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A CITY STARVED BUT UNBROKEN… THE EPIC STRUGGLE OF LENINGRAD DURING WORLD WAR II: THE 872 DAYS OF SIEGE (SEPTEMBER 8, 1941 – JANUARY 24, 1944)

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The siege of Leningrad (1941-1944) stands as one of the longest and most devastating blockades in modern history. This siege created an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe, claiming over a million civilian lives and reshaping the fabric of urban society under extreme conditions. The paper explores how ordinary citizens endured starvation, cold, and bombardment while maintaining social cohesion and cultural activity. The study examines the strategic objectives of the German Wehrmacht and their Finnish and Spanish allies, the defensive measures of the Soviet forces in the context of 872-day battle. The analysis highlights how logistical breakdowns, harsh environmental conditions and shifting frontlines influenced both the conduct of the siege and its ultimate failure. The paper argues that the siege was not merely a military operation, but a calculated attempt to annihilate the civilians, revealing the intersection of warfare, ideology and urban resilience. The findings underscore how the civilian population transformed survival into an act of collective resistance, illustrating the complex interplay between suffering, identity, and resilience during wartime.

Keywords: Leningrad, World War II, Nazism, Ingermanland, Starvation, Generalplan “Ost”, Moscow, Neva, Saint Petersburg, Dmitri Shostakovitch, “Road of Life”.

СТРАДАВШИЙ ОТ ГОЛОДА, НО НЕ СЛОМЛЕННЫЙ ГОРОД… ЭПИЧЕСКАЯ БИТВА ЗА ЛЕНИНГРАД В ГОДЫ ВТОРОЙ МИРОВОЙ ВОЙНЫ: 872 ДНЯ БЛОКАДЫ (8 СЕНТЯБРЯ 1941 – 24 ЯНВАРЯ 1944 ГГ.)

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Блокада Ленинграда (1941-1944) считается одной из самых продолжительных и разрушительных в современной истории. Эта блокада привела к беспрецедентной гуманитарной катастрофе, унесшей жизни более миллиона мирных жителей и изменившей структуру городского общества в экстремальных условиях. В статье исследуется, как простые граждане переносили голод, холод и бомбардировки, сохраняя при этом социальную сплоченность и культурную активность. Работа рассматривает стратегические цели немецкого вермахта и их финских и испанских союзников, оборонительные меры советских войск в условиях 872-дневной битвы. Анализ показывает, как перебои в материально-техническом обеспечении, суровые условия окружающей среды и смещение линий фронта повлияли как на проведение осады, так и на ее окончательный провал. В статье утверждается, что осада была не просто военной операцией, а продуманной попыткой уничтожения мирного населения, что показывает взаимосвязь войны, идеологии и устойчивости городов. Полученные данные подчеркивают, что гражданское население превратило выживание в акт коллективного сопротивления, иллюстрируя сложную взаимосвязь между страданиями, самобытностью и жизнестойкостью во время войны.

Ключевые слова: Ленинград, Вторая мировая война, нацизм, Ингерманландия, голод, генеральный план «Ост», Москва, Нева, Санкт-Петербург, Дмитрий Шостакович, «Дорога жизни».

Dmitri Shostakovich - Seventh Symphony (Leningrad Symphony)

Literally composed under enemy fire, Dmitri Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony is a musical portrait of Russia at war. World famous Dmitri Shostakovich was born and raised in Saint Petersburg in 1906 and was still living there 35 years later. In 1918, Moscow became capital and in 1924 Saint Petersburg changed its name to Leningrad. Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony is not the greatest work of that renowned Russian composer, but it was written and performed under the most extraordinary circumstances during the 1941-1943 siege of Leningrad. It immortalized the city's endurance, its suffering and its ultimate triumph. And furthermore, symbolized the Russians' will to live and survival power, which has been characterized in many cases throughout world history [1, p. 37]

On Saturday, June 21, 1941, Shostakovich did not go to his country house on the Karelian Isthmus as he usually did but remained in Leningrad. An examination at the conservatory, where he taught classes in composition and orchestration, had been scheduled for 10 a.m. on the following day. Besides, there was an interesting soccer match in town; Shostakovich was a passionate soccer fan and never missed an interesting game. That afternoon, he bought tickets for the Sunday, June 22 game at Dynamo Stadium.

