The Blockade of Leningrad & the Mixed Results of Sovietization

Dane Burrough

Abstract: The Siege of Leningrad, a joint German-Finnish operation during World War II, lasted for 880 days and took the lives of a large number of the citizens of the city. The city was entirely cut off from the rest of the Soviet Union, causing mass starvation that was far deadlier than the military operations of the siege. Many scholars have argued that the Second World War served as the catalyst to fully “Sovietize” the populations of the various Soviet Republics. Examining primary sources from the siege, this paper explores the extent to which that process of Sovietization actually occurred in Leningrad and how the unique experiences of the blockade imprinted on the citizens a sense of independence from the greater Soviet state.

Sovietization was the multi-faceted process by which Soviet central planners endeavored to subordinate the whole U.S.S.R. to the power of the Communist government and thereby transform ordinary citizens into driven communist ideologues. Many scholars have argued that World War II, which Russians termed the Great Patriotic War, served as the catalyst to fully “Sovietize” the populations of the various Soviet Republics. However, this Sovietization failed to occur in the city of Leningrad, which suffered a joint German-Finnish siege for 880 days.¹

During the siege and subsequent blockade which lasted from 1941 until 1944, the citizens of Leningrad starved on an unprecedented scale. Estimates of how many citizens died during the siege vary; the official Soviet figure claims a death toll of 632,253,² but many historians place the number in a range from 750,000³ to 1,500,000 deaths out of a prewar population of 2,500,000.⁴ During the blockade, citizens resorted to both criminal activity and religious practice as a means of survival. Both religion and criminality violated the basic tenets of Soviet society and these accounts were therefore censored from the records of the blockade published after the war. The freezing and starving citizens of Leningrad were more concerned with their individual survival and the survival of their proud city than they were with the fate of the Stalinist regime; as a result, their previously patriotic attitudes faded. The remarkable physical and emotional losses rendered some Leningraders fiercely independent and more proud of their city than of the Soviet Union. The Siege of Leningrad was possibly the most lethal siege in the history of warfare. The siege began in early September 1941 after the Army Group North of the Wehrmacht or German army moved through the Baltic States to join with Finnish forces surrounding Leningrad and cut off the railroad connection between Moscow and Leningrad at the tiny village of Mga. In doing so, German and Finnish forces effectively surrounded the city and cut off its communication with the rest of the country. Throughout the siege, the Wehrmacht shelled and bombed the city to smoldering ashes. The Soviet leaders of Leningrad failed both to understand the gravity of the situation and to properly ration for a prolonged siege until it was too late to save much of the population from imminent starvation. Most of the Soviet deaths due to starvation occurred in the winter of 1941. According to Soviet official figures, likely vastly underreported, 101,583 people, or roughly four percent of the Soviet prewar population, died in January 1942 alone.⁵ The harshness of this
winter, one of the coldest in memory for many diarists, was exacerbated by the German bombardments that had cut off power to the city in the fall. Though the siege continued until 1944, the majority of the damage and casualties occurred in the winter of 1941.

During the siege, the citizens of Leningrad went to extreme measures to procure food for themselves and their families, frequently resorting to crime and the bartering of valuable pre-war goods to obtain bread. The bread itself was frequently mixed with sawdust and other fillers because the blockade had created a major grain shortage in the area. People even resorted to boiling belts and eating binding glue and other barely edible items to satiate their hunger. The sight of dead bodies frozen in snow or corpses being dragged on children’s sleds became a common sight during the height of the winter of 1941. Inhabitants’ contemporary diaries provide a vivid account of their daily struggle to survive on meager rations of food. In late November 1941 the Red Army, or Soviet ground troops, established an Ice Road across Lake Ladoga that served both as an evacuation route and a way to import supplies into the city. The route however was dangerous and inefficient because the German army frequently bombarded it and transport conditions were often terrible.

After the winter, fewer Leningraders died of starvation, and rations became less restrictive primarily due to collective gardening in residential areas and because there were fewer mouths to feed. The Red Army conducted various offensives throughout 1942 to break through the blockade, but its first successful operation, Operation Iskra, did not occur until January 1943. Even after the Red Army broke the blockade, constant shelling from the German forces would continue until the Soviets permanently broke the blockade on January 27, 1944.

Although the siege destroyed any sense of normalcy for the citizens of Leningrad, the survivors held immense pride in their ability to survive and preserve the spirit of their city.

