

THE CULTURE OF THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD

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The legacy of the Siege of Leningrad includes remarkable documents chronicling both unimaginable suffering and seemingly superhuman resilience. Among those who memorialized this catastrophe were some of the most astute minds and gifted writers of the Leningrad intellectual elite. Many of them pondered the new culture of the Siege in relation to previous siege warfare and the psychological ramifications of being under siege. Others analyzed the Siege in the context of Russian and Soviet history and, in particular, the history of the city itself. In some instances the more general and the more specific perspectives dovetailed in significant ways.

Among the respected chroniclers of the Siege, perhaps no one wrote more perceptively about the experience than the literary scholar Lidiia Ginzburg. Her *Blockade Diary*, first published in the journal *Neva* in 1984 (Chelovek za pis'mennym stolom; English translation, 1995) served as an emblem of the burgeoning revisionist reconsideration of the Siege.¹ The diary is replete with trenchant observations. Taken individually, they suggest themes that can characterize the culture of Leningrad transformed by bombardment and starvation.

Piter

One observation that Ginzburg makes early on in her diary reveals the distinction between Soviet culture before the war and the culture of Leningrad under siege. As is well known, there existed in the Soviet Union, as in any totalitarian state, an unhealthy tension between official/public life

and private life. For an intellectual like Lidiia Ginzburg, who in the Stalinist era lived under the continual threat of extinction, there was open animosity toward what was officially Soviet. She reveals her attitude when she describes her first emotions upon hearing of the declaration of war: "There was as yet no suffering, no mortal anguish, no terror; on the contrary, there was an excitement—and a feeling bordering on elation that this life was coming to an end" (5). In the following pages she implies, however, that during the siege, Leningraders on the whole came to acknowledge a growing connection with the war effort and the survival of the city as an entity.

Ginzburg makes much of the feeling of solidarity in Leningrad. People would say "We are surrounding Kharkov," "We have taken Orel."² She contrasts this attitude with the "individualistic pacifism" of Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. She claims that people of that time (after World War I), and especially in the West, did not want to understand that social life is a mutual social contract. Ginzburg insists that the smallest acts that contributed to human survival still constituted "courage" and supported the unspoken social contract that was the nation's response to war: "...with an effort they wrenched their lives away from malnutrition, and many of them, consciously or not, did their bit for the common purpose" (obshchee delo, 6). Thus in the broadest purview, we might observe that Leningraders under siege identified with the nation and Soviet culture to a greater extent than was their custom in peacetime.

The citizens of St. Petersburg/Leningrad have always demonstrated a particular pride in their city. It has at times rendered them suspect from the vantage point of Moscow. At particular times, as today with the interest in Russia in the study of one's region (kraevedenie), St. Petersburg has nearly gained the status, in popular imagination, of a city-state. This love of

¹ Citations here are to Lidiia Ginzburg, *Chelovek za pis'mennym stolom* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989) and Lidiya Ginzburg, *Blockade Diary* (London: The Harville Press, 1995).

city must surely be connected with a history of high culture, and the sense or belief that the city is the bulwark against barbarism and a fount of "civilization." The Serbian architect Bogdan Bogdanović has written on the wide-spread false etymology of 'city' and 'civilization.' In response to the outrage against attacks on Dubrovnik and Sarajevo during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, he wrote: "The horror felt by the West is understandable: for centuries it has linked the concepts 'city' and 'civilization', associating them even on an etymological level. It therefore has no choice but to view the destruction of cities as flagrant, wanton opposition to the highest values of civilization."³ Accordingly it does not surprise that the citizens of Leningrad rushed to defend the city and its cultural monuments. To its inhabitants, "Piter" was the most "civilized" city in the nation.

By defending Leningrad citizens also became ever more identified with the general war effort. Although the basic social unit during the siege was the family, the concentric circles of connection, radiating out from the little wood stove that kept people warm (*burzhuika*), proved in an important way to be a buttress rather than a barrier. Family members cared for each other, and surviving, they kept the city alive. Leningrad in turn kept the Germans "occupied," if not at bay, and thus contributed to the defense of the nation. The culture of Leningrad under siege in this way coalesced with Soviet culture to a greater extent than perhaps at any other time during the Soviet period.