A few minutes before 10 a.m. on June 22, the 35-year-old composer climbed the stairs to the small hall in the conservatory. No one in the city knew that on the borders of the Soviet Union war was already raging. Scores of cities and towns were being bombarded by the German Luftwaffe. Thousands of innocent civilians were dying in their homes, while the tank wedges of the Wehrmacht were cutting into the soft underbelly of totally unprepared Red Army infantry detachments. It was not until noon that day that foreign commissar Vyacheslav Molotov made a radio speech, announcing that Germany had invaded the Soviet Union, commencing an all-out war. The soccer match in Leningrad was cancelled.

The inhabitants of the city still did not believe that the enemy could threaten them directly, but their lives were sharply altered. Every young man was quickly drafted for the city's defence and headed for the front. Those conservatory teachers

and students who had not yet left for vacation went out to dig trenches near all the approaches to the city. Dmitri Shostakovich was there with them. He felt that his place at that time, like that of any other able-bodied man, was in the ranks of those defending their country. He applied to the military command to he sent to the front as a volunteer. In his application, he wrote among other things that he had been engaged in a most peaceful profession, but now he was ready to take up arms. He pointed out clearly that fascism is synonymous with the end of culture, the end of civilization. Historically, the victory of fascism would be absurd and impossible, but he knew that it was only by fighting that we can save humanity from destruction [8, p. 3]

Of course, Shostakovich did not forget for one moment that he was a composer. He wrote songs and decided of popular pieces for the musical brigades at the front. Instead of piano accompaniments, he wrote violin and cello pieces, since those instruments could be easily transported. Soon, however, he decided that he would create a major work devoted to the war. In July 1941 Shostakovich began to compose the first movement of his new symphony. On August 23 he played the still incomplete work to a friend who was leaving Leningrad. The city was empty. The evacuation continued throughout duly and August. As a member of the teaching staff and the Composer's Union, Shostakovich was offered the chance to leave for Central Asia several times, but he refused to go. Finally in late August he agreed to leave the film studios, primarily out of consideration for his children, 5 year old Galina and 3 year old Maxim. On August 29 the composer wrote to a friend: "*We'll be leaving for Alma-Ata in about two days*" [1, p. 38].

Two days later, however, nobody was able to leave. On the very day Shostakovich wrote his letter, the Germans had cut off the last railroad that connected the city with the rest of Russia. The 900-day siege of Leningrad had begun. On September 1 Dmitri Shostakovich was asked to speak on the radio. "I am speaking to you from Leningrad at a time when a mortal battle is being fought at its gates", – he announced to the public, – "The enemy is trying to push into the city, and we can hear the thunder of artillery. I am speaking to you from the front. An hour ago I finished the score of the second part of my large symphonic work. If I manage to

finish the third and fourth parts, I will entitle it to my 'Seventh Symphony'. In spite of the war and the danger threatening Leningrad, I have been able to work quickly and finish the first two movements". Shostakovich continued to work on the symphony as the standoff dragged on. For the first time in history, a huge symphonic canvas was created under incessant artillery bombardment and air attacks [1, p. 38].

On September 17 the Germans fought their way into the outskirts of Leningrad. They had only a few more miles to cover. All the rules of military science dictated that the city was doomed. The bombardment that day was the worst of the siege. On that evening, Shostakovich invited some of his friends to his fifth-floor apartment. They found him surrounded by orchestration sheets, on which he was scoring his new symphony. He sat at the piano and began to play with great enthusiasm, imitating the orchestral colours and skilfully highlighting the outlines of the structure. It seemed to his listeners that he was striving to extract every bit of sound from the piano. Shostakovich could sense that the music had gripped the imagination of his attentive audience [8, p. 4-5].

Suddenly, the air-raid siren sounded from one of the buildings, overlaid by a heavy sustained rumble like a collapsing sky, and the guests could hear enemy planes overhead. They could have gone to the bomb shelter, but nobody moved. Shostakovich played on. The siren wailed. The boom of heavy guns jarred the windows of the apartment. Exploding debris burst the street. And still Shostakovich played in a city isolated from the rest of the country and the world. A symbol of the 872 following days the brave people of Leningrad had to live through and the way their everyday lives were shaped.

I. Military and strategic analysis

Military miscalculation? Adolf Hitler's decision to siege not storm Leningrad

Although various theories have been put forward about Germany's plans for Leningrad, including making it the capital of the new Ingermanland province of the Reich in Generalplan "Ost", it is clear Hitler intended to destroy the city and its population. According to a directive sent to Army Group North on 29 September 1941: "After the defeat of Soviet Russia there can be no interest in the continued

existence of this large urban centre. Following the city's encirclement, requests for surrender negotiations shall be denied, since the problem of relocating and feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for our very existence, we can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population" [4, p. 82-84].

