

Chapter 1

TEMPLE OF HEROIC COMMUNITY

Soviet People, Leningraders and German Fascists in the State Museum of the History of St Petersburg

WALKING ALONG NEVSKIY PROSPEKT, THE MAIN STREET OF ST PETERSBURG, on 8 September at about 11.35 A.M., one may hear from loudspeakers in the street the sound of warning sirens, and then the regular clicking of a metronome. If anybody is listening to the local radio or watching a local television channel at that moment, they will also be informed that on this day in 1941 an 872-day siege of the city by the German army started. In 2009, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, these signals were broadcast to remember the defenders, citizens and victims of the Leningrad Blockade (also known as the Siege of Leningrad). Since that moment, local memory of the blockade has acquired its new 'sound' dimension (Voronina and Utekhin 2010: 63).

As Tatiana Voronina and Ilya Utekhin (*ibid.*) point out, the role of acoustic signals is to inform people about events that are 'the most important to them in a given moment'. These sounds played this role both during the war as well as today. In besieged Leningrad, the sound of sirens warned people of approaching air raids; and the metronome, played over the radio when no other information was broadcast, informed people that the city was still alive. Today, on 8 September every year, the sounds are played to remind residents about the fate of their city during the war. Thus, the sound of a metronome is one of those symbols which the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur (2003), would describe as 'giving rise to thought'. However, it is not the only meaningful symbol of the blockade.

Another symbol is a 125-gram piece of bread. When, on 8 September 1941, the encirclement of Leningrad was completed, the city was cut off from the rest of the country. As the city was not well prepared for a siege, and food reserves could suffice for only one month, the city dwellers were

to experience nearly 900 days of a 'frozen hell of starvation and disease' (Glantz 2002: 132). The most severe time began in November 1941 when the daily bread ration was reduced to 125 grams for dependents, such as children, pensioners and adults relying on aid, as well as those working in offices (but not in factories). Scientists in the besieged city developed a formula for an artificial bread, which had 179 calories only and was composed of 20–25 per cent of cellulose mass and 40–50 per cent of various additives such as bran, oilcake and chips. This bread was to form the basic diet for the majority of Leningrad's inhabitants during the winter of 1941/42. This 125-grams ration has become well recognised today, not only in St Petersburg, but throughout the country. This bread is both symbolic of a heroic deed – it presages the final lifting of the blockade – and of the suffering of ordinary people during the war. As with the metronome, it is a very important memory and symbol of the war experience. They are both icons, and their power lies in the fact that they not only give rise to thought, but force one to reflect upon the past. This is why they are always present in survivor's memories, visible and audible in the city landscape, and this is why they feature so strongly in museum exhibitions. Indeed, one may find a replica piece of Leningrad bread not only in the Blockade Museum in St Petersburg, but within local museum exhibitions throughout the country, such as displays in the Komi Republic¹ telling the story of the Great Patriotic War.²

These items – the metronome and piece of bread, as well as others, such as a child's sledge used as a means of transportation when the public transport system was out of action, and a tiny stove (*burzhuyka*) used to heat houses when the central heating was cut off – are all symbolic of the fight with the enemy. They also suggest that the image of the enemy was not uniform during the war, but was a dual image; it was perceived as both the German soldiers, who besieged the city, as well as the hunger and cold, which daily threatened people's lives. These symbols, however, also infer that the memory of the war is much more complex than it would appear at first glance.

The State Museum of the History of St Petersburg, while telling the story of the blockade must deal with this complexity, and therefore presents the enemy in these two fundamentally different forms. It is the museum's aim to show the history of the blockade, however in doing so it does not escape from the influence of memory. Thus, as we will show in this chapter, when the museum story concentrates on warfare, a military enemy is apparent, yet when the focus is on the city's history, the image of the enemy becomes hunger, cold or a bomb. Despite the fact that both images complement one another, they have their own development dynamics in the museum

narrative and are strongly contrasted with the main characters of the story, namely the citizens of Leningrad on the one hand and Soviet heroes on the other.

In this case study we concentrate our analysis on this complex relationship between enemy images and their relations to the main character/s of the story. We also pay special attention to the role of the symbols of the blockade in the narrative. To ensure our argument is clearly understood, we begin this chapter with a short description of the development of the memory of the Blockade of Leningrad after the war.

