

THE GREAT READING  
ADVENTURE 2005

MELANIE KELLY



HELEN  
DUNMORE  
*The Siege*

# HELEN DUNMORE AND THE SIEGE

1942



Helen Dunmore

MELANIE KELLY

THE GREAT READING  
ADVENTURE 2005

HELEN DUNMORE READS  
**THE SIEGE**

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Statue of Lenin in front of Finland station

## PREFACE

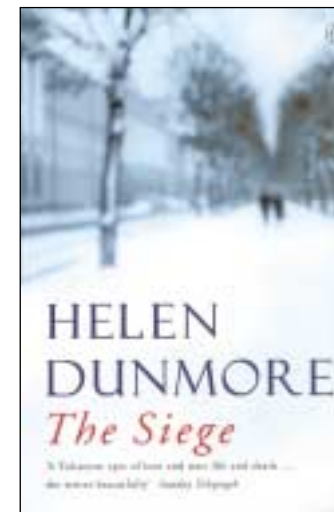
Leningrad, 1941. The Soviet Union's second largest city, a major industrial centre and one of the world's most beautiful cultural capitals. Stylish, brilliant, thriving.

A living city filled with ordinary people doing ordinary things. Paying the rent, turning on a light, getting on a tram, eating in a café, meeting the children from school, making plans. Should I ask for promotion? What shall we have for supper? The brown dress or the blue?

A city confident that while war rages elsewhere in Europe, it can enjoy peace brought by its country's pact with Hitler's Germany.

Then the Germans attack without warning and Leningrad is surrounded. Nearly three million people are locked in.

There's no food, no fuel, no power, no sewage system, no running water, no public transport, a constant threat of shelling, famine and disease, and the coming of one of the harshest Russian winters in living memory.



Nothing can be taken for granted.  
All pretences are stripped away.  
Life has been pared to the bone.

Helen Dunmore's *The Siege* imagines what it might be like to live in a city that has had everything and has lost it all.

What would *you* do if you were here?

How far would you go to survive?

## INTRODUCTION

Bristol's annual Great Reading Adventure is now well established as part of Bristol's cultural programme. Each year, everyone in the city is encouraged to read the same book at the same time. From January to March, thousands of copies of the selected book are distributed free of charge to schools and colleges, libraries, reading groups, the business community and members of the public. A range of activities takes place linked to the book, and high quality support material, including readers' and teachers' guides, is produced. The initiative receives excellent coverage in the local media and the feedback from participants is overwhelmingly positive.

After experiencing a life of treachery, pirates and rum in 2003 with Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, in 2004 we were battling with seven-foot tall flesh-eating plants as we were caught up in John Wyndham's terrifying and thought-provoking novel *The Day of the Triffids*. Now in 2005, we turn to a haunting story about the suffering and survival of ordinary people in time of war with Helen Dunmore's *The Siege*. Although each year's book is different, the mission of the Great Reading Adventure remains the same: to bring communities together through the power of literature, and to encourage more reading and writing by the widest range of people in Bristol.

Helen Dunmore has lived in the city for nearly 30 years. The 2005 Great Reading Adventure forms part of a year-long celebration of creativity in Bristol, which will also include festivals, a major programme of art in schools and new projects to promote cultural activity throughout the city. It is organised under the banner of Creative Bristol, the initiative delivering the promise of the 2008 Capital of Culture bid.

*The Siege* was critically acclaimed on publication, described by *The Independent* as a 'wise, humane and beautifully written novel... a masterpiece'. It was short listed for the 2001 Whitbread Book of the Year and the Orange Prize for Fiction. The story is set during the blockade of Leningrad by German troops, which lasted from September 1941 to January 1944, and is estimated to have caused the death of over a million people. It focuses on a small group of civilians trying to adapt to starvation, piercing cold and enemy bombardment. Their bustling, elegant city is on the brink of collapse and their daily routines and expectations have been shattered. Intense dramas are played out in the confined spaces of shabby apartments, bread queues, the cab of a supply truck. *The Observer* called the book 'a horrifying war story from the point of view of the hearth, not the trenches'. Bristol, too, came under enemy attack during World War Two, and the Great Reading Adventure will be used as a basis for learning about the city's own experience of being on the front line.

This guide will tell you about Helen Dunmore and her work. It looks in detail at *The Siege*, and provides background material on Leningrad and the Bristol Blitz as well as questions to think about while you read the book. This is the first time that the Great Reading Adventure has used a book by a living author and much of the material in this guide has been developed from conversations with Helen herself.

An expanded version of the guide, including additional background information and a more extensive bibliography, is available on the Great Reading Adventure website at [www.bristolreads.com](http://www.bristolreads.com). The site also provides news of all the activities that are taking place over the next two months including film screenings, talks, debates, workshops, competitions and other events, as well as copies of the education material.

We hope you enjoy taking part in the 2005 Great Reading Adventure and that, like us, you find *The Siege* an absorbing, moving and unforgettable read.

Great Reading Adventure launch events 2003 and 2004

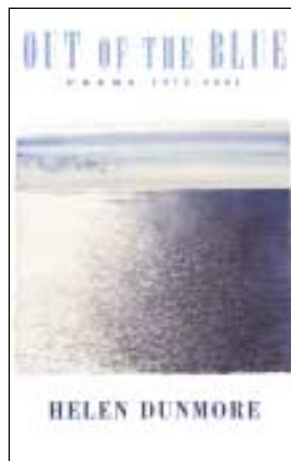


## HELEN DUNMORE: BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

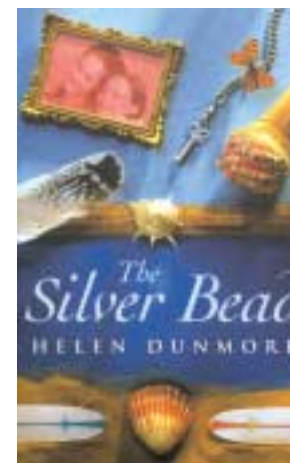
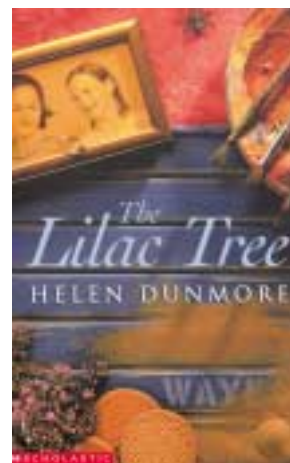
Helen was born in Yorkshire in 1952 and studied English at York University. After graduation she spent two years teaching in Finland. On her return to England in 1976, she moved to Bristol to share a flat with a friend. Having arrived in the city in 'a casual way', she has been based here ever since. She spends part of the year in Cornwall.

Helen's first love was poetry and her first published book was a collection of poems called *The Apple Fall* (1983). She claims to have been 'very intimidated by prose' and it was some time before she gained the confidence to write an adult novel. Poetry seems to her a more natural medium, whereas prose is a craft that she has learnt. For the Great Reading Adventure, she has selected eleven of her poems to be reproduced in the readers' guide and on the project website.

Selection of poetry books



Helen has written a number of books for children. These include *Secrets* (1994), which won the Signal Poetry Award, and a trilogy set in Cornwall featuring the friends Zillah and Katie. She says that being a children's author and poet has influenced the way in which she approaches her adult fiction: 'Writing children's books gives a writer a very strong sense of narrative drive... Writing poetry makes you intensely conscious of how words sound, both aloud and inside the head of the reader.'

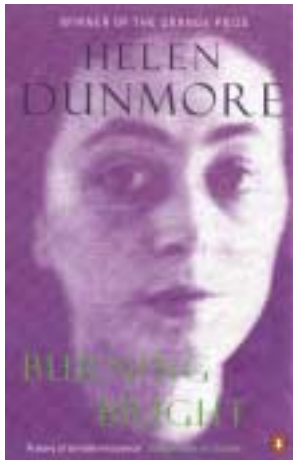


Children's books featuring the characters Zillah and Katie

*A Spell of Winter* (1995), her third novel, was her breakthrough. It won the first Orange Prize for Fiction and brought what she describes as 'a lot of very useful attention'. She believes the Orange Prize has succeeded in 'raising awareness of women writers' and has 'raised the game of all literary prizes', although she recognises that winning any award entails a certain amount of luck.