After the extinction of the whole population, a Germinazation of the area should take place under the administration of the Reichskommissariat Moskowien – Adolf Hitler's ultimate plan was to raze Leningrad and give areas north of the river Neva to the Finns [4, p. 86].

The decision by the German High Command to impose a siege rather than launch a direct assault reflected both operational caution and significant miscalculation. Convinced that the city would collapse under sustained pressure starvation, bombardment and attrition the Germans sought to avoid the heavy casualties expected in brutal urban combat. Logistically stretched after rapid advances and lacking the manpower necessary for house-to-house fighting, a siege seemed the only viable option to preserve strength for future operations. Yet this very caution became a strategic blunder: the pause granted the defenders precious time to reorganize, fortify, and transform the city into a symbol of resistance. What was intended as a cost-saving measure ultimately prolonged the campaign, strengthened enemy morale and denied Germany the swift victory it expected [5, p. 55-57].

The German decision in September 1941 to besiege rather than storm Leningrad emerged from a mixture of strategic calculation, logistical reality and ideological rigidity. Hitler and the OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres) believed that a direct assault on a city of three million, defended by extensive fortifications and the remnants of several Soviet armies, would consume men and materiel they could not spare while "Barbarossa" still aimed for a swift victory in the south. A siege promised to achieve the same political and military outcome Leningrad's destruction without incurring the catastrophic casualties expected from urban fighting [5, p. 44-45].

Yet this choice proved a profound strategic miscalculation. By avoiding an immediate assault and diverting mobile units toward other fronts, the Germans forfeited their best opportunity to seize the city before Soviet defences stabilized. The prolonged blockade cemented Leningrad's role as a symbol of national endurance, tied down vast German forces for years, and ultimately failed in its objective. What had seemed the only logical option in the autumn of 1941 became, in hindsight, a costly decision that prevented the city's rapid capture and undermined Germany's broader campaign in the east.

The "Road of Life" - Leningrad's artery across the ice

During the brutal siege of Leningrad, the so-called "Road of Life" became the city's only fragile link to the outside world. When German and Finnish forces choked off all land routes, Soviet engineers turned to the freezing expanse of Lake Ladoga as an improbable solution. As soon as the ice grew thick enough to bear weight, they carved out a makeshift highway across it an evolving network of routes constantly measured, repaired, and rerouted to avoid cracks and shifting conditions. Every meter of this ice road was a triumph of engineering improvisation: plows cleared snow to thicken the ice, poles and lights marked shifting lanes and repair crews worked in temperatures that could plunge below –30°C [7, p. 211-212].

Yet engineering alone could not guarantee survival. Drivers, many barely trained, crept across the frozen lake in trucks overloaded with flour, fuel and medicine, knowing that a single mistake or a sudden shift in weather could plunge them through the ice. They drove at carefully calculated speeds too slow and the ice might crack beneath them, too fast and the vibrations could cause the same outcome. Under the cover of night and blackout conditions, they navigated a landscape without landmarks, guided only by dim lamps and the memory of those who had driven before them. The return trips carried evacuees famished civilians, wounded soldiers, and children crammed into cold trucks rattling their way toward safety [q.v.: 5].

All of this unfolded under the constant threat of Luftwaffe attack. German aircraft patrolled the lake, seeking to bomb or strafe the supply columns visible as faint trails in the snow. Crews were forced to disperse, to halt suddenly, or to

abandon trucks struck by shrapnel. Despite these dangers, the "Road of Life" operated for two desperate winters, sustaining Leningrad's population and enabling the evacuation of hundreds of thousands. It became more than a supply line: it was a symbol of endurance, ingenuity, and defiance. Against overwhelming odds, it kept a city alive [7, p. 214-215].

The Forgotten Front: breaking the blockade (operation "Iskra")

The 872-day siege of Leningrad is often remembered for its unimaginable civilian suffering, but behind the city's endurance lay continuous and often overlooked military efforts to break the encirclement. From the first months of the siege Soviet forces on the Volkhov and Leningrad Fronts launched repeated offensives across the swamps, forests and river crossings east and south of the city. These operations, frequently mounted under desperate conditions, reflected both the strategic imperative of relieving Leningrad and the political determination to prevent the symbolic Soviet metropolis from falling. Despite early failures, each assault gathered critical experience that would shape the eventual breakthrough [10, p. 540-541].

The battles along the Volkhov River in 1942 exemplified the brutal nature of this struggle. Soviet troops fought through deep snow, freezing temperatures and well-prepared German fortifications, often gaining only a few hundred meters at staggering cost. The infamous Lyuban offensive resulted in the near-complete destruction of General Vlasov's 2nd Shock Army, a powerful reminder of the obstacles the Red Army faced in this sector. Yet these failures did not deter Soviet command. Instead, they spurred a re-evaluation of tactics, logistics and coordination between front lessons that would prove essential later that year [10, p. 544-545].

