

“This very well written book is the first to analyze how the horrific Siege of Leningrad, which claimed the lives of roughly 800,000 of the city’s inhabitants, was remembered and memorialized. The work is truly interdisciplinary. Students and scholars of history, political science, literature, and cultural studies will benefit from reading this book.”

– Richard Bidlack, Washington and Lee University

“In this moving account of the worst urban siege in modern history – the 900-day German Blockade of Leningrad in World War II – the author skillfully disentangles two main narrative and memory streams – each of them socially and psychologically complex and ever shifting – to examine how Leningraders and other Soviet people on the one hand and the ‘official culture’ on the other remembered and misremembered the agony and heroism of that dreadful experience. Informed by vigorous analysis, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad* is also rich in color and detail that brings out the pathos, horror, and suffering of a landmark event of the twentieth century in fresh and vital ways.”

– Richard Stites, Georgetown University

“A beautiful book on a topic of stunning import! The Leningrad Siege, which took more than a million lives, was an ordeal unparalleled even in the bloody twentieth century. Richly grounded in theory and in comparative references – the London Blitz, the reconstruction of Warsaw – the book seamlessly interweaves grim and stirring historical narrative with a keen and elegant interpretive voice as it moves from the onset of the siege in 1941, through the wrenching Stalin years, and eventually on to questions of historical memory and identity in the new St. Petersburg. This wonderful book will draw you both into and out of yourself. You will gain insight about the complex inner power of layered memory and the mediating role of constructed myth. And you will find yourself absorbed in great questions about cities and their identities and in the gripping story of the Russian experience and memory of World War II.”

– Nina Tumarkin, Wellesley College and author of *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*

Preface

In August 1991, a small group of Communist diehards launched a coup against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. I happened to be in Moscow at the time, and I learned of the coup when a neighbor, who had been listening to the radio, banged on my door and let me know that we were now living in a state of emergency. Over the next three days, I was an eyewitness to the opposition to the coup that centered on the White House, the headquarters of the government of the Russian Federation, and its newly elected president, Boris Yeltsin. I read the broadsides and leaflets produced to fill the gap left by the absence of regular newspapers. I watched the plotters' televised press conference. I listened to a parade of dignitaries – including Yeltsin, Elena Bonner, and Evgenii Evtushenko – make speeches from the balcony of the White House. I saw an elderly woman admonishing young soldiers perched on armored vehicles along Kalinin Prospekt. I lent a hand in efforts to build a barricade on Manezh Square.

It was during those three days that the seeds of this project were planted. The sense that we were living through and, in a small but not unimportant way, making history was ubiquitous, largely unquestioned, and a bit unnerving. Events looked more threatening, more dramatic, and especially more coherent on CNN than they had on the steps of the Russian White House. All the same, what I read and saw on television immediately became part of my memory of those days. I left Moscow the day after the coup ended, fascinated by how people come to represent and understand their life stories as part of history. Eventually my interest in this process led to the Great Fatherland War, a formative moment in the nation's history and in the life histories of the people who fought and suffered in it.

Acknowledgments

From inspiration to realization is, of course, a long road. I would like to express my gratitude to the people who contributed to this book in all sorts of ways. I have benefited enormously from the advice and questions of friends and colleagues who read all or part of the book in its various forms: Eliza Ablavotski, Carol Avins, Jeffrey Brooks, Maria Bucur, Barbara Engel, Sibelan Forrester, Karin Gedge, Helena Gosciolo, Peter Gray, Michael Hickey, Katherine Jolluck, Adele Lindenmeyr, Karl Loewenstein, Lynn Mally, Louise McReynolds, Benjamin Nathans, Claire Nolte, Kendrick Oliver, Cynthia Paces, Rochelle Ruthchild, Roshanna Sylvester, Barbara Walker, Robert Weinberg, and Elizabeth Wood. I extend my thanks to Steven Maddox for his generous help with photographs. Nancy Wingfield happily read and reread everything I sent her, offered invaluable suggestions and support, and helped me hunt down a very difficult-to-find reference.

Conversations with Susan Gans on the nature of trauma and memory helped me to refine my thinking on these issues. In the early, indeed formative, stages of this project, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in Susan Suleiman's National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) seminar on representations of the occupation and World War II in French literature, history, and film. The seminar's lively, interdisciplinary discussion had a profound impact on the overall shape and approach of this book. I am happy to thank the seminar's participants, as well as the other groups that have responded to papers and presentations over the years, including the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, the Center for Gender Studies at the European Humanities University (Minsk), the Women's Studies Center at the University of Łódź, and the Centre for Metropolitan History at the University of London.