The citizens of Leningrad met the beginning of the war in the summer of 1941 with a mixture of shock and intense patriotism. A week after the war began Yura Riabinkin, a teenage diarist, wrote, “at first I felt a certain sense of pride, then a wave of fear—the first eventually got the upper hand of the second.” Georgi Kniazev, the Director of the Archives of the Academy of Sciences, wrote in July, “[t]his is my city... can it really be true that it is threatened by the danger of an enemy occupation? No, no, no!” Kniazev’s observation is indicative of the greater sentiment shared amongst the Leningrad intelligentsia as well as the Soviet leaders in the Smolny, the communist headquarters in Leningrad. It reflected the lack of preparedness for the imminent siege and blockade. If Kniazev heard rumors of Germany marching towards Leningrad with the intent to occupy, the policymakers in the Smolny must also have had intelligence on the Wehrmacht’s movements. However, Andrei Zhdanov, the communist boss of Leningrad, and his staff did not believe that the Nazis would ever make it to Leningrad. Zhdanov had put responsibility for the defense of Leningrad on his own shoulders in August, mainly in response to the political maneuvering occurring in the Kremlin in Moscow. Thus, Soviet leaders made multiple mistakes that sparked distrust amongst the Leningraders.

One such mistake that proved to be fatal was the creation of the so-called People’s Levy. Immediately after the war began, the Soviet
authorities called for citizens to volunteer for military service. Officials ordered women and children to dig fortifications along the Luga Line and trained men to fight in battle. These troops, however, were vastly underprepared and ill equipped, resulting in large numbers of casualties among volunteer units. Of the plight of these volunteers, one diarist wrote, “[t]he entire cream of our Leningrad youth suffered especially, forced to enlist as volunteers and in civilian battalions, driven to slaughter.” 12 American journalist and author Harrison E. Salisbury wrote of the volunteer regiments, “[the] officers were no more experienced than the men.” 13 This deadly mix of desperation and ineptitude did not engender support for the Soviet cause from the average Leningrader; instead, it bred resentment among the population once the blockade took its deadly toll.

By September 1941, Leningrad had become a dangerous place; German shelling had become a common occurrence as the Wehrmacht began closing in on the blockade ring. At first, the Leningraders failed to understand the gravity of their situation; the diarist Elena Kochina wrote, “[a]ll roads to Leningrad are cut off. Is something about to happen?” 14 One diarist noted that, “Bread rations began to be cut on September 1,” 15 while another recalled the bombing raids: “Every time there was a bombing raid I expected to die.” 16 While citizens tried to adjust to life under siege, a dramatic political war erupted between the Kremlin and the Smolny over who was at fault for the city’s lack of preparation. A telegram from the Kremlin to Zhdanov read, “[w]e are disgusted by your conduct. All you do is report the surrender of this or that place, without saying a word about how you plan to put a stop to all these losses... Perhaps you have already decided to give up Leningrad?” 17 In late September, Moscow sent a document to the Smolny to prepare for the worst, instructing them “to verify the matter of preparations for blowing up and destroying enterprises of important installations and bridges in Leningrad in the event of the forced retreat of our troops from the Leningrad area.” 18 The public noticed these ultimately unnecessary contingency actions and increasingly feared that the government would surrender the city to the Nazis. Once the siege began, the Leningraders’ attitudes towards Stalin and the U.S.S.R. became more apparent. Many Leningraders, particularly intellectuals and people whose family members Stalin had purged in the 1930s, became hostile towards Stalin and the Soviet Union. One diarist wrote, “[a]s for Stalin, he has been grinding us to a pulp for the past twenty years. He detests Leningrad—no one here has known him or seen him since the Revolution.” 19 After Stalin adopted the title of Marshal, a diarist commented, “[a] man who possesses everything in the world... still needed the title, the simple combination of sounds, the word ‘marshal,’ an innocent acoustical window-dressing!” 20 Another survivor recalled in an interview after the fall of the Soviet Union, “[n]o one talked about the leaders... Of course, the people didn’t like Zhdanov, because he was a ‘fat cat,’ the only fat cat we saw.” 21 Contrastingly, many historians have noted that during and immediately following the siege, more pictures of the Leningrad communist leader Zhdanov were hung in citizens’ houses than those of Stalin or Lenin. Still, not all citizens shared these negative descriptions. One survivor remembered:

[We] fought for the Motherland... but Soviet... we thought less about it... Stalin, yes, but for the Soviet system... Stalin commanded our armed forces... in him we saw our eventual victory... we thought he knew everything in his head... we believed in him like a God. But, whether we were defending Socialism I personally was not thinking about that. 22