By late 1942 planning for a new offensive operation "Iskra" (Spark) was underway. This time, both the Leningrad and Volkhov Fronts would strike simultaneously toward the narrowest point of the German lines near the southern shore of Lake Ladoga. Soviet engineers prepared supply routes across the frozen lake, artillery units were concentrated in unprecedented numbers, and infantry formations were reinforced for the decisive assault. When the offensive began on 12

January 1943, it opened with a massive bombardment that shattered German positions and allowed Soviet infantry and armour to push forward despite fierce resistance [10, p. 546].

After nearly two weeks of relentless combat, the forces of the two fronts linked up near the settlement of Shlisselburg, opening a land corridor only a few kilometres wide but sufficient to break the blockade. Until the siege would not be fully lifted until a year later, operation “Iskra” marked a decisive turning point. It brought much-needed supplies into Leningrad, boosted civilian morale, and demonstrated the growing effectiveness of the Red Army. The forgotten front those bitter, costly battles in the forests and marshlands east of the city had finally produced the breakthrough that Leningrad had waited more than 500 days to see [3, p. 272-274].

II. Human resilience and survival

The science and sociology of starvation

The siege of Leningrad (1941-1944) remains one of history’s most harrowing illustrations of how starvation reshapes both the body and the social fabric. Cut off from the rest of the Soviet Union, the city’s inhabitants endured temperatures far below freezing and food rations that dwindled to a few hundred calories a day. Physically, the effects were devastating, extreme hunger forced the body to metabolize fat, then muscle, then organ tissue. Survivors described swollen joints, brittle bones, and constant mental fog symptoms of a physiology pushed past its limits as it tried to preserve life at any cost [1, p. 154-155].

As the blockade tightened, the search for calories became a daily obsession. Ordinary foods vanished first, and then people turned to whatever could be chewed, boiled, or scraped for nutrients. Bread was stretched with sawdust, cellulose and other fillers to make dwindling flour supplies last. Citizens boiled leather belts, shoes and book bindings, attempting to extract any trace of protein and fat. Even wallpaper paste made from potato starch became a source of sustenance. These improvised meals revealed not only ingenuity, but the desperation created by prolonged starvation, where the line between food and non-food dissolved entirely.

In this context, the "Road of Life" across the frozen surface of Lake Ladoga became both a symbol of hope and a lifeline for survival. Under constant threat from artillery and air attacks, convoys of trucks carried limited supplies into the city and evacuated children and the critically ill. Though it was never enough to meet the population's needs, the route offered psychological relief: a reminder that the city was not entirely abandoned. Yet the scarcity that persisted even with these convoys influenced how citizens perceived fairness, loyalty, and their place in the community. Access to food, however small, became a marker of privilege and an axis of social tension [12, p. 323].

Over time, starvation eroded moral boundaries that had once seemed inviolable. Reports from the period tell of theft from workplaces, neighbours and even the dead. Families sometimes faced unbearable choices about how to allocate their tiny rations and the social conventions of sharing and mutual aid weakened as survival instincts intensified. Yet acts of extraordinary solidarity also emerged: neighbours secretly cooking for elderly residents, workers dividing meagre rations, and citizens risking their lives to maintain cultural institutions. The siege revealed the dual nature of extreme hunger—its ability to fracture communities through moral compromise and its unexpected capacity to inspire resilience, ingenuity and communal care amid devastation [1, p. 140-141].

Daily life in the Apocalypse

Daily life in the apocalypse in Leningrad was shaped less by dramatic battles for survival and more by the everyday negotiations with cold, hunger and grief. Heating a home or whatever structure could be claimed as one became a constant task that defined the rhythm of each day. People scavenged for anything combustible: splintered furniture, insulation striped from abandoned buildings, even books once treasured for their stories. Those who were fortunate enough to have access to pre-collapse technology improvised hybrid solutions, feeding small solar units or hand-cranked generators to power insulated heating coils. Most, however, relied on the oldest ritual of human endurance: tending a fire that had to be kept alive through the long dark.

Death was another daily reality, and in the deep freeze of the new climate, it demanded new customs. Frozen ground resisted shovels and even axes, forcing communities to adapt burial rites out of both respect and necessity. Some groups constructed elevated pyres using scavenged timber; others practiced "sky burials," laying the dead on cliff sides where scavengers and the elements would complete what the living could not. Where firewood was too scarce to burn, people-built cairns stone mounds laboriously assembled over bodies wrapped in the remnants of blankets or clothing. These improvised rituals, though far from traditional customs, became acts of remembrance that reaffirmed the value of each life lost.