The Blockade of Leningrad in Official and Local Memory

The German attack against the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 started a new chapter in the history of the Second World War called, in Russian historiography, the Great Patriotic War. The capture and, if necessary, destruction of Leningrad, which had been the cultural capital of Russia and symbol of Bolshevik Revolution, was one of the Hitler's priority war-time objectives (Glantz 2002: 9); equally, the city's resistance was one of the Stalin's strategic defence goals. The ultimate number of casualties from the Blockade of Leningrad as a result of both the siege and the ensuing battle, will probably never be known, but historians estimate that 1.6 to 2 million Soviet civilians and soldiers perished during the 872-day blockade between 8 September 1941 and 27 January 1944 (Glantz 2002: 327–67).³ As David Glantz (2002: 148) claims, 'regardless [of] the actual death toll, these figures accord the Battle for Leningrad and its associated winter blockade the dubious distinction of being the most terrible and costly siege in recorded history'.

It should, therefore, not be surprising that memory of the blockade has evolved with the great social and political changes since the war. These changes have resulted to a large extent from the official historical policy in force at a given point in time. The Soviet authorities that wielded power over all media were able to shape official memory, making it correspond to their current political needs and blocking any alternative interpretations. It was this very force that made the Soviet authorities prevent and forbid the development of independent memory about the blockade, and, by including it in the discourse on the victory in the German–Soviet war, the Soviet authorities used it as an element of their own propaganda. This is not to say that other interpretations, divergent from the ones proposed by the dominant discourse, were non-existent. As a most critical event in the life of many of Leningrad's citizens, the blockade had a strong influence on

their society (Kirschenbaum 2006: 77). Nevertheless, the personal recollections were individual in their nature. Whenever they became a collective phenomenon – for instance, Leningraders' memory of the joint experience of the war – they were subdued and destroyed by the authorities, starting from immediately after the war.

The first 'memory projects' to commemorate and secure the memory of the blockade began as early as 1941 (Konradova and Ryleva 2005: 245; Shishkin and Dobrotvorskiy 2007: 3). The city authorities had issued an order to collect weapons and military equipment that constituted proof of a heroic fight by the defenders of the city. The collected items formed part of an exhibition opened in 1941 on 'The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Nation against the German Fascism'.⁴ These items were then combined in 1943 into a new exhibition on 'The Heroic Defence of the City of Leningrad', following Operation Spark in January 1943 which had broken the blockade. Individual rooms of the exhibition displayed information about consecutive episodes, which together relayed the 'true story' of what had happened during the blockade (Shishkin and Dobrotvorskiy 2007: 3). Local history and tales about the blockade were intertwined with national history that talked about the German–Soviet war. Just after the war, in 1945, the exhibition was extended again with new rooms and materials. Later on it was transformed into the Museum of the Defence of Leningrad.⁵ Both the exhibition and the museum were of great interest to the citizens (Salisbury 2003: 571–72).

In January 1945, Leningrad received the Order of Lenin, the highest decoration of the Soviet Union, for its heroic fight during the war and defence of the nation. The Order confirmed the significance of the blockade in the narrative at state level. International significance came soon after when the Nuremberg Trials started at the end of 1945. The Blockade of Leningrad was proof of Nazi crimes committed against civilians. For the first time Leningraders, the Soviet people generally, and indeed the whole world, learnt of the number of people who had died of starvation in the besieged city (Gorshenin 1954). The figure of 641,803 people who perished during the blockade became symbolic. Even if later research showed that the number of casualties was larger, the number agreed at the Nuremberg Trials was widely used by state propaganda as a number of international significance (Voronina 2011).

In that period much was written in the local press about the blockade, creating a picture of 'Leningrad war fame' (Kalendarova 2006: 277). Stories about the heroic deeds of Leningraders were used to mobilise people to rebuild the city and give them moral courage in the face of very difficult postwar living conditions. At the same time the articles

highlighted the exceptional attitude of the city, which had not only driven the enemy back, but also freed itself from the siege without any external support. Aleksey Kuznetsov best expressed this thought in his speech in 1946 when he was appointed Secretary of the Communist Party in Leningrad. He made it clear that the city was one of Hitler's strategic targets and, thanks to its heroic attitude, was not only the first one to face the enemy, but also contributed to the defence of the motherland. Kuznetsov emphasised the role and significance of the city by claiming that Leningrad was 'the city that overshadowed the fame of Troy' (Kalendarova 2006: 277–84). Glorifying the city and emphasising the exceptionality of its fate, Kuznetsov belittled Stalin's role, whether deliberately or not. The words of the First Secretary were captured by the Leningrad press, which frequently quoted his statements.