While the diarists held varying opinions of Stalin, they were united behind a strong devotion to the city of Leningrad. The people of Leningrad felt much pride for their city with a great appreciation for its immense beauty.
Kniazev captured this feeling when he wrote, “[i]f things turn out badly, it would be better to die here, somewhere along the embankment or in the deep waters of the Neva... But our city—and I firmly believe this—will never fall into the hands of the enemy!” 23 In a later entry Kniazev wrote, “[t]he ring can only be broken from the outside, and if this does not happen, then the only thing left will be to die, defending our native city.” 24 Even during the first siege winter, Leningraders were still ferociously proud of their city’s independence, history, culture and art. Riabinkin wrote, “[o]ur dead bodies will rot, our bones will crumble to dust, but Leningrad will stand on the banks of the Neva for all eternity, proud and invincible.” 25 Remarkably, the diarists rarely extol the virtues of the Soviet Union in the same way or even mention the Soviet Union at all. Their pride was for Leningrad alone.

Soviet leaders pounced on this sense of perceived heroism. Propaganda posters urged Leningraders to remain strong, conserve their food, and continue fighting for the Motherland. The propaganda posters worked. As one survivor recalled, “[p]eople were absolutely unprepared for war, because our communist propaganda... was still effective. It worked. Mass propaganda always reaches the people quickly and spreads quickly among them. And people were so patriotic.” 26 In contrast, Kochina noted, “[t]he hurricane of war has torn off these rags: now everyone has become what he was in fact, and not what he wanted to seem. Many have turned out to be pitiful cowards and scoundrels.” 27 Kniazev seemed perplexed by his fellow citizens’ heroic portrayal. In the fall of 1941 he wrote, “[w]e are very ordinary people, nothing at all remarkable, and I have nothing that is in any way heroic to record.” 28 Although both
statements were penned before the blockade winter, they are still indicative of Leningraders’ general mood. To them, days were not about committing heroic acts to save the Soviet Union, but rather about surviving another day and gaining a sense of normalcy amongst the rapidly deteriorating conditions. Writing in March of 1942, after the worst of the winter season, one diarist noted that the idealized Soviet acts of heroism were coupled with, “How often have they demonstrated brutality, cruelty, often completely unnecessary and senseless. And how much deception and baseness!”29 This recollection illustrates the terrible circumstances Leningraders endured in the winter of 1941. Another diarist wrote, “[o]rdinary people simply reeked of Soviet heroism, a heroism simply impersonal... Everything living, everything truthful was inadmissible. Uncensored tragedy wafted through several lives.”30 These are not the sentiments of Soviet patriots as they were portrayed by Stalin’s propaganda. Rather, they are the sentiments of people bitter about their terrible experiences and frustrated at their inability to share those experiences with the outside world. The authorities exploited their people’s deprivation and hunger to further the causes of Soviet unity and victory. As the siege progressed into a blockade, it became clear to Leningraders that the daily bombings were a lesser cause for concern than the leaders’ ineptitude. Historian Anna Reid comments: “Failure to lay in adequate stores of food and fuel before the siege ring closed was due to the same lethal mixture of denial, disorganization and carelessness of human life as the failure to evacuate the surplus civilian population.”31 Some of this incompetence stemmed from the siege of Moscow and Stalin’s perceived indifference towards Leningrad. The Kremlin was far more concerned with the situation around Moscow than they were about food shortages in Leningrad.32 By October, rationing had become more severe and citizens were starting to feel the effects of food deprivation, yet they maintained their patriotic zeal for the Soviet Union. Kniazev wrote in November of 1941, “Leningrad must defend itself, whatever the outcomes might be. There can be no talk of surrender! We must bear all the burdens and ordeals that have fallen to our lot, including hunger.”33 The feelings of Kniazev and his fellow patriots, however, were not representative of the majority of the population. Many others became despondent and unable to think of anything but food. Riabininkin wrote in late October that, “[t]o remain in Leningrad from now on is a sentence of death.”34 For most citizens, basic human needs trumped wartime patriotism.

The hunger that the blockade brought to Leningrad dampened the wave of loyalty among the city’s citizens. For many, the food shortages served to crystallize their feelings about the Soviet Union as a whole; for some, hunger created feelings of despondency. To demonstrate their unrest, several resorted to activities that were anti-Soviet in theory: crime and religion. Nevertheless for most of the citizens trapped in the city, the blockade meant they only thought of food. Kachina wrote, “I dreamed that large white rabbits with eyes like cranberries had gotten caught in the mousetraps. I woke up and rushed to the traps. They were empty! ... All the mice had evidently died off long ago.”35 Riabininkin wrote, “I have absolutely no desire to study at all. The only thoughts occupying my head are ones about food and about the bombing and shelling.”36 The hunger made Leningraders indifferent to everything, including each other. It destroyed personal relationships and caused people to betray their closest friends and family members. These actions were characteristic not of heroism but of people desperate to survive.