Despite conditions that fractured old social bonds, a semblance of community persisted through shared labour and mutual reliance. People formed small clusters around resources: a working well pump, a reliable scavenging route, a defensible shelter. Even minimal acts sharing fire, tending children collectively, establishing rotating night watches became the glue of fragile social cohesion. Storytelling returned as a vital communal practice, offering hope, identity, and a sense of continuity. In these moments, around a dim fire or in the cramped light of a hand-powered lantern, people found connection not in the world that had been lost, but in the routines that allowed them to imagine a future again.

The unbreakable human spirit – culture in the crucible

During the harrowing siege of Leningrad, when hunger, cold and relentless bombardment defined daily existence, culture became a lifeline that kept the city's soul intact. Even as the civilian population faced unimaginable deprivation, people refused to surrender their humanity. In dimly lit apartments and makeshift shelters, music, poetry and learning became acts of resistance powerful declarations that the spirit of Leningrad would not be extinguished by violence or despair.

One of the most enduring symbols of this cultural defiance was Dmitri Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, the so-called *"Leningrad Symphony"*. Composed amid air raids and firestorms, the work grew into a sonic monument to endurance. When it was finally performed in the besieged city in August 1942, the orchestra starving, freezing and reduced to a fraction of its former size was reinforced with

musicians pulled straight from active military duty. The performance, broadcast from Leningrad across the Soviet Union and beyond, reminded the world that even in its most fragile moments, the city still possessed the strength to create something magnificent.

Equally vital were the broadcasts of poet Olga Berggolts, whose steady, compassionate voice became a beacon of hope for thousands. Her poems and speeches, transmitted across crackling radios, honoured the dead, encouraged the living, and articulated the collective grief and determination of the city. To many, Berggolts was not simply a poet; she was a companion in suffering and a reminder that their pain mattered and their courage was seen. Her words helped maintain a sense of shared identity when the siege threatened to shatter all communal ties.

Behind the frontlines of survival, librarians also fought their own quiet battle. In frigid reading rooms and bomb-damaged storehouses, they worked to protect the city's priceless collections from destruction. Books were wrapped, hidden and moved by hand through snow and rubble. Even at the height of starvation, librarians continued to lend volumes to citizens and soldiers alike, believing that literature could nourish the mind when the body faltered. Their dedication preserved not only physical artefacts of culture but also the idea that knowledge and beauty were worth defending at any cost [11, p. 100].

Women and children in the blockade

Women and children endured some of the heaviest and most enduring burdens during the Siege of Leningrad, carrying responsibilities and traumas that shaped both the city's survival and its collective memory. As men were mobilized to the front, women assumed central roles in keeping households functioning under impossible conditions. They stood in endless bread lines, bartered precious belongings for food, and navigated a city where cold, hunger, and death defined daily life. Their labour was not only domestic but civic; they became a critical backbone of the besieged city's resilience [11, p. 152-154].

Inside factories, women replaced absent male workers and kept wartime production alive despite exhaustion and malnutrition. They worked long shifts in

unheated facilities, sometimes collapsing at their stations, only to return home to care for children and elderly relatives. Many also took on direct military duties serving in anti-aircraft units, acting as fire watchers during bombings, or joining the medical corps. Their double and triple burdens were compounded by grief as family members succumbed to starvation and disease. Yet their efforts sustained vital infrastructure and morale in a city fighting to survive.

Children, meanwhile, experienced the blockade through the lens of deprivation and loss. Their world contracted to the search for warmth and crumbs of food, the disappearance of friends and siblings, and the psychological strain of constant bombardment. Schools attempted to keep lessons running in bomb shelters or freezing classrooms, both to provide routine and to protect a sense of childhood, but hunger often made concentration impossible. For many, the defining memories of these years were not play or learning but the relentless struggle against starvation.

The tragedy of childhood during the siege was not only physical but deeply emotional. Many children lost parents and were forced into early self-reliance, navigating a shattered city with the instinct for survival far outweighing innocence or play. Diaries from young survivors reveal a stark awareness of death and suffering, showing how the blockade compressed an entire generation's formative years into a landscape of trauma. Together, the experiences of women and children highlight a gendered and generational reality of the siege of Leningrad one marked by extraordinary resilience, but also by profound and lasting loss [12, p. 192-193].

