

Shortage
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Polk Laffoon IV

On the eighth day of September, 1941, German armies led by Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb overran the ancient fortress of Shlisselburg, some 40 miles from Leningrad, and in so doing completed the encirclement of the city. The capture of Leningrad, formerly (and today again) called St. Petersburg, was a primary objective of Adolph Hitler in his plan to subjugate Russia – a plan which had been set in motion fewer than three months prior, and was now unfolding with chilling efficiency.

By the end of the month, the Fuhrer would issue this now infamous directive regarding Leningrad to his generals: “The Fuhrer is determined to erase the city of Petersburg from the face of the earth. After the defeat of Soviet Russia there can be no interest in the continuance of this large urban center. . . . It is intended to encircle the city and level it to the ground by means of artillery bombardment using every caliber of shell, and continual bombing from the air. Following the city’s encirclement, request for surrender negotiations shall be denied, since the problem of relocating and feeding the population cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for our very existence, we can have no interest in maintaining even a part of this very large urban population.”

As things turned out, Leningrad survived. Its magnificent squares, monuments and architecture, its historic churches and regal palaces, were battered almost beyond recognition, but they have been restored. The city’s network of canals and the Neva River, once choked with blood, refuse and the detritus of war, run clean again. The Hermitage Museum, which

concealed its countless treasures thanks to the wizardly planning of director Iosif Orbeli, is open for us to visit. In Decembrists' Square, the epic statue of Peter the Great stands free of its protective sandbags, once again facing West, recalling Peter's vision that here, amid the swamps and marshes of the far North, he would build a city to rival any in Europe.

But this bounty came at a price. The price was the Siege of Leningrad, the Nazis' calculated attempt to starve the city into extinction between the fall of 1941 and January, 1944. For almost 900 days, its citizens endured deprivations on a scale unrivaled in human history. In the first winter, some 650,000 people died of starvation. That was nearly 25 percent of its pre-siege population. For much of the time, there was no heat, no electric light, no water, no streetcar or tram and no trustworthy leadership. Disease was rampant. Temperatures, often falling to minus 30 degrees Celsius, were among the coldest on record. Yet at no time during the 900 days did the Germans stop shelling the city.

The Siege of Vicksburg, by the Union armies in 1863, and the Siege of Paris, by the Germans in 1871, are both remembered in part for their acute absence of food. But as Harrison Salisbury reported in his celebrated account of the Leningrad siege, "Leningrad exceeded the total Paris casualties on any two or three winter days. The Vicksburg casualties, military and civil, were exceeded in Leningrad by starvation deaths on any January, February, March or April day."

In the time we have this evening, I'm going to share with you some of what I know about this siege, most particularly the first year of it, and the reasons there may be to keep its memory alive. Having visited St. Petersburg twice, and viewed both times the monument to the siege survivors on the highway between the airport and the center of town, I began to understand. The sparkling city that spreads before tourists

does not erase, for locals, the raw and bitter memories of the 900 days. The monument instills in all who view it a valuable sense of perspective. The more we comprehend how bad things can get, and then, despite all the odds, how the human spirit may still triumph, the better equipped we are to place our own situations in proper context. Likewise, the more aware we are of the depths of depravity to which human beings can descend, the better we can appreciate the joy of our own lives.

For the Russian people in the early summer of 1941, the war in Europe seemed, for the most part, far away and not a threat. Sheltered by the false security of a Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact signed in August 1939, official Russia viewed Germany as its ally. Even as the Nazis overran much of the rest of Europe and then, hardly hiding their intentions, prepared to penetrate the Baltic republics, the Russians continued to ship them *war materiel*.

Joseph Stalin, the Soviet dictator, was not so foolish as to think the Germans would remain friendly forever, but he was hopeful that, with appeasement, trouble could be delayed by at least a year. Thus he chose to ignore the warnings of war, delivered with increasing intensity by his minions in the field. Said Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, a month before the invasion, "Stalin and his people remain completely inactive, like a rabbit confronted with a snake."

In fact, the Russians weren't ready. They had neither the trained manpower nor the munitions to wage war. Worse, they lacked leadership. In Stalin's famous purge of the military, carried out in 1937-38, many thousands of Red Army officers were arrested for their perceived threat to Bolshevik power. Many of these were shot, and those that were not were shipped to Siberia. Besides weakening and demoralizing his own forces, Stalin's action encouraged many of the Wehrmacht generals to

believe that quick and easy victory against the Soviets was now a real possibility.