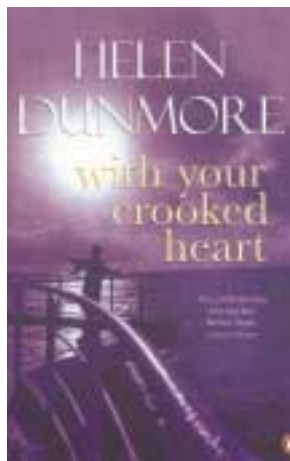
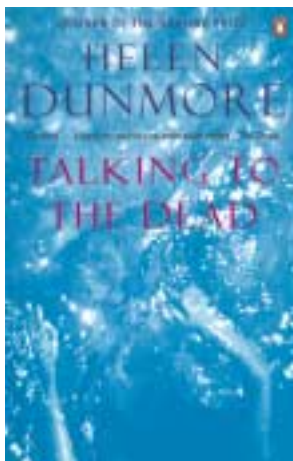
Through her fiction Helen aims to draw the reader deep into the book. Many of her novels begin in her mind's eye with a sharp, clearly imagined scene. She says that if the scene 'won't go away, then I know there is fiction in it'.

Selection of Penguin titles  
by Helen Dunmore



In addition to her writing, Helen has taught at the University of Glamorgan and the University of Bristol's Department of Continuing Education, and for the Open College of the Arts. She has been a performer and teacher of poetry and creative writing, tutoring on residential courses for the Arvon Foundation and taking part in the Poetry Society's Writer in Schools scheme. She writes reviews, contributes to arts programmes and has been a judge for the T S Eliot Prize and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award.

From a practical point of view, working in other fields provided additional ways of earning a living until she found success as a writer of novels. However, she continues to find the experience enjoyable and valuable. Along with her book tours and travels, teaching and tutoring bring her into contact with a wide variety of people and settings. She says that the popular image of the reclusive writer is rarely true: writers are always meeting people and engaging with the life around them.



## Poetry

*The Apple Fall* (1983); *The Sea Skater* (1986) – winner of the Poetry Society's Alice Hunt Bartlett Award; *Raw Garden* (1988) – a Poetry Book Society Choice; *Short Days, Long Nights: new and selected poems* (1991); *Secrets: collection of poems from hidden worlds* (1994) – winner of the Signal Poetry Award; *Recovering a Body* (1994); *Bestiary* (1997); *Penguin Modern Poets: Helen Dunmore, Jo Shapcott, Matthew Sweeney* (1997); *Bouncing Boy: and other poems* (1999); *Out of the Blue: poems 1975-2001* (2001); *Snollygoster and Other Poems* (2001).

## Children's fiction

*In the Money* (1993); *Allie's Apples* (1995); *Amina's Blanket* (1996); *Fatal Error* (1996); *Go Fox* (1996); *Clyde's Leopard* (1998); *Great-Grandma's Dancing Dress* (1998); *Allie's Rabbit* (1999); *Brother Brother, Sister Sister* (1999); *Aliens Don't Eat Bacon Sandwiches* (2000); *Allie Away* (2000); *Zillah and Me* (2000); *The Zillah Rebellion* (2001); *The Ugly Duckling* (2001); *The Silver Bead* (2003); *The Lilac Tree* (2004) (previously released as *Zillah and Me*); *The Seal Cove* (2004) (previously published as *The Zillah Rebellion*); *Tara's Tree House* (2004).

## Adult fiction

*Zennor in Darkness* (1993) – winner of the McKitterick Prize; *Burning Bright* (1994); *A Spell of Winter* (1995) – winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction; *Talking to the Dead* (1996); *Love of Fat Men* (1997); *Your Blue-Eyed Boy* (1998); *With Your Crooked Heart* (1999); *Ice Cream* (2000); *The Siege* (2001); *Mourning Ruby* (2003).

## Other

Critical introductions to Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (2003) and Emily Bronte's *Poems of Solitude* (2004), both published by Hesperus Press.

## Smiles Like Roses

All down my street  
smiles opened like roses  
sun licked me and tickled me  
sun said, Didn't you believe me  
when I said I'd be back?

I blinked my eyes, I said,  
Sun, you are too strong for me  
where'd you get those muscles?  
Sun said, Come and dance.

All over the park  
smiles opened like roses  
babies kicked off their shoes  
and sun kissed their toes.

All those new babies  
all that new sun  
everybody dancing  
walking but dancing.

All over the world  
sun kicked off his shoes  
and came home dancing  
licking and tickling

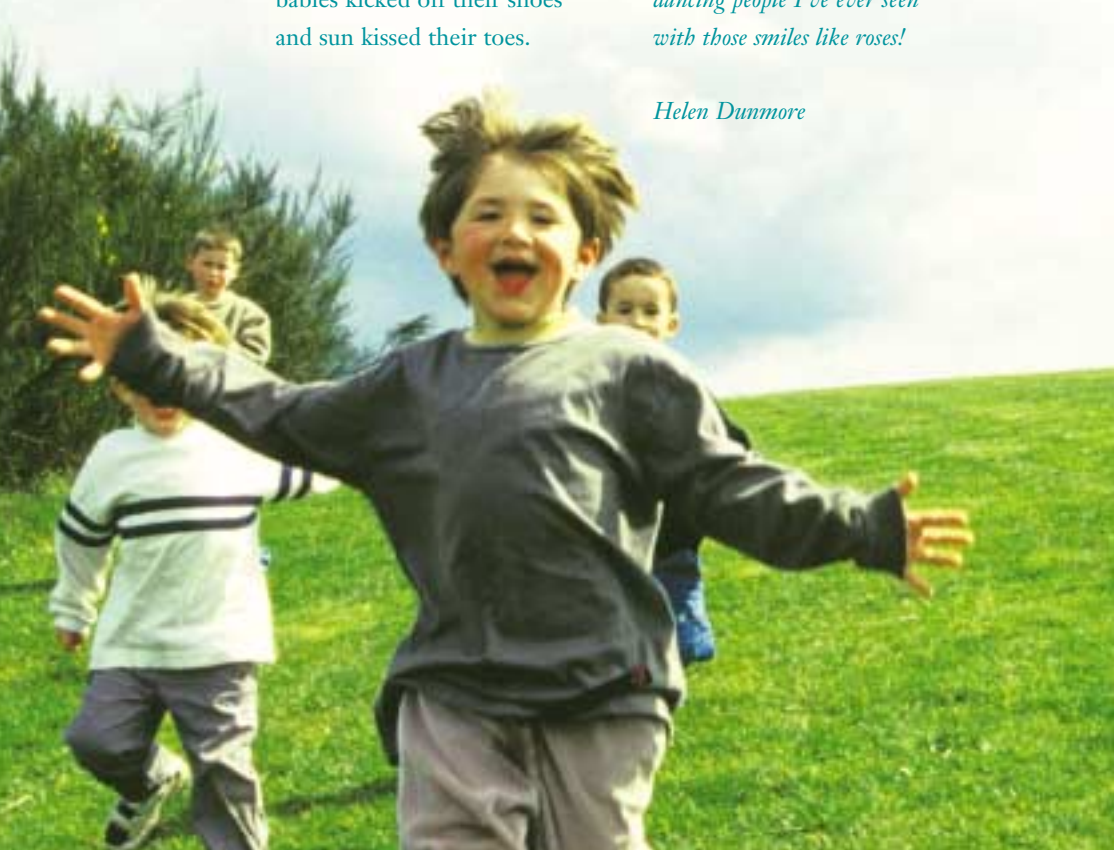
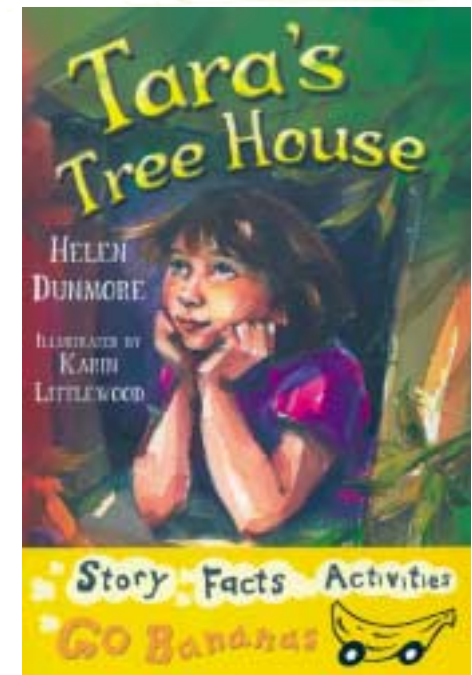
kissing crossing-ladies and fat babies  
saying to everyone  
*Hey you are the most beautiful  
dancing people I've ever seen  
with those smiles like roses!*

