

## 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.

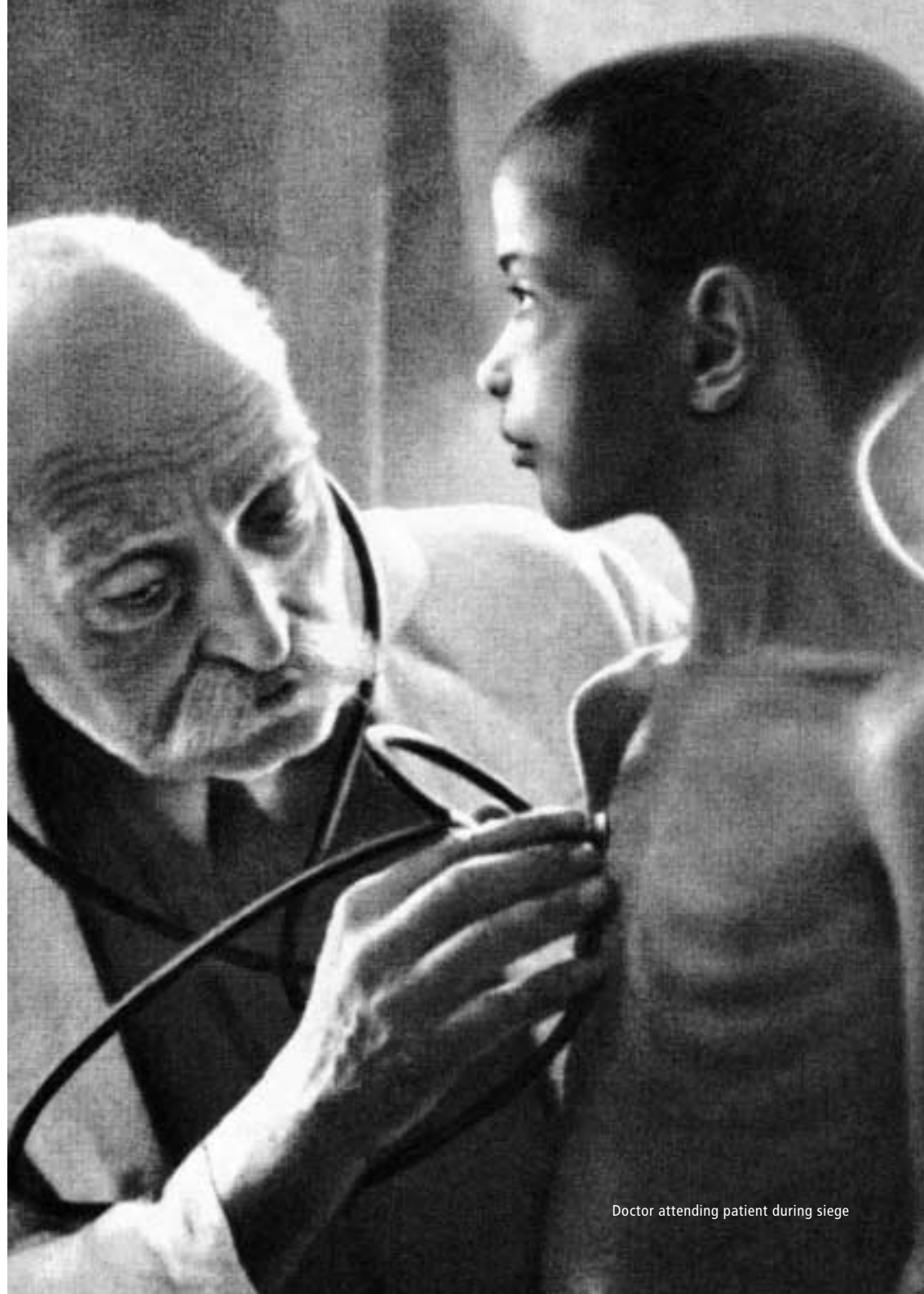
However, although this enthusiasm may at first make him appear heartless, he is essentially compassionate and optimistic. He continues to be devoted to his patients even though he has little with which to treat them and his own health is failing. He does not give way to despair but remains committed 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