This year marked the seventy year anniversary of the Siege of Leningrad, which saw three quarters of a million of the city's residents perish during 872 days of cold and hunger. For years, little was written about what was a hollow and Pyrrhic victory for the Soviet authorities; later the realities of the siege were glorified to fit within a heroic narrative. Only today are we beginning to read the truth, writes Anna Reid.

For the past five years, I have been working on a history of the 1941-44 siege of Leningrad. Just out with Bloomsbury, it’s now making its own way in the world, leaving me to reflect on how perceptions of the siege have changed and are still changing here and in Russia.

One of the great under-reported atrocities of the war

Outside Russia, Leningrad is one of the great under-reported atrocities of the war. Having reached the city outskirts in early September 1941, Hitler and his generals decided that instead of storming the city directly – as they had Kiev and Smolensk – they would besiege it, letting no civilians out nor food or other supplies in. Though Leningrad never fell, the result was about three quarters of a million dead from starvation – between a quarter and a third of Leningrad’s entire pre-siege population. Added to that should be a million or so Soviet servicemen and women killed in action in the Leningrad region, mostly during Germany’s initial invasion and final retreat.
Scraping off the syrup: the Siege of Leningrad seventy years on
Published on openDemocracy (https://www.opendemocracy.net)

The siege of Leningrad lasted 872 days. Civilians in the city suffered from extreme starvation. 750,000 people died, which represented between a quarter and a third of the city’s pre-siege population. It was the greatest loss of life experienced by a modern city.

Why has this epic tragedy not been written about more before? First, it was lost in the general white-out of the Eastern Front – an empty, snow-swept plain, in the Western imagination, across which Red Army conscripts stumbled, greatcoats flapping, towards massed German machine-guns. Not until Beevor’s magnificent *Stalingrad* did the war in Russia start getting the attention long devoted to (far less important) campaigns in Italy, North Africa and the rest.

Second, the Soviet authorities made it very hard to write about Leningrad truthfully. For Stalin and his successors, it was an embarrassingly Pyrrhic victory. Yes, the city had stood firm. But the vast civilian death toll begged awkward questions. Why did the German armies get so far so quickly? Why was no mass evacuation of civilians organised before the siege ring closed? Why were adequate food stocks not laid in? Postwar, Stalin suppressed discussion of the siege almost completely, persecuting Leningrad writers (most famously *Akhmatova* [2] and *Zoshchenko* [3]), purging the Leningrad Party organisation and closing a popular Museum of the Defence of Leningrad that included a mock-up of a wartime bread shop complete with the notorious minimum ration of 125g of adulterated bread. The museum’s director was charged with ‘amassing weapons in preparation for a terrorist act’ – a reference to its collection of trophy German ordnance.

‘I wanted to do three things with Leningrad. First - restore the siege to due prominence in Anglophone perceptions of the war. Second - examine what happens to a sophisticated European city when the food runs out. And third - debunk Soviet-era myth.’

Brezhnev rehabilitated the siege, but in sanitised, heroicised form, as a centrepiece of his cult of the Great Patriotic War. People died of hunger, in this version, but quietly and tidily, willing sacrifices in defence of the birthplace of the Revolution. Nobody grumbled, shirked work, fiddled the rationing system, took bribes or got dysentery. And certainly nobody hoped the Germans might win. Excluded also were the Soviet leadership’s brutality and incompetence. Continuing political repression – honest, harmless, patriotic people dragged from their flats even as they starved, only to die slightly faster in the *Kresty Prison* [4] - went unmentioned. So did military bungling, food theft, and the deadly chaos of the Ice Road evacuation route across Lake Ladoga. Horror and degradation were
safely abstracted down to a few symbolic objects – the home-made lamps and stoves used to heat and light apartments when the utilities failed, the children’s sleds used to drag corpses to the morgues.

At its lowest, from 20th November to 25th December 1941, the ration sank to 250g of bread per day for manual workers, and 150g – three thin slices - for everyone else. Mourners who visit St Petersburg's Piskarevskoye Cemetery often bring bread alongside flowers as a tribute to the dead.

Since glasnost, as one historian puts it, Russians have begun ‘wiping off the syrup’. I wanted to do three things with Leningrad. First - restore the siege to due prominence in Anglophone perceptions of the war. Second - examine what happens to a sophisticated European city when the food runs out. And third - debunk Soviet-era myth.