*Helen Dunmore*

## CHILDHOOD INFLUENCES AND TARA'S TREE HOUSE

Helen's early love of reading was, she says, 'undoubtedly encouraged' by her family. Growing up in a house surrounded by books and seeing people enjoying them made her want to read herself. Helen says that 'you can't bully children into reading': what is important is being enthusiastic about books and sharing that enthusiasm. Helen's parents never judged what she chose to read, but gave her the freedom to discover what she liked.

As a child, Helen read and memorised a lot of poetry, which she continues to find 'extremely valuable'. She was also 'keen on comics' like *Bunty* and *Judy* because of their strong narratives. The first book she can remember being read to her was *The Wind in the Willows*. She liked books produced in interesting shapes and with pop ups, funny books, the fairy stories of Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen and Andrew Lang, classics like *A Tale of Two Cities*, true life adventures (Grace Darling, Scott of the Antarctic, Florence Nightingale) and Alison Utley's *Little Grey Rabbit*, among many others. Like other children, she read in 'a very retentive way'. She can still hear the words from some of those early books, like the Janet and John series, and can recall 'the excitement of actually reading' for the first time.





Helen likes thinking from the point of view of children and focusing on things that they will find interesting. In her books for children she hopes to recapture the pleasure she derived from reading as a child when she would be completely absorbed into a vividly imagined world full of colour and life. She is aware, too, of the need to write 'pure and clear sentences'. Children do not want to be 'baffled' by the way the language has been constructed, she says, although they do enjoy 'rich, complicated words'. She is grateful that she was encouraged to learn the structure of English at school and to become confident in using it. She feels that 'knowing the rules' has given her power as a writer.

Among the many books and authors she would recommend children to try are Michael Morpurgo for his sense of place and strong emotional themes, Dick King Smith for his ability to write with a child's eye view, Philippa Pearce's magical *Tom's Midnight Garden*, Diana Wynne Jones, and Tove Jansson's complex and moving Moomin books. She is also very fond of Nina Bawden's *Carrie's War*, which has established itself as a classic and will be read by older children during the Great Reading Adventure.



Illustration of Tara's tree house by Karin Littlewood

*Tara's Tree House*, the book to be used by younger readers in the Great Reading Adventure, was published in June 2004, although the basic story had appeared previously in Helen's short story collection *Aliens Don't Eat Bacon Sandwiches* (2000). The commissioning editor at Egmont had read the original version and thought that it could be adapted as an illustrated chapter book for newly fluent readers, with facts and activities linked to learning about World War Two. The illustrations are by Karin Littlewood.

Tara is a young girl sent to live with her nan while her mother is in hospital. She is bored in the little flat but sneaks into the garden belonging to the downstairs neighbour and discovers a beautiful pear tree and the prospect of adventure. She learns of Nan's own experience of being sent away from home when she was young and also meets Mr Barenstein, owner of the garden flat, who remembers the cherry tree where his little sister Hannah used to play. He allows Nan to create a vegetable plot in the garden and another neighbour, Mr Giovanni, to build Tara a tree house. At the beginning of the book, Tara had thought six weeks was a terribly long time to be separated from her mother. By the end, she realises that children could be separated from their families for years, like her nan, or forever, like Hannah. She says to herself:

I'm going to phone Mum in hospital tonight... and I'll tell her about the tree house, and Nan's veg plot, and all the things that are happening in the garden. Six weeks isn't long really.

The book, with its subtle references to the wartime evacuation of children and the Holocaust, provides a gentle introduction to the way in which family history relates to the major events described in the history books. Because of the sometimes cynical manipulation of history by those in power, Helen believes that people can come to distrust what they are told about the past. She is pleased that there is such a 'huge interest' in history books and television programmes at the moment, and that people are excited by the subject. The importance of holding on to personal and public history is a theme that runs through much of her work.



Illustration of Tara sitting in the pear tree

However, in writing *Tara's Tree House*, Helen's prime purpose was, as always, to write a story that children could enjoy and to which they could relate. The idea of playing in a tree house is central to the book and one that children are likely to find interesting. Although the story shows that children are not immune to the suffering brought by war, Helen does not want to burden her readers with 'huge adult topics'. Hannah's tragedy is implied rather than explicitly described and Nan's experience of evacuation is, on the whole, a pleasant one. The book is 'about love and goodness and passing on stories to be remembered', and celebrates the fun that can be had when young.

## Over the Green Hill

Two boys, a girl in a red coat,  
a leaping, dancing, spring-mad dog  
fighting its leash, released  
to run like water over the hill  
the green hill, with mystery running after.

Where are they going and why so happy,  
why the red flag of her coat flapping  
like poppy-silk against the green,  
why are they all running  
like water over the top of the hill,  
the green hill, with secrets running after?

What is the country they are running to,  
is there peace there, is there freedom  
to jump and play in the spring air,  
why are they all running, why do they look  
behind them, and laugh, and run faster,  
why are they holding hands as they run  
over that green hill with the wind running after?

*Helen Dunmore*

## BACKGROUND TO THE SIEGE 1: KEY DATES ON THE EASTERN FRONT

|      |               |  |
|------|---------------|--|
| 1939 | 15 March      | Germany occupies Czechoslovakia                    |
|      | 23 August     | USSR-German non-aggression pact agreed             |
|      | 1 September   | Germany invades western Poland                     |
|      | (3 September) | (Britain and France declare war on Germany)        |
|      | 17 September  | Soviet troops invade eastern Poland                |
| 1941 | 22 June       | Germany begins invasion of Soviet Union            |
|      | 8 September   | Siege of Leningrad begins                          |
| 1942 | September     | Germans enter Stalingrad                           |
| 1943 | January       | Soviet troops open land route to Leningrad         |
|      | 2 February    | German army surrenders at Stalingrad               |
| 1944 | 27 January    | Germans driven from Leningrad                      |
|      | 1 August      | Beginning of Warsaw Uprising                       |
|      | 14 September  | Soviets reach Warsaw suburbs                       |
|      | 2 October     | Warsaw Uprising crushed by Germans                 |
|      | November      | Soviet advances in Hungary and Czechoslovakia      |
| 1945 | 17 January    | Germans driven from Warsaw                         |
|      | February      | Yalta conference (Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill) |
|      | 22 April      | Soviet forces enter Berlin suburbs                 |
|      | 2 May         | Berlin captured                                    |
|      | 7 May         | Germany signs unconditional surrender              |

Women working on defences



## BACKGROUND TO THE SIEGE 2: THE EVENTS AT LENINGRAD

Germany broke its non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union without warning in June 1941 and rapidly advanced into Soviet territory in a campaign code-named Operation Barbarossa. Stalin had had most of the Red Army's senior officers killed during the Great Purge and the lack of experienced leadership was soon apparent as millions of defeated Soviet troops were captured in the first few weeks of the invasion.

Leningrad (which has since reverted to its original name of St Petersburg) did not have any great military significance, but it was an important target for the Germans because of its symbolic value. It had been the country's capital during the time of the Tsars and was the birthplace of the Russian Revolution.