III. Political and ideological dimensions

The city of Lenin: the siege as an ideological battlefield

The siege of Leningrad quickly became more than a military operation; it evolved into a symbolic confrontation in which both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union sought to define the meaning of the city itself. For Adolf Hitler and his high command Leningrad represented the birthplace of Bolshevism, the ideological enemy they were determined to erase from Europe. The city's name alone, tied directly to Lenin, made it a target not only for conquest but for annihilation. Nazi propaganda framed the encirclement as a justified campaign to destroy the "cradle of the

revolution", portraying the siege as a cleansing act that would eliminate a system they depicted as barbaric and alien.

For the Soviet regime, by contrast, Leningrad was a sacred symbol of the 1917 Revolution and a living monument to its founder. As the siege tightened, the city assumed an even more exalted role in Soviet rhetoric. Party officials, artists, and journalists crafted a narrative of collective heroism in which the city's survival became synonymous with the survival of socialism itself. Every act of endurance whether producing war materiel under bombardment or simply refusing to abandon the city was celebrated as proof of the moral superiority of the Soviet system. In this narrative Leningrad was not merely a city under attack; it was the heart of the socialist homeland [12, p. 322-323].

The brutal reality of starvation, cold, and constant shelling made propaganda a crucial weapon for both sides. Nazi broadcasts attempted to break civilian morale by predicting imminent collapse, while Soviet radio often broadcasting from freezing studios highlighted examples of resilience and unity. The famous performances of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, composed in the besieged city, became a powerful Soviet propaganda tool, broadcast worldwide as evidence that culture and spirit could survive even the harshest conditions. Each regime used images and stories from the siege to affirm its ideological worldview, transforming the suffering of civilians into a political asset [2, p. 126].

By the time the siege was lifted in January 1944, Leningrad had become an ideological monument as much as a military one. For the Nazis, its failure to fall symbolized the collapse of their dream to crush Bolshevism at its source. For the Soviets, the city's endurance entered national mythology as the ultimate expression of socialist strength and sacrifice. The siege thus lived on in post-war memory not only as a humanitarian tragedy but as a pivotal ideological battlefield, one in which narratives proved almost as important as tanks or artillery.

The Party and people: Soviet management of the catastrophe

The Communist Party's management of the siege of Leningrad was defined by a combination of rigid control, ideological discipline, and sheer administrative

necessity. From the earliest days of the blockade, party officials moved quickly to ensure that the population followed a unified line: survival required obedience, sacrifice and loyalty. This imperative translated into the suppression of "defeatism," a broad category that could include anything from open criticism of rationing to expressions of despair. Arrests and deportations, already familiar tools of the Stalinist state became instruments for policing morale. While such measures were undeniably harsh, the leadership viewed them as essential to preventing panic and maintaining the city's ability to resist [9, p. 473-475].

Yet the Party's approach to managing the crisis was not solely coercive. It also sought to preserve the basic mechanisms of civic life despite the collapse of normal conditions. Party cells in factories, administrative bodies, and residential districts became hubs for distributing information, coordinating labour and ensuring that the most vital tasks transport, munitions production, and food distribution continued. Here, ideology intertwined with pragmatism: motivating citizens through patriotic appeals was as important as organizing them. These networks proved indispensable as the city confronted starvation, bombardment, and freezing temperatures [9, p. 477-478].

One of the most contested aspects of the Party's policy was its prioritization of key workers. While the general population suffered devastating losses from hunger and cold, those deemed essential to military production or administration often received higher rations and better access to shelter. For many Leningraders, this hierarchy was a painful reminder of the inequalities embedded within the Soviet system. Nevertheless, from the leadership's perspective, such prioritization was not optional. Maintaining industry, transport, and communication was framed as a matter of collective survival an argument that carried weight even among those disadvantaged by the system [9, p. 480-481].

Despite the severity of Party rule, it also played a real role in sustaining hope and social cohesion. Cultural institutions were encouraged to continue operating; concerts, lectures, and exhibitions persisted even in the darkest months of the siege, often under the Party's direct patronage. Propaganda emphasized endurance, framing

the city's suffering as a test of socialist resolve. While shaped by ideology, these efforts provided many residents with a sense of purpose and dignity. The Party's stewardship of Leningrad during the siege was therefore deeply contradictory: repressive yet mobilizing, exploitative yet stabilizing. It left a legacy that continues to challenge historians seeking to understand how a city endured one of the greatest catastrophes of the twentieth century [2, p. 179-180].