The judgements and assessments of the blockade expressed in that period by the commanders-in-chief in the Soviet Union highlighted other aspects of the Siege of Leningrad. First of all, they pointed out the key role of Stalin in breaking the blockade. Secondly, they focused on the military achievements. The citizens were only mentioned in order to point out that their attitude and dedication should serve as an example in postwar times too. What is interesting is that neither Kuznetsov's statements nor the statements of high-ranking state officials mention the number of casualties or the conditions of life experienced in the city. Even if they presented different approaches, in fact they concentrated only on the positive aspects of the blockade.

The end of the 1940s was marked by growing conflict between the memory of the exceptional fate of Leningrad, as created by the city authorities, and the state interpretation of events, which focused strongly on Stalin's role. It was also asserted increasingly frequently that the victory of Leningrad was not an achievement of its citizens alone, but an outcome of aid rendered by other regions of the country, and of the mobilisation of all citizens of the Soviet Union.⁶ This conflict of memory became one of the elements of the complex mechanism of the so-called *Leningradskoye delo* (The Leningrad Affair),⁷ an action against the Leningrad party organisation commanded by Andrey Zhdanov and prepared on Stalin's order. It resulted in repression of the city's high-ranking party officials, members of the Soviet mass organisations and of many Leningrad communists (Salisbury 2003: 571–83).⁸ Memory about the blockade was also subjected to repression. In 1949 the Museum of the Leningrad Blockade was shut down,⁹ and its staff were accused of creating an anti-party attitude that allegedly diminished Stalin's standing. They were also accused of preparing an attack against Soviet power. Shishkin and Dobrotvorskiy (2007:

26) write that the evidence for this was the weapon and military exhibits in the museum. The management, including the director, were sent to prison camps; other people were released but subsequently could not find new jobs (Salisbury 2003: 579–83; Shishkin and Dobrotvorskii 2007: 25–31). The press printed fewer and fewer articles on the siege, and those that were published praised Stalin's achievements and highlighted the importance of aid rendered by other cities and fronts that contributed to the Leningrad victory (Kalendarova 2006: 285).

Memory about the blockade was rekindled in the official discourse at the end of 1950s. The image of the blockade and methods of its interpretation shaped in that period have endured until today, with some minor changes and adjustments. During this period the first memory projects were also established, which set the framework of the language used to commemorate the blockade.

The beginning of the 1960s marked the development of officially remembering the German–Soviet war as a national victory. In Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, the victory of the nation over fascism was mentioned for the first time, and the significance of Stalin and the wartime commanders diminished (Hösler 2005: 157). It was also asserted more and more frequently that it was necessary to preserve the memory of the wartime events for future generations. The emphasis on the 'link between generations' played an important political function. It showed that all generations jointly built the Soviet future. In June 1965 Leningrad was awarded the Gold Star decoration¹⁰ for its extraordinary achievements, setting an example for future generations.

According to Glantz (2002: 470), in this context, the history of the blockade was important in so far as 'the course and outcome of the Battle for Leningrad represented the entire Great Patriotic War in microcosm'. Due to the authentic involvement and struggle of not only soldiers but also civilians, the blockade became a symbol embodying all the highest values of Soviet society. As the newspapers wrote at the time, the blockade ought to be 'known in order to appreciate and love our Soviet Motherland even more' (Kalendarova 2006: 287). The references to the history of the blockade had another propaganda goal too. In the face of the Cold War, the fear of repetition of the blockade served as an element to legitimise power. Moreover, memory of the blockade served to build a discourse on 'the Soviet fight for the peace' (Voronina 2007). Reference to the heroic 'authentic' defence which brought about victory over fascism supported their conviction about the moral superiority of the Soviet Union over the West.

In that period, the press published increasing numbers of articles that not only described the heroic approach of the blockade, but also

highlighted the issues of hunger, cold, death and suffering in everyday life. The first publications of memories also started to appear, and for the first time, official discourse mentioned the issue of casualties among the citizens.¹¹ The developing memory of the tragedy completed the heroic one, thus creating the image of the city as both hero and victim. However, taboo subjects still existed.