In September 1941, the tanks of the German Army Group North reached the southern outskirts of the city where they encountered an impressive line of earthworks, anti-tank ditches and other defences hastily built under the direction of Marshall Zhukov. The Germans could not force their way in, despite keeping up a constant barrage of shells and bombs, but, on the other hand, the people of the city could not break out. It was decided by the German command that it would be better to contain the situation, letting the people starve to death rather than attempting to capture them.

At the beginning of the siege there was barely a month's supply of food in the city. By November, some food was arriving by rail each day at Tikhvin to the east. It was then transported to Novaya Ladoga on the shores of Lake Ladoga from where it was carried by ship to Osinovets and then on to Leningrad. What came in was less than half of what was needed. The situation deteriorated further when Tikhvin fell to the Germans and a 300 km road, surfaced with branches, had to be cut from Zaborye, which lay further east. When Lake Ladoga froze, the so-called Road of Life across the ice was used to bring food into the city and to take out civilians. By February 1942, up to 400 trucks a day made the trip, at risk from breaking ice, bad weather and German artillery and aircraft. Thousands tried to cross by foot, but many died on the way.



Trucks on the Road of Life

By December 1941, rations in the city were at starvation level. Manual workers and essential technicians were allowed 255g of bread and 49g of meat a day; the rest of the population received only 130g of bread and 14g of meat. Without a ration card it was impossible to get food, except on the black market. In *The Siege*, Helen Dunmore writes: 'Ration cards are not like gold: they are so far above gold that you can't even make the comparison.' All the animals in the city had been eaten, including domestic pets, horses and rats, and there were rumours that people were resorting to cannibalism. Helen describes her characters eating a guinea pig from the hospital laboratory and boiling leather to make soup.

Weakened by malnutrition, people had little resistance to the cold of an abnormally harsh winter or to diseases. Books and furniture were burnt when fuel stocks ran out, and medical supplies were soon used up. During December 1941, it is estimated that 52,000 people died (normally the average total for a year) and in January 1942 there were a further 148,000 deaths. Often bodies lay where they fell in the street, frozen beneath the snow, and with the thaw of spring came the threat of epidemics spreading from thousands of rotting corpses. Some bodies were buried in mass graves, blasted out of the rock-hard earth.

A direct land link to Leningrad was forced through by the Soviets in January 1943, although it would be another year before the Germans were finally driven away and the siege was ended. Despite the relentless German shelling and air raids, many of the arms factories in the city had continued production throughout this period with the starving workers putting in 15-hour shifts a day, often in freezing conditions. In 1945, Leningrad was the first city on which Stalin bestowed the Order of Lenin. It was later awarded the title Hero City of the Soviet Union. After the war, Stalin executed many of Leningrad's leaders on various dubious pretexts. He is thought to have been resentful of their popularity and felt threatened by their independent actions.

We may never fully understand why Hitler wanted to annihilate Leningrad. For him, the Eastern European Slavic races had no value other than as slaves: he described them as 'a rabbit family who would never proceed beyond the family association if not forced to do so by a ruling class'. This led to the decision to eradicate Soviet civilians, their towns and villages, and their culture wherever possible. Helen Dunmore quotes from a secret directive dated 29 September 1941 at the beginning of her book:

Worker in Leningrad armaments factory

The Fuehrer has decided to have Leningrad wiped from the face of the earth. The further existence of this large town is of no interest once Soviet Russia is overthrown...

Requests that the city may be handed over, arising from the situation within, will be turned down, for the problem of the survival of the population and of supplying it with food is one which cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for existence, we have no interest in keeping even part of this great city's population...



The siege was as much about implementing Hitler's racist ideology as it was about military strategy. It was a Slavic city whose population valued its significant cultural heritage, one that was the envy of much of the western world. Hitler needed to destroy that culture in addition to destroying its people in order to remove all traces of what he considered an inferior, degenerate race.

While researching *The Siege*, Helen became fascinated by the way in which Stalin exploited different ideologies for his own ends. When necessary, he found it useful to call upon deep felt patriotic and religious beliefs to support the battle against fascism. Citizens and members of the Red Army were encouraged to think that it was the elemental body of Russia rather than communism that they were defending. Stalin was astute enough to see that nationalistic pride was needed to stop Hitler erasing the Soviet identity, rather than political ideology. Anna, the central character in *The Siege*, is surprised to 'hear herself talking of the Motherland' and meaning it, and her father, who has suffered under the oppressive Soviet regime, does not hesitate to join the People's Volunteers on the Luga line when Leningrad is in danger.



Gravestone, Leningrad

## Heimat

Deep in busy lizzies and black iron  
he sleeps for the Heimat,  
and his photograph slips in and out of sight  
as if breathing.

There are petals against his cheeks  
but he is not handsome.  
His small eyes search the graveyard fretfully  
and the flesh of his cheeks clouds  
the bones of heroism.

No one can stop him being young  
and he is so tired of being young.  
He would like to feel pain in his joints  
as he wanders down to Hübers,  
but he's here as always,  
always on his way back from the photographer's  
in his army collar  
with a welt on his neck rubbed raw.

The mountains are white and sly as they always were.  
Old women feed the graveyard with flowers,  
clear the grass on his photograph  
with chamois leathers,  
bend and whisper the inscription.  
They are his terrible suitors.

*Helen Dunmore*



## THE SIEGE

*The Siege* is an enthralling novel of endurance, compassion and the struggle for survival of individuals, a city and its culture. During the first winter of the siege, the characters go through what most people would take a lifetime to experience. Their relationships and emotions are intense and powerful because all they have is each other. Readers are challenged to imagine how they would react in the same circumstances.

Among the words of praise the book has received are the following:

A searing historical novel. Dunmore vividly evokes the unbelievable cold, privations and violence as people struggle to survive... an extraordinary description of the horrors of the time.

*Sunday Express*

A woman's-eye view of war, with the daily struggle to find food and fuel raging through her characters' bodies and minds... An important as well as thrilling work of art.

*Independent on Sunday*

Dunmore captures the siege's sense of estrangement and disorientation in bold, unexpected images.

*New Statesman*

Beautiful writing, brilliant imagery, expert pacing... we are pinned to the page by exquisite descriptions of starvation, cannibalism and frozen corpses... an important novel.

*Sunday Tribune*

Terrifying and absorbing... Dunmore skilfully evokes the perilous fragility of the city as Leningrad is surrounded by German troops and the supply routes are cut off. An impressive, disturbing novel.

*Tablet*

This is a novel of psychological delicacy and poetic strength as well as a meditation on suffering and endurance.

*Washington Post*

Helen Dunmore has always been very interested in Russian history and she had been thinking about the events of Leningrad long before she began writing *The Siege*. She had always found it difficult to grasp the scale of what happened during those '900 days'. The facts and statistics that had been produced could only take her so far in understanding the situation. Helen wanted to find a way of telling the story that would enable readers to 'imagine themselves there'. She chose to concentrate on a small number of 'deeply sympathetic characters', who were 'living and dying in the immediate personal present'. Helen says that her characters, three generations of a Russian family, 'are in the thick of history, yet are still living their private lives'. They are caught up in the turmoil of events and, unlike the reader, do not know if or when the siege will end: every day for them is a journey into the unknown.

Helen had a very clear idea of what she wanted to happen to the characters and what their 'imaginative life' would be. They are people who, before the siege, had lives very like our own with the same routines and preoccupations. Now they face a previously unimaginable catastrophe and have to decide what they are prepared to do in order to survive. The decisions they make are often tiny and relate to how they might get some food, shelter or heat, yet in a rapidly changing world, these small decisions can mark the difference between life and death. The book makes us ask 'What would I do in this situation? What would it mean to me? What would I fight for?'

25th October Avenue, Leningrad before the siege



At the core of the novel are two couples: Anna, a nursery worker, and Andrei, a trainee doctor; and Anna's father, Mikhail, a blacklisted writer, and his former lover, Marina, an actress. With them is Kolya, Mikhail's young son, who is being brought up by Anna (her mother Vera died in childbirth).