IV. The effects – broader philosophical and historical themes

The siege as a total war: the eradication of the distinction between soldier and civilian

The siege of Leningrad, lasting from September 1941 to January 1944, stands as one of the most harrowing exemplars of total war in the twentieth century. Unlike traditional military campaigns that targeted opposing armies, the German and Finnish forces surrounding Leningrad sought to subjugate an entire population through systematic starvation, relentless artillery bombardment, and aerial attacks. The city's civilians were not collateral damage but the central targets of the campaign; the Nazi strategy explicitly aimed at breaking the human spirit and forcing surrender by annihilating the population itself. In this sense, Leningrad epitomized the total war principle of erasing the boundary between soldiers and civilians, treating all inhabitants as combatants to be neutralized.

The deliberate starvation imposed on Leningrad's residents illustrates the chilling mechanics of this total war approach. Supply lines were severed, and food rations were reduced to near-starvation levels, often amounting to just 125 grams of bread per day for adults at the height of the siege. Factories, schools and hospitals became extensions of the battlefield, as civilians were forced to sustain the city's defence while enduring hunger, cold, and disease. In this context, survival itself became a military objective, and every aspect of daily life from queuing for water to keeping factories running was subsumed under the demands of the siege. The population, though unarmed in the traditional sense, was conscripted into a collective struggle, demonstrating the total war blurring of roles between civilian and soldier [3, p. 260-262].

Artillery and aerial bombardments compounded the siege's horrors, targeting both military positions and civilian infrastructure with equal ruthlessness. Residential blocks, hospitals, and cultural landmarks were destroyed, leaving the cityscape itself a armed terrain intended to crush morale. The psychological dimension of this campaign was as significant as physical deprivation: terror became a strategic instrument. By making no distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the attackers enforced a reality where the entire civilian population was caught in the crosshairs, illustrating the defining characteristic of total war the mobilization of the enemy's society itself as a primary battlefield.

Despite these conditions, the resilience of Leningrad's citizens transformed the city into a symbol of defiance under total war. Civilians are organized to maintain food distribution, care for the wounded, and continue essential industrial production, effectively sustaining both the human and military resistance. The siege revealed the horrifying extent to which twentieth-century warfare could target the human population itself, not just armies, making clear that in total war, survival becomes a battlefield. Leningrad's ordeal underscores the brutal logic of this form of warfare, where the distinction between soldier and civilian is erased, and the annihilation of a city's population is weaponized as a tool of military strategy.

The anatomy of humanitarian crime: was the siege a genocide?

The siege of Leningrad stands as one of the most harrowing episodes of World War II. Encircled by German and Finnish forces, the city's population endured extreme starvation, relentless bombardment, and freezing winter conditions. Estimates suggest that up to a million civilians perished, mostly from hunger, disease, and exposure. Beyond the staggering human toll, the siege raises profound ethical and legal questions: was this a calculated military strategy, or did it constitute a deliberate attempt to annihilate a civilian population a crime that might meet the legal definition of genocide? [5, p. 338-340].

International law, particularly 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, defines genocide as acts committed "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

Traditionally, this has been applied to acts such as mass killings, forced sterilizations, and systematic persecution. The siege presents a more nuanced case: the Germans deliberately cut off food, fuel and medical supplies to the city, intending to break both the Soviet war effort and the spirit of its inhabitants. While the target was tied to the city rather than an ethnic or religious group, the deliberate creation of life-threatening conditions raises the question of whether intentional starvation and urban annihilation can fit within the broader legal framework of genocide.

Scholars and legal experts remain divided. Some argue that the primary objective of the German command was military: to neutralize a strategic city and demoralize the Soviet population, not to eliminate a specific national or ethnic group. Others contend that the deliberate infliction of conditions calculated to destroy the population, especially through starvation, constitutes a genocidal act under the principle that intent to destroy a group can be inferred from systematic policies and outcomes. The siege of Leningrad thus inhabits a morally grey zone where the boundaries between war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide are blurred but deeply consequential for historical and legal interpretation [3, p. 265-266].

Ultimately, examining the siege through the lens of genocide law underscores the dark complexity of human conflict. It challenges traditional notions of military necessity versus deliberate destruction, forcing legal scholars, historians and ethicists to confront whether the deliberate engineering of mass suffering, even without explicit ethnic targeting an constitute a form of group annihilation. The debate over Leningrad is not merely academic; it is a reminder that the mechanisms of war can be wielded as instruments of systematic human destruction, leaving enduring questions about culpability, intent, and the scope of international law.

Leningrad and modern conscience: what does it mean to remember?

