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The Constant Struggle of Life and Death During the Siege of Leningrad

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The Constant Struggle of Life and Death During the Siege of Leningrad

Abstract

In 1941 during the Second World War, Hitler began Operation Barbarossa, in which he invaded the Soviet Union in order to repopulate it with Germans and expand German territory. The city of Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, was one of Hitler's main objectives because if Leningrad fell to the Germans, they would then be able to go south and capture Moscow, which would possibly lead them to win the war. Additionally, Leningrad was a Baltic seaport, which was useful for trade, and it was home to some of the USSR's main munition factories. When Germany attacked Leningrad, the people of the city were cut off from food and fuel for 882 days, making it the longest siege of the modern day. With very limited food and resources, death became an everyday occurrence and every Leningrader endured starvation, taking desperate measures to keep themselves and their loved ones alive. To avoid death, they used the nearby lake to transport food into the besieged city and meanwhile made food out of any resources they had left, regardless of whether or not it was truly edible.

Keywords

World War II, Siege of Leningrad, Operation Barbarossa

Disciplines

European History | German Language and Literature | History

Comments

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The Constant Struggle of Life and Death During the Siege of Leningrad

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History 11A

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The Constant Struggle of Life and Death During the Siege of Leningrad

In 1941 during the second World War, Hitler began Operation Barbarossa, in which he invaded the Soviet Union in order to repopulate it with Germans and expand German territory.

¹The city of Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, was one of Hitler's main objectives because if Leningrad fell to the Germans, then they would be able to go south and capture Moscow, which would possibly lead them to win the war. Additionally, Leningrad was a Baltic seaport, which would be useful for trade, and it was home to some of the USSR's main munition factories.² When Germany attacked Leningrad, the people of the city were cut off from food and fuel for 882 days, making it the longest siege of the modern day.³ *With very limited food and resources, death became an everyday occurrence and every Leningrader endured starvation, taking desperate measures to keep themselves and their loved ones alive.*

When the siege began, the population of Leningrad exceeded 2.5 million, however once the war ended, only one third of the population remained as many died of starvation or were able to evacuate.⁴ As Helen Dovgiallo, a survivor of Leningrad, recounts from her time in Leningrad, "we did not expect any hostile actions from Germany. Not too long ago we signed a peace treaty between countries...Russian secret services gave enough warnings about German aggressive plans, but our government simply could not believe this".⁵ Because of this peace treaty between Russia and Germany, Helen and the other Leningraders were not at all expecting what was to come for the next 900 days. They never would have thought Germany would make them suffer

¹ Alan Wykes. *The Siege of Leningrad: Epic of Survival*. (New York, NY: Ballantine Books Inc., 1968), 6.

² Cynthia Simmons, and Nina Perlina. *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 15.

³ Alan Wykes, (6).

⁴ Evgeny Senchukov and Anatoly Bogush. *Soviet Storm: World War II in the East, Episode 5*. (2010; Janson Media), Documentary.

⁵ Helen Dovgiallo. *900 Days of the Leningrad Siege*.

so tremendously and for so long. Meanwhile, German soldiers were told to “lay waste to the entire city and to annihilate its inhabitants without exception or remorse”.⁶ Germany was so determined to take Leningrad that they did not care how many innocent civilians they would kill. When the disturbing reality hit Leningraders, it came as a shock as they were unaware of Germany’s true intentions.

Germany was unrelenting in how they targeted Leningrad. Instead of bombing large, important buildings, they would bomb bridges, houses, and shops. They refrained from bombing large buildings because they served as the Germans’ reference points during air raids.⁷ By bombing houses, it more directly impacted the innocent civilians, who were now left homeless and without any possessions. During this siege, the entire city was essentially on the front line as air raids occurred on a daily basis. On September 8th, 1941, German soldiers targeted a warehouse where the majority of the city’s food was stored and lit it on fire.⁸ The sight of a massive cloud of smoke that was visible to most Leningraders was dreadful because upon seeing this, they knew all their crucial flour and sugar was gone. The placement of the German troops cut Leningrad off from all supplies that they would get from other cities. They also seized the train stations so people were unable to leave. This would not only impact Russian soldiers, but also the millions of citizens.

As winter came, it gave the people a sliver of hope because their nearby lake, Lake Ladoga, would freeze over, which would provide the only route to get to non-occupied Russian land in order to bring more resources in and evacuate people out of the besieged city. As displayed in Figure 1, boats and trucks were used to transport people, food, and fuel across the

⁶ Alan Wykes, (6).

⁷ Evgeny Senchukov and Anatoly Bogush. *Soviet Storm: World War II in the East, Episode 5*. (2010; Janson Media), Documentary.

⁸ Ibid.

lake.⁹ When the lake was frozen over, it was still a dangerous route as the ice would often crack and trucks full of food would disappear into the water.¹⁰ Additionally, this lake was frequently targeted during air raids, which was dangerous for the truck drivers and citizens being evacuated. Despite the danger, this lake was the reason hundreds of thousands of people were able to survive, thus it was coined “the road of life.”

Still, though, people were not nearly getting enough food and had to resort to desperate measures in order to stay alive. In diary entries and letters, a common topic was death and hunger. People wrote that they would much rather be shot and killed by Germans than continue suffering from starvation. They were no longer scared of death by bombs or shells.¹¹ One girl wrote in her diary that she is expecting people to soon eat cats, dogs, and even their own children in order to stay alive. While people were already eating cats and dogs during the siege, it was still viewed as deviant. One woman was so desperate to keep her children alive that she suffocated her own six-week-old baby to feed her other three kids in order to keep them alive.¹² She had to make the dire choice of losing all four of her children to starvation or killing one in order to save the rest.