The central character of *The Siege* is Anna. She is a believable mixture of vulnerability and strength. She constantly tries to keep her emotions and imagination in check in order to concentrate on what needs to be done here and now. Helen says that she 'wanted to be very clear that the daily life of Anna is very demanding'. She has taken on the burden of supporting her family, despite her youth, and has set aside her own ambitions. When she is first encountered in the book, before the war begins, she is tempted to daydream about what her life might have been like if she had continued her studies. She forces herself to resist such thoughts and to get on with her many responsibilities: looking after Kolya, working on the land at the family dacha outside the city, drying mushrooms, making jams and jellies, pickling, sorting potatoes, giving lessons to the local children at a nearby farm, carrying food back to the Leningrad apartment on her battered bike, working as an assistant in a city nursery.

Children from Leningrad creche 237



When Marina moves in at the start of the siege, Anna inwardly resents yet another demand placed upon her, though she does not voice her frustration:

How could she cope with yet another person who wouldn't be practical, who refused to come to terms with the way things were? She'd got enough of that with her father. Why couldn't they have a bit of sense? Why did they think she could have sense for all of them?

She has already managed to get the family through two winters using the produce from the dacha. Now, suffering from malnutrition, she has to gauge what energy she can risk expending on her searches for food and fuel as the others are even more dependent upon her than before. She spends hours, weak from hunger, queuing for bread, negotiating with stall owners, hacking away at the ice to find water, digging out scraps of wood in a bombed building, fighting off more ruthless people who would snatch what she finds away from her.

When she collects the last of the dacha food at the beginning of the siege, knowing it will be too dangerous to return, she destroys what she cannot carry so it will not fall into the hands of the Germans. In this, she demonstrates the traditional Russian response to invasion and shows how, in her small way, she is forming part of what will become 'the tide of history'. Helen is fascinated by the way in which history comes from thousands of personal actions and decisions rather than the 'great deeds' of rulers. She is also interested in what will survive us, what will make the future.

Anna has always felt that she has been on her own, though never alone. When Anna meets her lover, Andrei, she finally finds someone who can understand her. Both have huge responsibilities although they are young. Both yearn for life and for colour and do not know if they will ever have them again. Andrei's passion for knowledge means that he is excited by the opportunity the siege gives him to observe at first hand the effects of starvation.

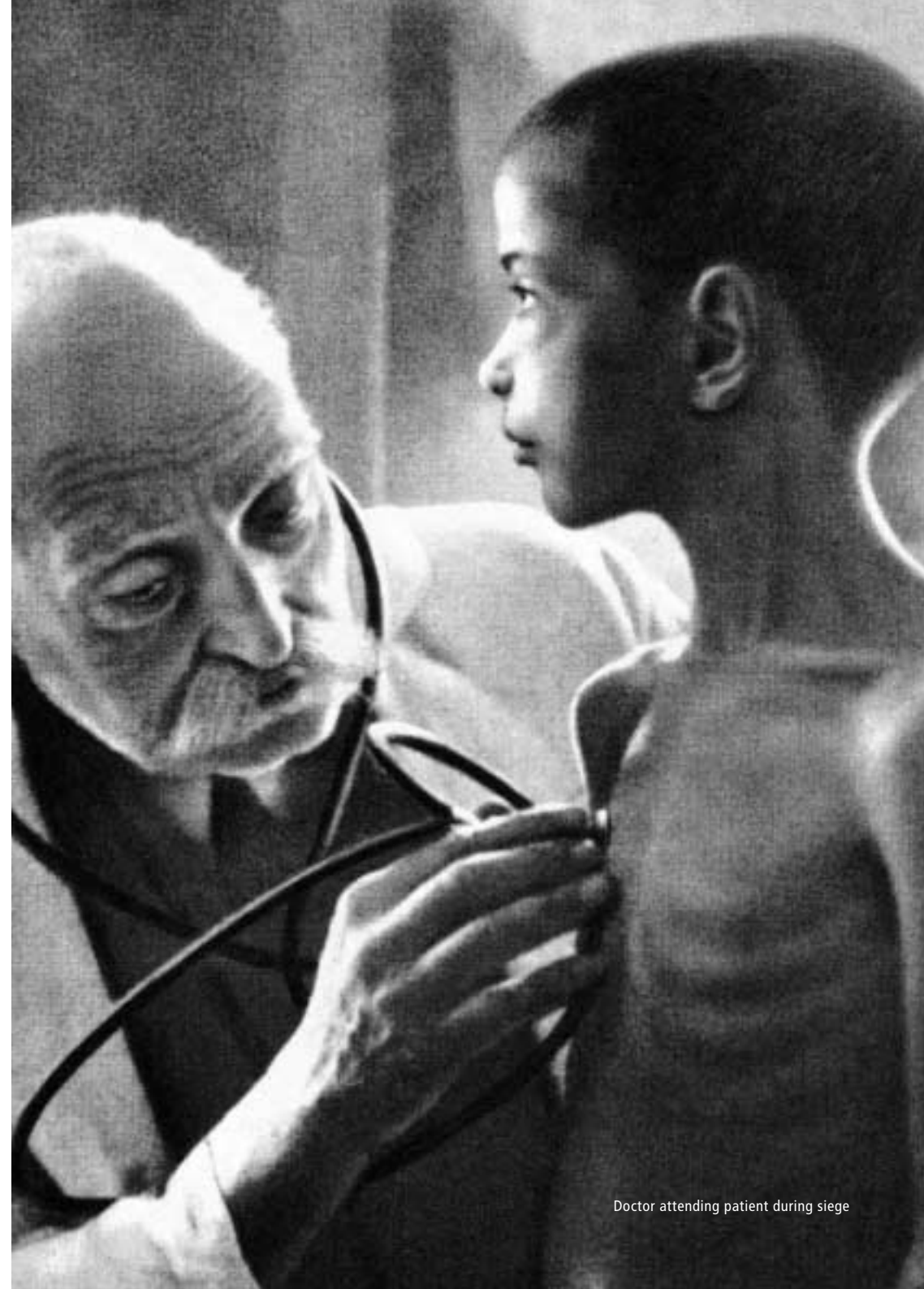
However, although this enthusiasm may at first make him appear heartless, he is essentially compassionate and optimistic. He continues to be devoted to his patients even though he has little with which to treat them and his own health is failing. He does not give way to despair but remains committed to their care. Andrei only believes what he has personally seen and felt, the reality and not the propaganda.

Before she met him, Anna felt she was 'living with tangled people, and their tangled stories'. She is a little unnerved when she realises that Andrei is not like that. He says: *'I love you, I want to be with you, come with me.'* Anna 'hasn't grown up with such words' but she comes to appreciate his directness, honesty and engagement with the immediate present, which matches her own.

The older couple is less practical than Anna and Andrei. Mikhail is a man of words rather than action. He keeps on writing, despite the knowledge that he will never be published and that his life is at risk should he be discovered, because writing gives him his identity. In his secret diary he records his thoughts during the early days of the attack when it becomes clear that the Germans want to eliminate the people of Leningrad. He is initially excited by the chance to do something and to be of use.

But his renewed interest in the world around him and the sense of purpose that resistance brings soon fades when he is injured defending the city. Back in the apartment, 'he doesn't want to talk, or eat, or move. The process that began years ago, when Vera died and they stopped publishing his books, is now completing itself'. All Mikhail wants now is 'to drift, to let go, to cease to feel'. In his final days, as he wastes away, he is haunted by ghosts of the past, which seem more real than his living family.

Marina is also lost in the past, because she finds the present so different from what she has been used to. She was once an acclaimed actress, enjoying the excitement and hope that came with the early days of the revolution, but, like Mikhail, she fell out of favour with party officials and became invisible: 'fame vanished between one day and the next'. She had gone to ground at her dacha and hoped to be forgotten, but was aware that if she made a false move 'they could remember her at any time'. She and Mikhail have been pushed to the sidelines until the war brings them back to the centre of things. She has, however, a greater sense of self-preservation than Mikhail, trying to bully him into life.