I am indebted to the librarians and archival staff at the Central State Archive of St. Petersburg, the Central State Archive of Literature and Art of St. Petersburg, Harvard University, the Hoover Institution, the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, the Russian National Library, and West Chester University. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, and West Chester University.

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Memory,” in Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver, eds., *The Memory of Catastrophe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 106–17; “Gender, Memory, and National Myths: Ol’ga Berggol’ts and the Siege of Leningrad,” *Nationalities Papers* (<http://www.tandf.co.uk>), 28 (September 2000): 551–64.

Finally, I need to thank the people whose contributions are more profound and more difficult to list. To my parents, Diane and Barry Kirschenbaum, I owe my love of books and of unusual travel opportunities. Their enjoyment and encouragement of my work have been an enormous gift. My other great teacher, Reggie Zelnik, did not live to see the publication of this book. I hope that it reflects something of his light and humane touch.

To John Conway, my husband, who has never known me not to be working on this book, goes the greatest thanks of all – for his love, friendship, insight, and dinner table conversation.

A Note on Transliteration and Translation

I have used the Library of Congress system of transliteration, except in the cases of a few very well-known names, such as Yeltsin. Following Joseph Brodsky’s lead, I have transliterated the city’s nickname as “Peter.” All translations are my own, except where noted.

Introduction

Nothing but a legend, you say? You want nothing but facts? Facts are perishable, believe me, only legends remain, like the soul after the body, or perfume in the wake of a woman.

Amin Maalouf¹

The almost nine-hundred-day siege of Leningrad constituted one of the most dramatic and tragic episodes of World War II. Even before it ended, the siege became one of the war's most widely told stories. Both the Soviet and the Allied press transformed besieged Leningrad into legend, a compelling story of steadfastness and heroism. Inside the blockaded city, Leningraders undertook a startling array of commemorative projects, ranging from keeping diaries to producing documentary films. Perhaps the best known of these contemporary commemorations is Dmitrii Shostakovich's monumental *Leningrad Symphony*. Begun in blockaded Leningrad, the piece had more than fifty international premiers in 1942 and became an emblem of the city's suffering and its strength. In the summer of 1942, the remnants of the Leningrad Philharmonic, supplemented by musicians stationed at the Leningrad front, performed the symphony in Leningrad itself. Broadcast by radio throughout the city, the concert immediately became part of the epic story of the blockade. One of the violins played that evening became a museum piece.

¹ Amin Maalouf, *The Rock of Tanios*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 261. Cited in Ellen L. Fleischmann, "Selective Memory, Gender, and Nationalism: Palestinian Women Leaders of the Mandate Period," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 47 (Spring 1999): 142.

The extraordinary and unexpected plight of blockaded Leningrad easily lent itself to mythmaking. Just weeks after the surprise invasion of 22 June 1941, rapidly advancing German troops threatened the city. By the end of August, the local newspapers and radio were exhorting Leningraders to become “heroic defenders” on the “city front.” Thus, the epic terms in which the state media would narrate the siege were set quite early. Of course, not all Leningraders responded as the authorities hoped. A minority blamed the military disasters on the Communists and called for Leningrad to be declared an open city. Still, the extent of defeatist sentiment in Leningrad should not be exaggerated. As the historian Andrei Dzeniskevich concludes, “The overwhelming majority of workers maintained loyalty to the party and the Soviet state.”² Indeed, thousands of Leningraders became involved in local defense, working overtime in the war industry and standing watch on rooftops to extinguish incendiary bombs in buckets of sand.

The first air raids came in early September. The blockade began shortly thereafter. On 8 September 1941, German forces occupied the southern shore of Lake Ladoga (east of the city) and, together with Finnish troops north of the city, severed all land routes in and out of Leningrad. Facing determined resistance from the Soviet Army, the Germans failed to capture the city. They decided to rely instead on siege and starvation. The front lines stabilized within four kilometers of the city, and Leningraders found themselves cut off from what they began to call the mainland.

During the late fall and throughout the winter of 1941–42, the city’s population – predominantly women, children, and the elderly – faced conditions that defy imagination. Temperatures in January 1942 reached forty degrees below zero centigrade (minus forty degrees Fahrenheit). Leningraders suffered the bitter cold in a city without heat, electricity, running water, or public transportation. Between 20 November and 25 December, the daily bread ration for dependents fell to a low of 125 grams (not quite 4.5 ounces, perhaps fifteen or twenty small bites of bread). Thousands died of starvation every day, and corpses piled up in streets and courtyards.

