviour? Sergey Yarov's study of wartime Leningrad is an unblinking inquiry into the depths of the human spirit.'

Mark Harrison, University of Warwick