Crime became rampant during the winter, as people were increasingly willing to do anything
to survive. First-hand accounts of crime frequently went unpublished or were censored out of published accounts because they contradicted the heroic narrative of the blockade that the Soviet government wished to promote. The crimes that Leningraders committed range from the macabre, such as the widespread recollections of cannibalism, to the sad, like the crimes committed by Kochina's starving husband Dima. Kochina's relationship with her husband tragically suffered as a result of the rampant hunger. The couple bickered frequently over food and came to resent each other. Kochina's first run-in with crime occurred when one of the many trade school boys roaming the streets in search of food stole her daily ration of bread. She was extremely unhappy when, in late December, her husband turned to stealing bread with the sharpened end of a cane. After a woman caught Kochina's husband stealing, the woman demanded from him half of the bread, “grabbed the bread... and began to cram it greedily into her mouth. Then he sat down beside her and ate his half. Thus they sat and ate, now and then cursing one another, until they'd eaten all the bread.”

Despite the shame this brought her, she also attempted to justify his actions, “Well after all, the salespeople really are robbing us blind. In return they have everything they want. Almost all of them, without shame at all, wear gold and expensive furs.” Kochina was not alone in witnessing or detailing the increase in crime. One diarist writes, “I myself was a witness when a teenager tore a piece of bread from the hands of a weakened old woman, quickly shoved it into his mouth, and then fell onto the floor with his face to the ground and started to chew it feverishly.” Crimes committed for food ran rampant in Leningrad during the blockade. The accounts, however, were frequently suppressed because they did not portray the heroism that Stalin wished to promote. The ideal of selflessness was paramount and extolled as a virtue; fulfilling basic human needs did not stoke the Soviet propaganda in the same way.

The most infamous of the crimes committed during the siege winter, and therefore the most censored in Soviet accounts, was cannibalism. Harrison Salisbury was the first historian to discuss at length the rumors of cannibalism that had escaped the censors. He recounts the story of a young man who was lured into an abandoned building to exchange bread for boots, but when he finally got there he realized that the man was a member of a cannibal collective and had brought him there to eat him. Reid discredits this particular story, but historians have unearthed proof of cannibalism in besieged Leningrad following the release of Soviet police records in 2004. For the survivors of the siege winter, cannibalism became the subject of countless rumors. The acclaimed Soviet poet Olga Berggolts recorded what one friend told her about a cannibal couple who first ate the small corpse of their child and then entrapped three more children to eat as well.

According to Reid's police records, around 2,000 people had been arrested by June of 1942 for either cannibalism or corpse-eating. The authorities’ desperate attempts to quash these rumors indicate that Soviet policymakers viewed rumors of cannibalism as incompatible with their greater heroic narrative about the siege survivors. Crime driven by hunger accompanied Leningraders’ increasing numbness towards death and dying. Kochina wrote, ”death is not a casual visitor now. People have gotten used to it. It’s constantly hanging around among the living.” Kniazev wrote, ”[d]eath is not difficult to die, but it is extremely hard to be dying.” In addition, hunger turned people into single-minded beings. One diarist commented, “excruciating hunger forces a person to think and talk only about one thing—about food.” These reflections and diary entries all illustrate that hunger did not cause the citizens of Leningrad to act more patriotically; rather, it served to evaporate much of the patriotism that had arisen immediately after the war began. People had
little time for ideology when they were worried about survival. The realities of under-siege Leningrad, partly a consequence of poor pre-siege planning, contradicted the Soviet assertion that people were starving as part of the patriotic struggle.

The increased practice of religion also directly counteracted the process of Sovietization. One survivor interviewed in the early 2000s claimed that “along with bread the only other valuable commodity she recalled was the religious icon.” Riabikin addressed the intangible side of religiosity during the blockade writing, “[o]nly God, if such exists, can give us deliverance.” He also noted that his mother remarked,

“[a]ll my hope now is in God. Here I am, a Communist Party member, but I believe in God.” Religious life remained a private matter during the blockade, as the NKVD or Soviet secret police, continued to crack down on religious assemblies. But more and more people turned to religion as a way of consoling themselves as their situations became untenable. Once again, the Stalinist censors were quick to eliminate any pro-religious comments or discussions of God in the accounts they allowed published.