The situation within the city improved somewhat in early 1942, when an ice road across frozen Lake Ladoga, dubbed the “Road of Life” by the media, began to carry convoys of food into the city and to transport

² Andrei Dzeniskevich, “The Social and Political Situation in Leningrad in the First Months of the German Invasion: The Psychology of the Workers,” in Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch, eds., *The People’s War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 77.

the sick and starving to the mainland. With the arrival of spring, the worst period of the blockade came to an end. The evacuation of civilians continued during the summer as flotillas replaced the ice road across Lake Ladoga.

The city remained within easy reach of German artillery, but something like normalcy returned. During the winter of 1942–43, the city's population was far smaller than it had been a year earlier, and better prepared for a winter under siege. Now German artillery fire took more lives than starvation. In January 1943, a Soviet offensive opened a narrow corridor that allowed the reestablishment of a rail connection to the mainland, albeit under heavy fire. A year later, fireworks – which some Leningraders mistook for artillery fire – marked the victorious lifting of the blockade. The human losses were staggering. Conservative postwar estimates put the number of dead at 670,000. More recently, historians have suggested a figure of one million deaths due to starvation as a reasonable approximation. No city in modern times has withstood greater losses.³

Since the war, and particularly since the early 1960s, the remarkable story of the blockade has been retold in countless memoirs, interviews, previously unpublished diaries, histories, films, monuments, poems, and museum exhibits. This book tells the story of these stories. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the experience of the blockade, the book aims to trace how, in the half century between the beginning of the Soviet-German war and the end of the Soviet Union, both the people who survived the siege and the state that claimed it as evidence of its own legitimacy remembered and recounted it.

At first glance, the story of the story of the blockade appears to be a relatively straightforward tale of the shifting tactics of the propaganda state. Desperate to mobilize the population, the wartime state extolled the resourcefulness, self-sacrifice, and self-reliance of heroic Leningrad. Shostakovich won the Stalin Prize for his symphony, and Leningrad won the designation “Hero City.” Once the war had been won, Josef Stalin, eager to claim responsibility for the overall victory, suppressed the story. The blockade museum, opened during the war, was shuttered. Work on

³ A. R. Dzeniskevich, *Blokada i politika: Oborona Leningrada v politicheskoi kon'iunktore* (St. Petersburg: Nestor, 1998), 45–68. V. M. Koval'chuk, “Tragicheskie tsifry blokady (K voprosu ob ustanovlenii chisla zhertv blokirovannogo Leningrada),” in A. A. Fursenko, ed., *Rossia v XIX-XX vv: Sbornik statei k 70-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Rafaila Sholomovicha Ganelina* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1998), 357–69. David M. Glantz, *The Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1944: 900 Days of Terror* (Osceola, WI: MBI Publishing, 2001), 180.



5. Nevskii Prospekt during the winter of 1941-1942. The poster proclaims "Death to the Child Killers!" *Source: ITAR-TASS.*



25. Male soldiers and sailors on the Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad. Photo by John K. Conway.



26. "The Home Guard" on the Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad, which includes a young female medic. Photo by John K Conway.

“Lisa A. Kirschenbaum has written a complex, insightful book, a sophisticated account of the interdependent relationship between personal memories, official myths, and the monuments they created. An engaging book . . . particularly valuable through its focus on an urban space where divisions between home and front and genders dissipated, adding to our understanding of these issues.”

– *The Journal of Military History*

“One of the most refreshing aspects to this interesting and heartfelt book is that the author has drawn on a comparative historiography of war and memory in the twentieth century . . . to think about her subject, as well as positioning it in the context of the Soviet cultural history.”

– *Canadian Slavic Papers*

“With this book Kirschenbaum has created yet another monument to the epic siege of Leningrad.”

– *American Historical Review*

“This book is superb. . . . This deeply researched, elegantly written volume is appropriate for advanced undergraduates and graduate students, as well as specialists on Russia, twentieth-century history, and the study of history and memory. . . . This book is a signal contribution.”

– *The Historian*

“[Kirschenbaum’s] analysis is thorough and balanced, and the result is an impressive accomplishment on several counts Her detailed account of how the siege has been remembered provides a major new chapter of scholarship on this specific mnemonic project – and a chapter that is wonderfully written in the bargain.”

– *The Public Historian*

“The thesis of [this] innovative study – which is expressed in lucid, erudite, and very articulate prose – is that the myth and memory of the blockade each evolved over time and influenced each other The book’s most important contribution is a delineation of changes in the blockade myth through description and analysis of Soviet newspaper reportage, documentary film, propaganda posters, scholarly publications . . . published fiction, museum and library exhibitions, building reconstruction cemeteries, and war monuments.”

– *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*

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Cover image: Nevskii Prospekt during the first winter of the war. ITAR-TASS.
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