Doctor attending patient during siege



She says:

It's about time someone was hard on you. I'm not going to let you lie here and give up. You aren't dead yet. You haven't lost your children. You haven't been arrested... You could get up. You could be better. You just don't want to. You *refuse* to heal yourself.

She brings food from her dacha to the apartment and gives what energy she can to protecting the family unit, despite being an outsider. She gives up her ring to exchange at the market; she looks after Kolya and Mikhail while Anna scours the city for supplies; she keeps back two jars of jam to bring a brief moment of pleasure in the midst of the hardship; she dissolves the papier-mâché fort she once made for Kolya so they might make a kind of soup from the wallpaper paste it contains; she is angry when Anna gives some precious sugar to the dying baby of a neighbour, thinking it has been wasted. However, she says of herself and Mikhail 'Other people have lives, but we just keep on having emotions' and, ultimately, she lacks the strength of will to survive.

Another crucial character in the book is that of Leningrad, one of the world's most remarkable cities and a showpiece for Russian art and culture. Helen says that 'millions of things have to happen before a modern, sophisticated city like Leningrad can function', but this only becomes apparent when the activity is brought to a halt:



Moving body through frozen streets

Suddenly and sharply, it's obvious that cities only exist because everyone agrees to let them exist... The city doesn't ask for details, as long as the food keeps coming in.

Leningrad mobilizes countryside, villages and towns for hundreds of kilometres around. Thousands of peasants who will never see the city spend their whole lives working to provide its food. Its web of trade relationships curls into millions of lives...

It takes a while to realise that the system has broken down completely because it has always been unreliable, and 'Like a body that cannot stop believing in an amputated, ghostly limb, so the city continues to believe in its supply chains long after they have been severed'. Leningrad did not grow organically but came into being through the act of will of its founder, Peter the Great, and the blood of his workers. Its citizens are fiercely loyal to it and have a reputation for thinking themselves a cut above the rest of the Soviet Union – something that annoys Andrei, who is from Siberia. Now, it is their loyalty and passion for their city that gives them the will to resist:

Slowly, the city sinks down, like a great ship sinking in an ice-field... The ship is poised, ready to dive into the blackness of death. Only its people keep on stubbornly living, as if they don't know that it's all over for them.

A key theme of the book is the way in which people adapt to change. When Anna joins with the other women building the city defences, she becomes aware that there are now two realities:

There are summer trees, flights of startled birds, the smell of honeysuckle in the depths of the night. This is the old reality, as smooth as the handle of a favourite cup in your hand. And then there's the new reality which consists of hour after hour of digging, and seconds of terror as sharp as the zig-zag of lightning. Lightning that's looking for you, seeking out warm flesh on the bare summer fields.



View of canal, Leningrad (White Nights)

As the siege intensifies, the old reality fades. Priorities and perceptions have shifted: the harvest moon becomes the bomber's moon; when the food warehouses are bombed, the first instinct is not to think of those who have died in the raid but about all the butter and flour that has been lost; little things like whether to keep an onion back for sprouting become crucial subjects for discussion; trees in the park where lovers once carved their initials have become 'defensive positions, behind which a man can crouch, watching, alert'. 'Being dead is normal' and 'It's normal for a dead man to stay in the next room until he's covered with a pall of frost'. Talking to her friend Evgenia, Anna says: 'It's these times... You find yourself doing things you'd never have thought you could do.' Evgenia replies: 'You know you're changing, but you still think you can find the way back to what you used to be.' As the book ends while the siege is still in progress, the reader is left to speculate about the degree to which the characters will be able to go back to how they were before.



Women defence workers

## HOLLYWOOD AND THE SOVIET UNION

The bravery of the defenders of Leningrad caught the imagination of the Allies and became an important symbol of the Soviet will to resist. Contemporary coverage of the events in the British press stressed our nation's solidarity with the Soviet people, something which now seems difficult to believe in the light of what happened after the war.

In the USA, President Roosevelt requested Hollywood to make films that would boost support for the alliance with the Soviet Union. One such film sympathetic to the Soviets was *North Star* (1943) directed by Lewis Milestone from a screenplay by Lillian Hellman and with a score by Aaron Copland. The film opens in a peaceful Ukrainian village on the eve of the German invasion. The villagers quickly organise themselves when they unexpectedly come under attack, but are eventually overwhelmed by the German troops. The sinister purpose of the occupation is to take the blood of the village children and use it for transfusions in a mobile German hospital unit. Although the opening scenes now seem a little corny, the film's portrayal of the everyday life of ordinary Soviet citizens and their strength in the face of adversity is still effective. The people shown are not the super heroes of popular mythology, but can be recognised as fellow human beings by viewers.

However, the West's friendship with the Soviet Union was short lived. Suspicion of Stalin's intentions for the occupied territories became apparent during the negotiations by the three major powers at Yalta in February 1945. On 5 March 1946, Winston Churchill made his first reference to the Iron Curtain and in July 1947, Stalin refused to accept the Marshall Plan, the project that aimed to foster economic recovery in Europe. Simmering tensions that had been briefly set aside during the combined fight against the Nazis surfaced once more and the Cold War had begun.

Anti-communist paranoia was already having an impact in Hollywood. Now the pro-Soviet films of the war looked like blatant communist propaganda and the resurgent right wing began ferreting out any hint of Leftist sympathies. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had been formed in 1937 to investigate subversive activities among

both left-wing and right-wing political groups. In 1947, it was reactivated, determined to purge the country of any communist influences by rooting out people who had been involved in promoting left-wing causes, including those who had been 'prematurely anti-Fascist' in condemning the Nazi regime prior to the outbreak of war. Hollywood was the committee's highest-profile target. So-called friendly witnesses who voluntarily attended the initial hearings 'named names' and gave evidence of what they considered to be communist activity in the industry. Over 320 people who refused to testify when subpoenaed were placed on a blacklist preventing them from working in the entertainment field. Many careers were ruined.

Among the friendly witnesses was leading actor Robert Taylor. During his testimony, he complained that he had appeared in a film entitled *A Song of Russia* (1943) against his better judgement, as the script, he now realised, was pro-communist. The film tells the story of an American orchestra conductor caught up in the German invasion of the Soviet Union and includes a sympathetic depiction of Russian villagers. Taylor also criticised the lyrics of a song used in the film called 'And Russia is Her Name'. This had first been performed by popular tenor Allan Jones at a Hollywood Bowl gala in 1943 that raised funds on behalf of Russian War Relief. The lyricist, Yip Harburg, was subsequently blacklisted in Hollywood.



Original song sheet for 'And Russia is Her Name'

## Don't Count John Among the Dreams

Don't count John among the dreams  
a parent cherishes for his children –  
that they will be different from him,  
not poets but the stuff of poems.

Don't count John among the dreams  
of leaders, warriors, eagle-eyed stalkers  
picking up the track of lions.  
Even in the zoo he can barely see them –

his eyes, like yours, are half-blind.  
Short, obedient, hirsute  
how he would love to delight you.  
He reads every word you write.

Don't count John among your dreams.  
Don't wangle a commission for him,  
don't wangle a death for him.  
He is barely eighteen.

Without his spectacles, after a shell-blast,  
he will be seen one more time  
before the next shell sees to him.  
Wounding, weeping from pain,

he will be able to see nothing.  
And you will always mourn him.  
You will write a poem.  
You will count him into your dreams.

*Helen Dunmore*

(i.m. John Kipling, son of Rudyard Kipling,  
who died in the Battle of Loos in 1915)

## BRITAIN ON THE FRONT LINE

The twentieth century saw a significant change in the way in which warfare was conducted. The front line was no longer a demarcation of opposing military forces but wherever shells and bombs could reach. One of the things that fascinates Helen Dunmore about Leningrad is the way it demonstrated how civilians were forced to become both combatants and targets during the war, rather than bystanders.

Bomb damage Temple Meads, November 1940



In anticipation of air attacks in the event of a war with Germany, Britain created a volunteer Air Raid Wardens' Service in April 1937 and in March 1939 every household was given a booklet entitled 'Protection of Your Home Against Air Raids'. Public shelters were constructed by local authorities in areas deemed to be at risk from enemy bombing and by early 1939, over a million Anderson shelters made from steel sheets had been distributed to homes with gardens. Eventually more than two million would be erected. Those without gardens could make use of the indoor Morrison shelter.