All that being said, we must recognize the surprising degree to which many chroniclers of the Siege write from a perspective that is not strictly or predominantly "Soviet." It is as if the cataclysmic destruction of the nation led to a similar fragmentation of self and a reassessment of

² Ginzburg, *Chelovek za pis'mennym stolom*, 520

³Bogdan Bogdanović, "The City and Death," (translation of "The Ritual Murder of the City"), in Joanna Labon, ed., *Balkan Blues: Writing out of Yugoslavia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), p. 36.

identities and loyalties. Siege survivors, at least those not writing officially, rarely defined themselves *first* as a Soviet citizen or member of the Communist Party. Rather, they expressed the views of, for example, a woman, a Jew, an ethnic German, an artist, or a person of a particular cultural background. Lidiia Ginzburg's *Blockade Diary*, for example, recounts the Siege experience from the perspective of N, a Leningrad intellectual (the "blockade man" of the translation is actually the genderless *blokadnyi chelovek*). Thus paradoxically, in a country founded on the principles of communist internationalism, unofficial Siege survivors continually highlighted individual differences. Equally paradoxically, most of these besieged citizens discovered in this catastrophe that they belonged, indeed, to the "world of nations." In her diary, the well-known artist Ostroumova-Lebedeva ponders the emotions of *all* soldiers and the goodness and villainy *everywhere*:

And just think: among the nations of the entire world, especially among soldiers engaged in combat, how often have we seen manifested the ennobled feelings of heroism, self-sacrifice, courage and resourcefulness. What tremendous mental anguish soldiers must experience when they are commanded to kill the enemy—people just like themselves. We might assume, and I think without error, that three-quarters of the combatants do not thirst for the blood of their enemies.

But simultaneously along with the valorous actions of our warriors and of people in general, how often have they demonstrated brutality, cruelty, often completely unnecessary and senseless. And how much deception and baseness! ⁴

⁴ Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002): 30.

While maintaining their legendary pride in their city, Leningraders engaged the broader Soviet culture of the war effort and commiserated more broadly with the suffering of all those who were touched by war. Yet, they did not identify themselves primarily as "Soviet" and, in fact, became more sensitive to membership in narrower subcultures (ethnic, religious, professional, gender-based) [Recount story of Lilia's oral history and her designations Jew/non-Jew?]

Immured

Testimonies from the Siege of Leningrad will take their place among other accounts of physical imprisonment, whether in the Peter and Paul Fortress, the Gulag, or a concentration camp. For example, Ginzburg describes in various ways the new-found freedoms that a radically circumscribed life afforded:

Getting up was easy, easier than in the former life, when fried eggs were waiting and didn't need thinking about. The transition was simpler now as well. People slept almost without undressing; it was enough just to stick your legs quickly into the boots which stood by the bed. (14)

Ginzburg also notes that during the worst winter of the siege (1941-42), Leningraders ceased to feel pressed for time. Although there were tasks to accomplish (queuing for bread, fetching water, obtaining firewood), they were few in comparison to the demands of pre-war existence. When conditions began to improve in the spring of 1942, she could sense the start of recovery when "it seemed to be too long to wait forty minutes in a queue for a cup of wishy-washy coffee with saccharine" (21-22).

In addition to the freedom from daily chores and the clock, the besieged experienced other social and even political freedoms. In desperate times certain conventions lost meaning. In her memoir, the former oboist with the Leningrad Philharmonic Kseniia Matus recounts an intimate relationship with a young soldier that would have been unacceptable during peacetime.⁵ This experience might be likened to the "camp marriages" that occurred in the Gulag, or the general loss of social restraint in the crucible of war.

That some chroniclers dared to commit their political views to paper attests to their sense that they could write freely—there was nothing left to lose (Gordon Lightfoot: "Freedom's just a word for nothing left to lose"). The freedom to "speak," though suffering under inhumane conditions, has characterized other liminal locales in the Russian history of immurement, written as both fact and fiction. Evgeniia Ginzburg, in her *Into the Whirlwind* and *Within the Whirlwind* (Krutoi marshrut I and II), as well as Solzhenitsyn in his fictional *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha) discovered this freedom in the Gulag, while Sasha Sokolov found it in the madhouse and depicted it in his novel *School for Fools* (Shkola dlia durakov). Among the open expressions of rage directed at Stalin and the government, the views of the artist Lidiia Shaporina and the classicist Ol'ga Freidenberg deserve particular attention.

In her diary, Shaporina describes the government's view of the common Russian as a "*quantité négligeable*" whom Stalin had been "grinding to a pulp for the past twenty years."⁶ Yet, she holds her own class, the intelligentsia, in part responsible and includes them in her scathing indictment:

⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁶ Ibid., 24.

Yesterday I was thinking—Russia deserves punishment, and the heavy hammer (*tiazhkii mlat*) must forge in her a true love for her nation, for her land. For a hundred years, and maybe more, the intelligentsia have reviled their country, their government, received as tsar Manducus, and have begun basely and hyperbolically to bow down, to offer up incense, thinking only of their own skins.⁷

Shaporina writes within a tradition of questioning the responsibility of the intelligentsia in determining Russia’s fate. However, she displays considerable audacity when she implicates her starving peers in the nightmare of besieged Leningrad.

Ol’ga Freidenberg likewise exercised the relative freedom that the Siege afforded. A person of unwavering principles, Freidenberg would likely have dared to write so openly under any circumstances. Still, her recriminations serve as emblems of anger that was given voice during the Siege. She rails against Stalin:

And the wheel rolled on. Under the pretense of the public's urging, Stalin bestowed upon himself the rank of Marshal.⁸ My God! How powerful the magic of words and titles! A man who possesses everything in the world—endless land, endless power, money, adulation, all sorts of ranks and honors, all the epithets of a deity—he still needed the title, the simple combination of sounds,

⁷ Ibid., 24. Shaporina here cites the phrase Pushkin employed in *Poltava* to symbolize the hardships that rendered Russia a more resilient nation: “Íî â ãñëóóáíüýõ äîëãîé èàðû/Îäðàòäðîíââ ñóääáá óääðû/Îëðãðåà Ðóññü. Õæ òýæëëë îëàò/Ãíäðý ñòãëëî, êóòò áóëàò.”

⁸ On 6 March 1943 “for outstanding service as leader of the Red Army,” Stalin was awarded the title of “Marshal.” This event was celebrated with a flood of festive ceremonies attended by the party leadership and writers from the front.

the word "marshal," an innocent acoustical window-dressing! In honor of the occasion, public enthusiasm was appropriately feigned. The fact that Stalin has become a marshal, figure-heads said at political rallies, spurs us to on to new achievements! Someone else's rank was to inspire servicemen without this rank to achieve new feats!⁹

Freidenberg decried the military strategists and their disregard for human life:

It was impossible to calculate the human sacrifice. All our young people had already been killed. All my students of all grades were decaying in the ground. Now there was no idiot who wouldn't know that we had been sending select young men to a blood bath in Tallinn and Kingisepp, that they went unarmed and unprepared, that our weapons were defective, that we fought with the help of braggadocio and political indoctrination, that the entire cream of our Leningrad youth suffered especially, forced to enlist as volunteers and in civilian battalions, driven to slaughter—our best youth, the seeds of our culture and of all our industrial specialties. All the college students had been slain, all the technicians, all the craftsmen and the best workers. Not a professional specialist remained in the city. All had been murdered, all lay dead. There was not a family that did not have a young man killed. I knew no one at the university, in my building, among friends and strangers, who had not lost sons, husbands, or brothers at

⁹ *Probeg zhizni*, Volume 9, Chapter 125, in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad*, 65.

Kingisepp or Tallinn, at the Finnish or Leningrad fronts. Millions fell outside Stalingrad and Moscow. It was worse when the victims served as pawns.¹⁰

In the crucible of the Siege, Liubov' Shaporina and Ol'ga Freidenberg wrote even more openly, perhaps, than they otherwise might have done. The sense of liminality served to embolden their inherent desire for justice. Such was not the case with everyone. In his memoir "How We Remained Alive" (*Kak my ostalis' zhivy*), Dmitrii Likhachev observed that life lived in the extreme of starvation (and the freedom of the liminal) brought out the extremes of personality—for better or worse:

In starvation people showed themselves, revealed themselves, freed themselves from any kind of trumpery: some turned out to be wonderful, unparalleled heroes; others—villains, scoundrels, murderers, cannibals. There was no middle ground.¹¹

We can recognize in such words as these the courage of Shaporina, Freidenberg and Likhachev, but the horrific accounts of base actions speak to the freedom some felt to do evil as well.

The Front

¹⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹¹ Dmitrii Likhachev, "Kak my ostalis' zhivy," *Neva* 1 (1991): 21.

Just as the Siege elicited contradictory emotions of enclosure and liberation, it transformed the traditional notions of the frontline of battle. The military frontline, although in constant flux, lay, technically, beyond the boundaries of the city proper. Yet, inhabitants of Leningrad felt themselves to be direct defenders of the city—either officially as members of the People's Militia (Narodnoe opolchenie) or air-raid defense (MPVO) against air and artillery bombardment or privately, simply by doing their work and keeping their families and themselves alive (Ginzburg's *obshchee delo*). Although they were besieged and cut off, Leningraders experienced the siege's line of demarcation on more fronts than the battlefield narrowly defined.

