

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