With the declaration of war on 3 September 1939, the blackout was introduced and air-raid warning systems put into operation. One of the responsibilities of the Air Raid Precautions (ARP) wardens was to ensure that everybody had a gas mask. Bristol's ARP headquarters were in Broadmead and posts were set up across the city at intervals of roughly a quarter of a mile. Units of Local Defence Volunteers (the Home Guard) were formed and deployed along the British coast following the fall of France in June 1940. Signposts were taken down and place names painted out to confuse any German spies who might parachute in. There were drives to collect scrap metal for use in the production of armaments and pig bins were issued to collect edible waste. Rationing was introduced and the government thought up the slogans 'Mend and make do to avoid buying new' and 'Dig for Victory', as well as 'Keep Mum. She's not so dumb' and 'Careless talk costs lives'.

At the outbreak of the war, the government implemented its evacuation plans, moving thousands of children, mothers, teachers and disabled people out of high-risk urban areas to rural reception areas where they were billeted at local homes. By January 1940, around a million had returned to the cities, as the expected bombing had not taken place: many were evacuated again with the start of the Blitz attacks later that year. The Children's Overseas Reception Board arranged evacuations to Canada, the USA and Australia, a scheme that was brought to a halt when the ship *City of Bernares* was sunk by a German torpedo in September 1940 killing 73 children. Children from Bristol began to be officially evacuated in February 1941, many going to Cornwall and Devon.

The German air force had at first concentrated on military targets (radar stations, aircraft factories and air fields) in a deliberate attempt to destroy the Royal Air Force prior to an invasion. This became known as The Battle of Britain. Between September 1940 and May



Palmyra Road, Bedminster, following raid

1941, the Germans changed their strategy and focused on attacking cities, making a total of 127 large-scale night raids. Around 60,000 civilians were killed during this period, the majority in London. The main targets outside the capital were industrial cities and ports. When a raid was expected, the ARP sent up enormous barrage balloons moored to wagons by heavy cables. These were designed to make it difficult for the Luftwaffe to fly low. German spotter planes would precede the bombers, dropping flares to identify targets. After London experienced devastating incendiary attacks in December 1940, civilians undertook compulsory fire-watching duties organised by the ARP.

Bristol first experienced bombing on 25 June 1940 and there were further raids in August and September of that year. Targets included Temple Meads Station and the Bristol Aeroplane Company Works at Filton. The Winter Blitz saw six major attacks between November 1940 and March 1941. There was a short raid on Eastville and East Bristol, 26-27 February 1941, and the last big raid on the city was on Good Friday, 11 April 1941. Bath was attacked during the later Baedeker Raids, which targeted historic sites identified by the Baedeker guide books.

At the start of the war, there were 3,500 shelter places available in Bristol, although it had been calculated by the Home Office that 25,000 were needed. Many of the shelters were defective and people did not trust those that were constructed above ground. Tunnels, mines, caves and other sites were utilised by citizens dissatisfied with the authorised provision. Serious confrontations broke out over the Portway tunnel between the civil authorities and the large number of people trying to use it as a shelter. Complaints about the city's shelter system appeared in a damning report by the Mass Observation social survey organisation whose observers visited Bristol three times between 19 December 1940 and 2 April 1941. Among the comments recorded was 'It's just like our Council. They always realise their mistakes about ten years too late'. The observers found that morale in the city was low and that there was 'a rather poor quality of local leadership in this area'. The observers felt that defeatism and depression were likely to increase 'unless something is done to give the people positive feelings of pride and purpose'. The Corporation reacted to the condemnation by promptly commissioning its own survey, which concluded that spirits were high and that 'the issue of this war... will be decided in the hearts of the men and women of Bristol'.

Damaged Bristol house



During this period, Winston Churchill wrote to the Lord Mayor of the city:

*My thoughts have been much with the inhabitants of Bristol in the ordeal of these last weeks.*

*As Chancellor of the University, I feel myself united to them and I have heard with pride of the courage, resolution and patience with which they have answered these detestable attacks on their families and their homes.*

*It is the spirit of such as theirs which makes certain the victory of our cause.*



Ice covered fireman's ladder, Bristol

In 1944, the Rev Paul Shipley compiled a book of eyewitness accounts from those who recalled the Bristol Blitz, based upon diary entries, letters and newspaper reports. The following extracts are taken from this publication and give some flavour of the front line experience in the city.

The sky is now lit up with different coloured flares; the barrage is terrific, and the air is filled with the constant drone of Jerry planes, the scream of falling bombs and the thunder of their explosions. See my mates. "We're in for a pasting to-night!" Both of them seem to think discretion the better part of valour. Can't blame them, anyway. Got a very queer feeling myself; I'm terribly dry, and I don't quite know what to do, but I decide I'll try and see it through.

Incendiaries start to fall in our own neighbourhood. Several fires in the City; more – and heavier – bombs dropping. Still windy, and the fires spread; new fires springing up now, adding a spectacular effect to the inferno of bombs and gunfire. Beginning to get used to it!

*Diary of Mr W A Hares, 24-25 November 1940, Merchant Street*

Car in Bristol bomb crater



Bristol was blitzed again last night. For twelve solid hours my neighbour and I sat in our cellar. My step-father was up and down all the time keeping watch. We had the two cats with us, and my Scottie... He seems to be able to sense [the bombs] coming, because his ears go up and then you hear that dreadful swishing and screaming as they reach earth. That sound gets me really more than the actual crashing...

It was a cruel and fiendish attack. Hospitals, churches and houses were all hit – no military objectives at all... We heard of many tragedies, too numerous to remember. But we came out all right once more, which every time I call a miracle, because we are right in the midst of it all.

*Diary of Miss M Fagnani, 3 January 1941, Colston Street*

Bombs were dropping all over the district by now, and yet the messenger-boy never hesitated to set off to the report centre. Perhaps he went a little white in the face, but never questioned his orders. Grand youngsters those boys!... The report centre was at least a mile from the post, and during his perilous journey he had two spills. He was never sure whether the blast blew him off, or whether he tried to duck for dear life – and dear life it was, for many were injured that night.

*Letter from Mr Rich, a Bedminster warden*

Searching through the rubble





Fireman at work after Bristol raid

Lots of wives lost their husbands these days; we were all in this fight – even the kids! They ran as great a risk here under the stairs as the wardens and ambulance-drivers; no one knew where or what the bombs would hit after whistling down. All the same, thinking of trying to manage without my husband brought a few tears which I could not hide from my eldest boy. “Are you worried about something?” he asked. “No dear,” I replied, “only tired,” and we ducked quickly under the pillows again.

*Letter from Mrs M Coleman, Coldharbour Road, wife of a warden*

On one occasion I was in charge of 50 children (the youngest 3½ and the eldest 5½) when, with no warning, a bomb fell just near, rocking the building to its foundations. This was followed by the wail of sirens, and we ran, in perfect order, to an outdoor shelter, with gunfire around and above us. Panting, and dishevelled we sat down on the hard forms – when “Donald” looked around him and remarked in a disgusted voice: “Well, if I’d known *this* was going to happen I’d have brought my pear to eat while I was waiting here.” In that moment the tension and fear were lifted and gone.

*Letter from Miss Wensley, Zetland Road*





## Out of the Blue

Speak to me in the only language  
I understand, help me to see  
as you saw the enemy plane  
pounce on you out of the sun:  
one flash, cockling metal. Done.

*Done for, they said, as he spun earthward  
to the broad chalk bosom of England.  
Done for and done.*

You are the pilot of this poem,  
you speaks its language, thumbs-up  
to the tall dome of June.  
Even when you long to bail out  
you'll stay with the crate.

*Done for, they said, as his leather jacket  
whipped through the branches.  
Done for and done.*

Where are we going and why so happy?  
We ride the sky and the blue,  
we are thumbs up, both of us  
even though you are the owner  
of that long-gone morning,  
and I only write the poem.