The laying of siege as military strategy blurs the boundary between the homefront and battlefield. Likewise, the starvation which may result broadens the conception of military arsenal. Some of the more intriguing, and poignant, observations of victims of the Siege of Leningrad concern their realization that the battlefield had encroached upon their own bodies. Lidia Ginzburg, in her *Blockade Diary*, recognizes this phenomenon as well:

The hostile world, approaching, advances outposts. Its closest outpost suddenly turned out to be one's own body...in the winter it had an eternal potential for suffering—with its ever new corners and ribs...while people discovered in themselves bone after bone, there occurred an alienation from the body, a splintering of conscious will from the body as a phenomenon of the hostile external world.¹²

Ginzburg's assessment is intentionally generic, but for many women victims of the Siege this assault on the body resulted in a loss of the sense of gender, of the inherently feminine (curvaceousness and desirability, menstruation and fertility) that disappeared with the loss of body fat. Kseniia Matus, the oboist with the Leningrad Symphony referred to above, recalls looking out over the audience during the first concert organized during the Siege, and not being able to tell men from women.¹³ Elena Martilla, a gifted young artist of eighteen when the war began, was distressed that during the Siege people called her "Grandma." Her saving grace was her art:

At one point in February I understood that I wouldn't make it until morning; were I to lie down, I would no longer be able to get up (I had already been having fainting spells two to four times a day). I didn't dare lie down and that was that. And how bitter I became: I'm a young woman and I'm forced to be snuffed out in my bed as if my life were worth nothing...Bah! Says who? That Fascist Hitler! And not in battle, but in my bed....I'll die, but at least it will be like an artist with a brush in my hands...¹⁴

Martilla rails against the assaults on her young body, which threatens to betray her and spell her demise. Her counterattack occurs also and inevitably within her body. She fights back, paintbrush in hand, with mind and spirit.

¹² Ginzburg, *Chelovek za pis'mennym stolom*, 521.

¹³ Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad*, 149.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

Likhachev makes the observation that the last stronghold remained the human brain:

The human brain died last. When the hands and legs stopped working, the fingers couldn't button buttons, there was no strength to close the mouth, the skin darkened and covered the teeth, and on the face the skull clearly showed through, revealing laughing teeth—the brain continued to work. People wrote diaries, philosophical compositions, scientific works, thought sincerely "from their heart," and displayed unusual firmness, not yielding to the pressure of the wind, not giving in to vanity (ne poddavaias' suete i tshcheslaviju).¹⁵

Thus Leningraders had the sense of fighting on numerous fronts—the actual front not far from the city; on the homefront, which was assaulted as well and needed to be defended; and within their own bodies, which fought against starvation. Technically cut off, the inhabitants of the city engaged the enemy on multiple fronts. Some chroniclers detailed this reality of the siege and offer surprising insights into this strategy of waging war.

"Treasure-trove"

The extreme conditions of the Siege revealed much that had previously gone unrecognized; for instance, personal failings that might have been tolerable in more forgiving times (Matus), or the opposite—bravery that would not otherwise have been tested. One came to appreciate inherent values of various kinds—the taste of food and

the warmth of fire and clothing (Ginzburg describes the warming of one's hands at the stove as a "measureless enjoyment" [17]). She also makes the observation that when objects became distorted or lost their purpose during the worst days of the Siege—books were burnt for fuel or boots were never taken off—there was a discovery, when conditions improved, "a discovered opportunity to return their original meaning to objects" (11-12). Books once again were for reading, and boots could be taken off—they were no longer "an essential attribute of a human being" (11). Not everything was discovered or defamiliarized, however. Some values of their former life buttressed Leningraders in excruciating times. Their legendary appreciation of high culture, for instance, proved salutary—it was not a revelation but a confirmation of their way of life.

(The following needs proper expression, but gives an idea of what follows)

Exs: Likhachev and wife helped their children memorize poetry—cf. Primo Levi in *Survival in Auschwitz*. They read *War and Peace*.

Conclusion:

A summary of how the culture of the Siege differed from traditional Petersburg/Leningrad culture and how some aspects of that culture were well suited to survival.

Other points to consider (perhaps):

¹⁵ Likhachev, "Kak my ostalis' zhivy," 21-22.

1. (21) laws of both forgetfulness and remembrance
2. (64-65) reversal of social function of food; intellectuals and food
3. (17) the appreciation of suffering, which validates the sanctity of life