The process of commemorating the blockade in art and architecture also began in the 1960s, following the erection in 1957 on Nevskiy Prospekt of a replica of 'the white and blue signs' which had warned Leningraders during the war about the danger of air raids (Kirschenbaum 2006: 88). The first memorial complex, the Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery, which was officially established as the memorial site of the blockade on 9 May 1960, had very important national meaning (Kalinin and Yurevich 1979). Its central element is formed by a sculpture of the Monument Rodina-Mat' (Mother Motherland), which symbolises national unity, and the epitaphs on the stone plaques are reminiscent of the texts from the memorial on the Field of Mars, where the participants of the February Revolution were buried in 1917. Thus, according to Rusinova (2006: 338–39), 'the civic outburst at the time of the blockade equals the one during the Revolution. Each of them presents in a very similar way a voluntary sacrifice in the fight for socialism'. This is how the motive of the 'link between generations' and the common Soviet victory receive a visual form.

The language of 'lyric statehood' generated in that period, strongly drawing on individual memories, became a permanent element shaping the identity of postwar Soviet society (Gudkov 2005: 92). In the 1960s and 1970s more than sixty monuments were erected around the city making a kind of 'one-to-one scale model of the blockade' called the Green Circle of Glory (Kirschenbaum 2006: 189). However, the most significant memorial, which united local history with the state myth of victory, is the Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad, which was erected in 1975 and inaugurated on Victory Day. According to Olga Rusinova (2006: 348–55), this monument, in contrast to the monument of mourning erected on the Piskaryovskoe Memorial Cemetery, shows the blockade as a triumph. It was erected to build a blockade myth about the historical victory which took place, but it also concerned the contemporary Soviet reality of the 1970s.

During the 1980s and 1990s a 'crisis of interpretation' of the blockade ensued and no new monuments were erected (Rusinova 2006: 357). Nevertheless, during this period a new discourse about the blockade began. In 1979 the *Book of the Blockade*, written by Ales' Adamovich and Daniil Granin, was published in which, for the first time, the dark sides of

the blockade were spoken of publicly (Kirschenbaum 2006: 231). When Perestrojka arose in the late 1980s there were more articles in newspapers and journals showing the blockade as a humanitarian catastrophe, during which acts of cannibalism, pillage and robbery had taken place. However, as Lisa Kirschenbaum (*ibid.*: 235) writes, 'inclusion of previously taboo details did not necessarily imply a rejection of the Leningrad epic' of heroism. The heroic feature was still present and strengthened by the *Blokadniki* (survivor of the Blockade) societies which, in the face of the social and economic difficulties of the 1990s, fostered 'their wartime heroism' in order to gain respect and social welfare, and retain continuity of identity (Kirschenbaum 2006: 259; Voronina 2007). From the mid-1990s the *Blokadniki* societies had increasing influence on the shaping of official memory; in consequence the memory of the blockade remained, and is still perceived, as heroic.

Despite overcoming the taboo issues, many historical facts were still not mentioned in public debates. So far, victory in the war had been considered by the majority of Russians as the only positive moment in the history of the Soviet nation, and the most crucial element in its formation. As in the 1960s, the image of a heroic and tragic fight was used by the contemporary authorities to consolidate its image (Konradova and Ryleva 2005: 245). The image of the past created in this way enables the reasons behind the war, with all their ambiguities, to be passed over in silence (Gudkov 2005: 94).

History of the Exhibition 'Leningrad during the Great Patriotic War'

As already mentioned, at the beginning of the 1960s, during the wave of patriotism which resulted in the creation of monumental statues and museums devoted to the Great Patriotic War, it was also possible to build memorials commemorating the Leningrad Blockade. At that time, the reopening of the exhibition on the history of the blockade to describe the fate of the besieged city was discussed more and more often. Although, from the moment the Museum of the Blockade was closed in 1949, the authorities had tried to make sure that no project commemorating the blockade appeared in the public space of the city. As Kirschenbaum (2006: 147) writes, 'at homes, the Leningraders preserved domestic siege museums'. The change of memory policy that occurred at the end of the 1950s opened the way for transforming the domestic museums into public ones that reviewed the fate of the whole community.