As Leningraders emerged from the siege winter of 1941, the worst was behind them. People’s allotted rations grew because many had either died or escaped on the Ice Road, which evacuated around 500,000 people in four months. Because of this mass death and displacement, many of the diaries did not continue past the spring of 1942, making it increasingly difficult to accurately gauge the thoughts of the Leningraders. However, Kniazev’s diary includes a telling late entry regarding a poster that withstood the winter: The Leningraders have stood by their city. In a few years’ time—50 to 100 years, say—this poster will be the pride of some museum. Those who come after us will bow their heads before it. This tattered sheet, carefully preserved, will tell the story of what Leningrad went through better than hundreds of pages of print. His diary serves as one of the great reminders of the fierce pride in Leningrad many citizens had. A woman interviewed after the collapse of the Soviet Union described the aftermath of the siege: “[a]nd then the victory. This was also a tragic moment. For when those salutes of arms began, everyone was already so worn out they took them to be a routine attack on the city.” One diarist writing about the end of the siege commented, “[o]ur life must now change, Leningraders have to begin to live in a completely different way. I don’t know what it will be, but it will be completely different!” Vera Inber, a poet and one of the few diarists who continued to write through the spring of 1942, described the end of the siege as, “[t]he greatest event in the life of Leningrad... Here words fail me.” Interestingly, Inber was not a native Leningrader and had only arrived in the city at the beginning of the war, yet the experiences of the blockade bound all of the so-called blokadniki to one another. During and after the blockade, the NKVD and the Kremlin did not endear themselves to the average Leningrader. Reid explained that there was no revolt within the city because “[t]his was in part a case of better the devil you know.” The NKVD stayed active during the siege to suppress any anti-Soviet thought. One historian writes of the actions of the NKVD and other Stalinist forces during the blockade: “Leningraders suffered—but not in the name of a good cause, and no more than under the allegedly ordinary circumstances of Stalinist peacetime.” The historiography of the Siege of Leningrad and validity of the primary sources are of interest in discussing the mixed results of the Sovietization of the citizenry of Leningrad. Even today, Russians are fascinated by the experiences of the blokadniki. One commenter notes that when the topic is discussed in...
modern Russia, “[t]he issue of ideology remains a thorny topic in siege discourse. Interestingly, ideology is rarely if ever discussed in contemporary siege testimonies published in Russian newspapers and journals.” Moreover, people who were children during the blockade and did not live through the Stalinist purges of the 1930s account for many of the contemporary accounts of the blockade. This fact may explain the pro-Stalinist sentiments expressed by some of the surviving blokadniki. The negative accounts, however, may have been influenced by the anti-Soviet feelings that emerged from the 1980s. Kirschenbaum notes that accounts from the 1980s and ‘90s, “[b]ecame a heroic defense of the ideals and traditions of St. Petersburg—Leningrad, rather than those of the Soviet state.” However, this does not undermine the validity of these new sources, but rather provides more nuance and balance to the preexisting narrative of the blockade. This new historical approach to the experiences of the citizens during the blockade demonstrates that the nature of the experiences did not conform to the dominant narrative about the blockade constructed by the Soviet authorities.

NOTES:

2 Ibid., 514
5 Reid, *Leningrad*, 419.
10 Ibid., 18.
15 Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege*, 22.
19 Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege*, 24.
20 Ibid., 65.
21 Ibid., 110.
24 Ibid., 62.
26 Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege*, 175.
27 Kochina, *Blockade Diary*, 44.
29 Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege*, 30.
30 Ibid., 73.
31 Anna Reid. *Leningrad*, 161.
Granin, Leningrad Under Siege, 85.

Ibid., 97.

Kochina, Blockade Diary, 58.

Granin, Leningrad Under Siege, 100.

Kochina, Blockade Diary, 55.

Ibid., 61.

Simmons and Perlina, Writing the Siege, 98.

Salisbury, The 900 Days, 480.

Reid, Leningrad, 286.

Ibid., 290.

Kochina, Blockade Diary, 64.

Granin, Leningrad Under Siege, 166.

Ibid., 174.

Simmons and Perlina, Writing the Siege, 60.

Clapperton, "The Siege as a Sacred Narrative," 56.

Granin, Leningrad Under Siege, 152.

Ibid., 145.

Reid, Leningrad, 278.

Granin, Leningrad Under Siege, 194.

Simmons and Perlina, Writing the Siege, 117.

Ibid., 45.

Inber, Leningrad Diary, 181.

Reid. Leningrad, 303.


Clapperton, "The Siege as a Sacred Narrative," 51.

Kirschenbaum, Legacy of the Siege, 252.

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