For nearly 900 days the city endured relentless bombardment extreme famine and the staggering loss of life with hundreds of thousands of civilians succumbing to starvation and disease. Yet, Leningrad’s endurance has become more than a historical fact; it has evolved into a symbol of resilience, suffering and the human capacity to survive under unimaginable circumstances. Remembering the siege is not merely an

act of commemorating history, it is a confrontation with the ethical and emotional weight of human suffering, challenging us to consider what it truly means to bear witness [6].

In modern Russia, the memory of the siege occupies a complex space. On one hand, it is commemorated with solemnity through monuments, ceremonies, and educational programs, emphasizing patriotism, endurance, and collective heroism. On the other, these narratives can sometimes overshadow the more difficult truths: the suffering of ordinary citizens, the moral ambiguities of survival, and the profound trauma inflicted on generations. Public memory, therefore, is a selective lens, balancing the need for national pride with the responsibility of acknowledging the immense human cost. For Russians, the siege is as much a part of their civic identity as it is a historical event, shaping attitudes toward resilience, loyalty, and the moral dimensions of wartime experience [6].

Internationally, the siege is remembered through a broader humanistic lens, emphasizing universal themes of suffering, endurance, and ethical responsibility. Scholars, educators, and institutions grapple with the challenge of conveying both the scale of tragedy and the dignity of those who endured it, often framing it as a cautionary tale against totalitarian aggression and the horrors of war. Yet, the ethical responsibility here is profound: to remember without sensationalizing, to honour the victims without turning their suffering into spectacle, and to engage critically with sources that may be incomplete or propagandized. Global remembrance thus invites reflection on shared humanity and the ethical imperatives of memory [6].

Historians and the public share a moral duty when confronting events like the Siege of Leningrad. Remembering is not simply to recount facts but to cultivate empathy, humility, and ethical awareness. This entails challenging myths, questioning state narratives, and preserving the voices of those who lived through the ordeal, even when they disturb comfortable assumptions. In doing so, memory becomes an active practice an engagement with the past that illuminates the moral dimensions of human action and inaction. The siege, therefore, is more than a historical event: it is a mirror for the modern conscience, demanding reflection on

what it means to witness suffering, to bear moral responsibility, and to ensure that remembrance honors both truth and humanity.

Conclusion

1. Humanitarian topics

– *Extreme civilian suffering:* The siege caused catastrophic loss of life, with estimates of 1 million civilians dying from starvation, disease, and exposure.

– *Urban resilience:* Despite the suffering, the population displayed extraordinary endurance, maintaining essential services, cultural activities, and morale under extreme deprivation.

– *Humanitarian lessons:* The siege highlighted the vulnerability of civilians in total war and the need for international awareness and mechanisms to protect populations during protracted conflicts.

– *Moral and ethical dilemmas:* Both the Axis and Soviet sides faced ethical questions. German forces deliberately targeted civilians, while the Soviets had to prioritize limited resources for military survival over civilian needs.

2. Military and strategic topics

– *Strategic significance:* Leningrad was a key industrial and symbolic city; its capture would have provided Germany with political leverage and cut off vital Soviet resources.

– *Soviet defence and resilience:* The Red Army's ability to maintain a defence despite encirclement prevented German forces from reallocating troops to other fronts, tying down significant Axis resources.

– *Logistical challenges:* The siege demonstrated the critical importance of supply lines—both sides struggled with transporting food, ammunition and reinforcements under harsh winter conditions and enemy fire.

– *Military innovation under pressure:* The Soviets used creative logistical solutions, such as the "Road of Life" over frozen Lake Ladoga, showing the interplay of environment, technology and strategy in warfare.

3. Broader Historical Topics

– *Symbol of Soviet endurance:* Leningrad became a powerful symbol of Soviet resistance and propaganda, shaping national identity and post-war memory.

– *Impact on WWII course:* The failure of Germany to capture Leningrad contributed to the overall weakening of the Eastern Front, indirectly influencing key turning points such as Stalingrad and Kursk.

– *Cultural and social legacy:* The siege had a lasting impact on literature, art and collective memory, illustrating the human cost of total war.

– *Lessons for future conflicts:* The siege underscored the devastating effects of protracted urban warfare, blockade strategies and the targeting of civilian populations, influencing post-war military and humanitarian thinking.

The siege of Leningrad exemplifies the extreme interplay between human suffering, military strategy and historical legacy. It was a humanitarian catastrophe, a strategic stalemate with significant implications for the Eastern Front, and a defining event in the historical memory of World War II. Its lessons remain relevant for understanding the costs of total war and the resilience of urban populations under siege. However, the steadfastness of the Russian people is unique in world history.

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