To avoid death, people made food out of whatever material they had when normal food was unavailable. They would make soup from leather and hay, and even be happy to eat vaseline, glycerin, or castor oil.¹³ After all the cats, dogs, and pigeons were eaten, people would

⁹ Boris Kudoyarov. *Supplies of Food Being Delivered to Leningrad, Russia over Lake Ladoga, 1 Sep 1942*. Russian International News Agency. www.wv2db.com

¹⁰ Evgeny Senchukov and Anatoly Bogush. *Soviet Storm: World War II in the East, Episode 5*. (2010; Janson Media), Documentary.

¹¹ John Barber and Andrei Dzeniskevich. *Life and Death in Besieged Leningrad, 1941-44*. (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 38.

¹² *Ibid*, 38.

¹³ Helen Dovgiallo. *900 Days of the Leningrad Siege*, 12.

turn to eat fruits and vegetables that were so rotten that they were black. In order to get one's daily rations, people had to wait in line from 4 or 5 in the morning, even all through the night, just to get a couple hundred grams of bread that was made of low quality, unusual ingredients.

Another diary entry describes the individual's walk to work, in which she would pass the same man sitting in the snow in the same spot and position for two weeks. "He 'sat'...without his knapsack, without his rags, in his underwear, naked, a skeleton with ripped-out entrails. They took him away in May".¹⁴ Death became so common that every day, the people that had enough energy to leave their house would immediately see corpses laying on the street and would have to step over them.¹⁵ As illustrated in Figure 2, family members are carrying the dead body of their relative to take to a cemetery.¹⁶ Most people, though, were lacking energy so much from lack of food and nutrients that they could not even walk down the stairs, let alone carry a dead body. Therefore, the majority of people were forced to simply leave their deceased loved one on the street.

Others wrote how being so emaciated not only physically impacted them, but mentally too. One woman wrote, "I look like all those other devils, I have become just bones and wrinkled skin...Compared to what you were during the first days of the war, you have become unrecognizable."¹⁷ Looking in the mirror for the first time in a while led to people being shocked and disgusted by their own reflection. Many panicked as the person staring back at them in the mirror looked like a monster and so unlike themselves.¹⁸ Not only were people trapped in a

¹⁴ Cynthia Simmons, and Nina Perlina. *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*. (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 51.

¹⁵ Evgeny Senchukov and Anatoly Bogush. *Soviet Storm: World War II in the East, Episode 5*. (2010; Janson Media), Documentary.

¹⁶ Mikhail Trahman. *Russian Civilians Transporting the Remains of a Dead Relative Along Nevsky Prospect, Leningrad, Russia, Apr 1942*. Russian International News Agency. www.ww2db.com

¹⁷ Alexis Peri. *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad*. (Harvard University Press, 2017), 37.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

front-line city that was turning to rubble before their eyes, but they were also trapped in their own bodies that did not look familiar at all. Now, the only thing they have to themselves – their body – is also being destroyed.

January 1942 was the worst month of the entire siege as rations during this month were the lowest and electricity was cut off.¹⁹ Non-workers' food rations were completely stopped, so they now had no dependable source of food – it was up to them to find something to eat or die. Because the electricity was cut off from lack of fuel, the emaciated citizens were threatened by dying of starvation *and* lack of heat. People burned their own books, furniture, and whatever else they could find to make a fire and keep warm through the harsh winter. Furthermore, the water pipes froze, so Leningraders lost access to fresh water, which is necessary for survival. Figure 3 shows people dressed in their warmest garments, gathering water from a broken water pipe.²⁰

Hope finally found its way back to the citizens in February of 1942, when rations were increased for the first time. Helen Dovgiallo explained, “You cannot imagine what a great day it was! People on the street hugged and kissed one another...Only 3 ounces of bread were added but the Leningrad citizens took this increase as a first sign of the coming complete victory”.²¹ While to most people in today's world would not think 3 ounces is very much, to the starving citizens, it was a drastic difference. This increased ration represented Leningrad surviving the siege. It was the first time things were starting to look up to the people in a time the circumstance was only getting worse.

¹⁹ Evgeny Senchukov and Anatoly Bogush. *Soviet Storm: World War II in the East, Episode 5*. (2010; Janson Media), Documentary.

²⁰ Vsevolod Tarasevich. *Civilians of Leningrad Fetching Water from a Broken Water Pipe, Russia, Dec 1941-Jan 1942*. Russian International News Agency. www.ww2db.com

²¹ Helen Dovgiallo. *900 Days of the Leningrad Siege*, (20).

January 1944 marked the end of the siege. Although the city was still on the front line, they were now getting food and fuel and people had much better chances of surviving. About 1.8 million people were evacuated from Leningrad during the war and approximately 1 million people died, mostly of starvation.²² While people were beyond grateful to have survived a time when death was nearly imminent, the trauma of constantly fighting for one's life forever stayed with the survivors. The siege of Leningrad is a clear example of how war can not only impact soldiers and their families, but also the blameless citizens of the country. While they were faced with life-threatening conditions, the people of Leningrad were determined to survive by all means necessary.

²² Evgeny Senchukov and Anatoly Bogush. *Soviet Storm: World War II in the East, Episode 5*. (2010; Janson Media), Documentary.

Figure 1:



Figure 2:



Figure 3:



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