1940s typescript, underlinings and marginalia

First port of call was the St Petersburg Central Archive of Historico-Political Documents – still known simply as the Partarkhiv or Party Archive. Today more and more of the historian’s raw materials are available online. These, though, were the real thing – paper degraded to a biscuity golden-brown, text the jumpy clickety-clack of 1940s typescript, underlinings and marginalia all right there in sharp red pencil. Here, immediate and physical, was Soviet bureaucracy in motion: the turf wars, the obfuscations (the euphemisms for starvation were ‘dystrophy’, ‘exhaustion’, or ‘problems connected with food supply’), the takings of credit and passings of the buck. With the help of researchers, I made some wonderful finds. Frontline reports from junior political officers attached to the People’s Levy, a doomed series of quasi-military units thrown into battle without weapons or training in the summer of ’41. An instruction manual for street-fighting, should Leningrad be taken – citizens were advised to throw bundles of grenades under the German panzers from a distance of ten metres, and then ‘take cover behind a bollard’. In Columbia University’s Bakhmeteff Archive – a treasure-house of émigré accounts - a memoir written by a senior supply officer, describing cannibalism in the Red Army. In Moscow archives, the memoirs of a schoolgirl who served as an orderly in the Yevropa Hotel after it was turned into a military hospital, and of the head of the Leningrad Composers’ Union, burdened with the horrible responsibility of allocating a beds in a recuperation clinic amongst dozens of dying musicians.
Most important of all for my book were the personal diaries, most published, a few handed me directly by the diarists’ families. Though repetitious they made compulsive, painful reading, taking one as far, perhaps, as it is possible for someone living in the comfort of twenty-first century Britain to get into the minds of those who actually lived through the siege. Cumulatively, they conveyed a giddy sense of accelerating, city-wide disaster - of wrong choices made, time running out, the rapid closing-in of individuals’ worlds, and finally of the erosion of personality, social bonds, morality and emotion. It wasn’t all a downward spiral, for they also bore witness to extraordinary resourcefulness, self-discipline, and endurance - the true heroism that the saccharine Soviet version of the siege discredits and obscures.

How is the siege remembered in Leningrad – now again St Petersburg - today? The best place to find out is the suburban Piskarevskoye Cemetery, site of the biggest wartime mass graves. After the war, the site was left an overgrown wasteland. In 1960 the mounds were finally tidied into neat rows, and an (unusually self-effacing) Motherland statue erected, engraved with famous, untrue words from the siege poet Olga Berggolts: ‘Nobody is forgotten, nothing is forgotten.’

Here lie Leningraders
Here are citydwellers - men, women, and children
And next to them, Red Army soldiers.
They defended you, Leningrad,
The cradle of the Revolution
With all their lives.
We cannot list their noble names here,
There are so many of them under the eternal protection of granite.
But know this, those who regard these stones: No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten.
Olga Berggolts, poet, Piskarevskoye Cemetery, St. Petersburg

Every Victory Day - May 9th rather than 8th for Russians – the Piskarevskoye fills with mourners. Most just walk quietly among the mounds. Some lay red carnations on the grass, others slices of bread. Originally blankly anonymous – the wall behind the Motherland statue bears no roll of names – the complex has lately begun to acquire individual features, as families of the dead pin their own ceramic plaques, bearing photographs and names, to trees and railings.
Memories fading fast

Despite the crowds, first-hand memories of the siege are fading fast. Most of the people at the Piskarevskoye – even the elderly men sporting rows of medals – are far too young to have lived through the war except as infants. Soon, only the middle aged will even remember Communism. It is argued that the Brezhnevite version of the siege survives out of a sense of respect to siege survivors, and that public discussion will become blunter once the last blokadniki have passed away. I’m not sure that this is true. Judging by my interviews, it is the children of the blokadniki – the generation currently in their sixties and seventies rather than eighties or nineties – who are most protective of Soviet-era pieties. True siege survivors tended to be at pains to disabuse me of romanticism, to stress the siege’s cold, stony quality, the depth of damage done.

Much will depend on Putin, and how crudely he uses the siege to rebuild Brezhnev’s cult of the war. So far, despite the launch two years ago of a commission to counter ‘falsified versions of history’, academic study remains uncensored. No aspects of the siege, within academic circles, are taboo, and the relatively few classified files in the Partarkhiv deal mostly with collaboration in occupied territories and desertion. Much bigger worries, for the average Petersburg professor, are a perennial shortage of funds and the steady drift of his best students to fellowships in America.

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Outside academia, in contrast, the pasteurised Brezhnevite version of the siege remains largely intact. Often, the young Russian translators I worked with were shocked and disillusioned at what we read together. ‘I used to think that during the war people behaved differently’, one said, as we lit on yet another account of bribe-taking by bread-shop staff. ‘But it was just the same as usual.’

That Russians are attached to the heroic, triumphant, version of their war isn’t surprising. In Britain, it’s the books about the Bletchley and the Battle of Britain that sell, not the ones about collaboration in the occupied Channel Islands, looting during the Blitz, or the internment of Jewish refugees. Nonetheless, the way genuinely to respect the memory of the three quarters of a million siege dead is to tell their stories truthfully. Having scraped off the syrup, it would be a shame to see it ladled back on again.

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The book concentrates on the first few months of the siege, during one of the coldest winters even by Russian standards, when 100,000 people a month were dying of hunger, their corpses lying unattended for days. During that winter ‘the city turned from something quite familiar ... into a Goya-esque charnel house’, Reid writes. Her great strength is her skilful and sensitive use of material kept by survivors, much of it previously unknown. Meticulously, she has drawn from scores of diaries and interviews, so that often the victims tell their own stories — painfully, on occasion, about what it feels and looks like to starve to death. This testimony makes for a powerful sense of immediacy.

Victor Sebestyen, The Spectator, 17 September 2011


This article was amended on 28 November

Sideboxes

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Voices (Education Project), The Siege of Leningrad [6]

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About the author
Anna Reid is a British journalist and author. She is author of three books on Russia and Ukraine.

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