You own that long-gone morning.  
Solo, the machine-gun stitched you.  
One flash did for you.  
Your boots hit the ground  
ploughing a fresh white scar in the  
downland.

*They knew before they got to him,  
from the way he was lying  
done for, undone.*

But where are we going?  
You come to me out of the blue  
strolling the springy downland  
done for, thumbs up, oil on your hands.

*Helen Dunmore*

## DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR THE SIEGE

The following topics could be used to prompt group discussions or could be considered by the individual reader while reading the book.

Helen Dunmore wanted her readers to be able to identify with the situation faced by the citizens of Leningrad. What techniques does she employ to achieve this? Does she succeed in her aim?

How are different types of responsibility a person might have – to the individual, to the family unit, to neighbours, to the collective – depicted? How are decisions made about where responsibility lies at any given moment?

What are the similarities between the two pairs of lovers (Mikhail and Marina, Anna and Andrei)? What are the differences?



VJ night celebrations in Bristol

How is nature depicted? How does this natural force relate to humanity's sense of control and to the power of the city?

What does it mean to be heroic in this situation? Who are the heroes of the book? Are there any villains? What does Helen Dunmore suggest are the keys to survival?

What does the book tell us about the relationship between the imagination and fact? What is the role of memory?

Andrei 'pronounces the word "writer" with a mixture of respect and doubt'. What is the significance of the written word – plays, poetry, literature, diaries, reports – in the book? What do stories mean to the characters?

Even before the siege, the citizens of Leningrad have lived in a climate of fear and suspicion, 'listening for the knock, trusting no-one and at risk from denunciation'. How does this affect the way people live their lives and relate to one another?

The book ends after only the first winter of the siege. We readers know that many more days of suffering lie ahead. What effect does this have on our relationship to the central characters? How would the book have differed if the story had been continued to the end of the siege?

## RESOURCES

Penguin has published eight of Helen Dunmore's novels and two collections of short stories. A comprehensive bibliography giving the names of the publishers of her other work is available on the Great Reading Adventure website ([www.bristolreads.com](http://www.bristolreads.com)). *The Siege* is available in a large print format edition and as an unabridged audio tape from ISIS.

Helen has included a selected bibliography of material she read during the research of *The Siege* at the back of the book as a guide for readers interested in learning more about the subject. This is reproduced on the website along with other relevant publications.

Dmitry Shostakovich, who was acting as a volunteer firefighter during the siege, began composing his Symphony No 7 (Leningrad) in August 1941. He continued working on it when he was transferred to Moscow and later Kuibyshev. It was first performed in Leningrad in August 1942. Apex and Naxos have both produced budget recordings of the work. Although now seen as a response to the atrocities of Stalin as much as to those of the German troops, it was originally hailed as a testament of the city's heroic resistance.

Redcliffe Press has published a number of books on the Bristol Blitz, details of which are on the website. Redcliffe is publishing a new revised edition of Helen Reid's book on the blitz, retitled *Bristol Under Siege*, to coincide with this project. Extracts used in this guide come from Redcliffe's reissue of *Bristol Siren Nights*. The website also includes information on other publications and sources of local history.



# The Bones of the Vasa

I saw the bones of the Vasa knit in the moonlight  
I heard her hull creak as the salt sea slapped it  
I smelled her tar and her freshly-planed pine,

there were rye loaves slung up on poles for drying  
there were herrings in barrels and brandy-wine  
and every plank in her body was singing,

off-duty sailors were throwing the dice  
while the royal flag cracked at the mast  
and the wind grew strong and the clouds flew past.

Oh the Vasa never set sail down the salt sea's stream  
down the salt stream for a second time  
where the midsummer islands waited like secrets,

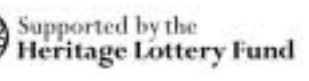
the King's Vasa flew down like a swan  
parting the waves and the sea's furrow  
parting that long road where the drowned roll  
and the tide rules the kingdom of no one.

*Helen Dunmore*

The VASA was a royal Swedish ship of the sixteenth century.  
She sank on her maiden voyage.

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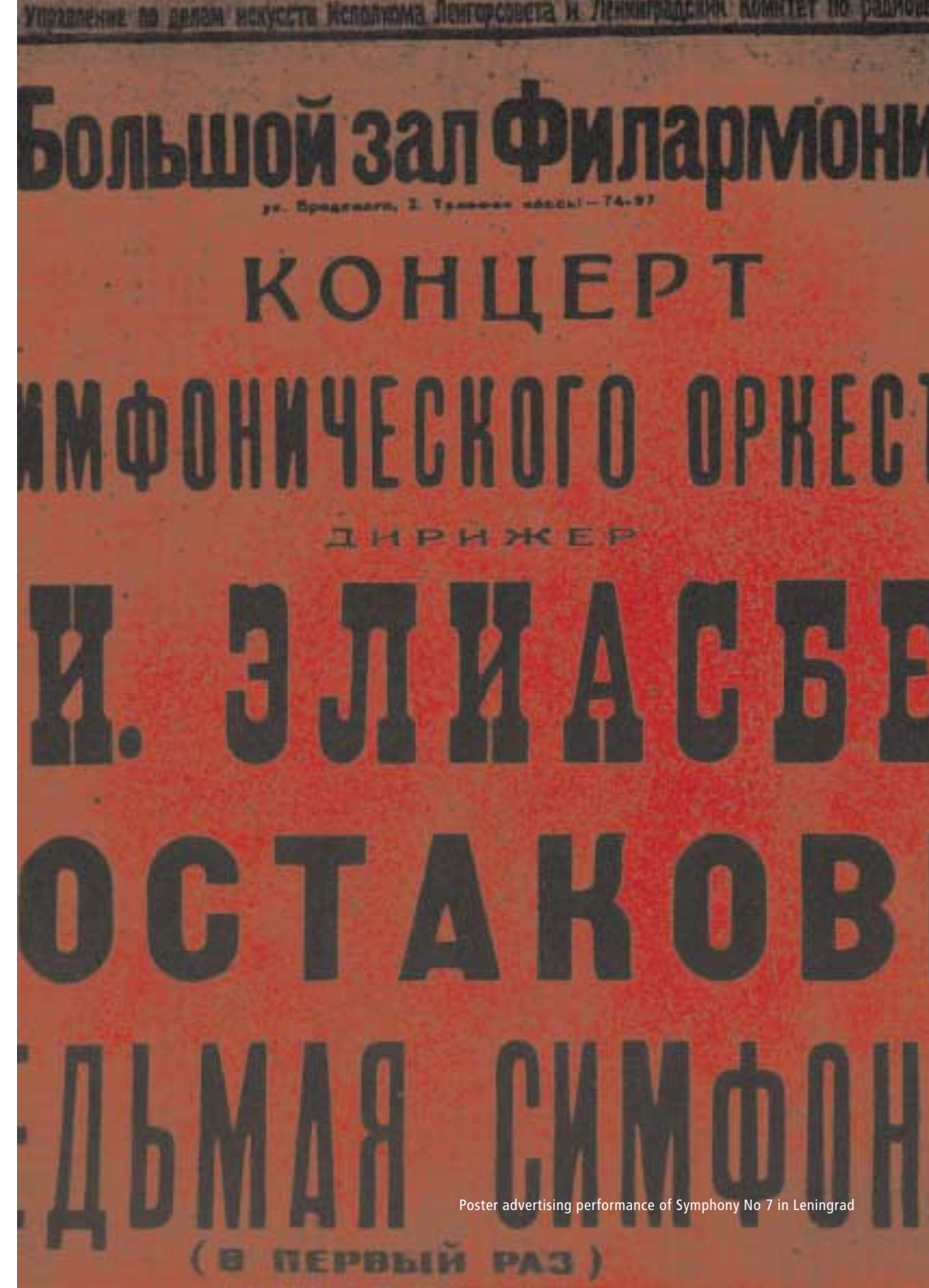
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Leningrad's White Nights



Poster advertising performance of Symphony No 7 in Leningrad