Which was exactly what Hitler believed. Convinced that he would not be able to cause England's final capitulation until he demonstrated mastery of the entire European continent, Hitler saw war against Russia as an absolute necessity – in the words of British military historian Michael Jones, “for the survival of the German people.” But such a war need not last long. He felt that his forces, under the overall supervision of General Franz Halder, were sufficiently strong that they could initiate a three-pronged invasion of the Soviet Union. Army Group South would strike at Ukraine, moving towards Kiev, the Donets industrial region and the Crimea. Army Group Centre would drive toward Minsk, Smolensk and Moscow. Army Group North would take the Baltics and Leningrad. The latter, he said to Von Leeb, should be in German hands within four weeks. And critically, it should be taken before Moscow.

For the Fuhrer, Leningrad had both economic and military significance. Heavily industrialized, it was home to hundreds of factories producing the complex goods, not least of them weapons, of an advanced society. It was also the Baltic seat of the Russian navy. The navy's headquarters, at Kronstadt, the island gateway to the Gulf of Finland, was an ongoing rebuke to Hitler's notion of the Baltic as a German sea.

Finally, and critically, Leningrad had ideological significance. Throughout its history, it had been the capital of the Russian Empire and a symbol of its political, administrative and cultural vitality. In 1917, with the overthrow of the tsar, Leningrad had become the cradle of the revolution that saw the Bolsheviks seize power in Russia. Hitler detested their philosophy. In *Mein Kampf*, he portrays it as part of an international Jewish conspiracy allied to a primitive Slavic culture that he both despises and fears. The Bolsheviks made Moscow their capital, but left Leningrad's strategic importance

undiminished. A year after the revolution, their military arm, the Red Guard – the future Red Army – was created within the city.

In Hitler's view, the sooner they could be destroyed and their land reordered by Fascism, the better it would be for all. In a visit to Army Group North's headquarters shortly before the invasion, he stressed to its commanders and their staff, the importance of their target: "The fall of Leningrad will deprive the Soviet state of the symbol of its revolution," he told them, "a symbol which for the last twenty-four years has deeply sustained the Russian people. Reverses in battle will undermine the spirit of the Slavic race, but the loss of Leningrad will cause a complete and utter collapse."

The German advance through Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and the northern parts of easternmost Russia was fast and cruel. Here's an operational order from Colonel-General Erich Hoepner, commander of the Fourth Panzer Group, as his troops sped east: "This war must have as its goal the destruction of today's Russia, and for this reason, it must be conducted with unheard-of harshness. Every clash, from its conception to its execution, must be guided by an iron determination to annihilate the enemy completely and utterly. There is to be no mercy for the carriers of the current Russian-Bolshevik system." Mass shootings of locals were common. At Lychkovo, a small town some 150 miles south of Leningrad, a Nazi pilot methodically bombed a railroad station filled with evacuating children. The withdrawal of the Russian fleet from Tallinn cost the Soviets 10,000 lives and dozens of ships, both military and non-combatant. A Russian Dunkirk of lethal proportions

The Soviet response to all this was seat-of-the-pants at best and brutally wasteful of troops. I noted earlier that the Russians lacked leadership. The man Stalin had entrusted with Leningrad's defense in these early days was Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, a crude and intellectually deficient bully whose

loyalty to the Kremlin secured his rank. Years later, Nikita Krushchev described him as “the biggest bag of shit in the army” – but by then it was too late to reverse the bitter truth, that Voroshilov’s incompetence had everything to do with Leningrad’s encirclement.

With the Germans rapidly gaining on the city, the general had on paper at least thirty divisions, some fully manned and some needing both men and equipment. He should have used them, says Michael Jones, to create a system of defense in depth around the city. Instead, he summoned legions of civilian recruits to form what became known as the “volunteer armies,” and he sent them into battle against the Nazis with little or no training, few weapons and, again, no mature leadership. The predictable result was slaughter by the tens of thousands. “We were cannon fodder,” recorded one survivor.

At the same time, Voroshilov concentrated all his resources on one line of defense, along the Luga River, south of the city. The logic of this strategy was to try to stop the German advance as far away as possible, but once the Luga line was outflanked from the south, as it was soon enough, the city had nothing to fall back on.

On the 18th of July, before any formal blockade of the city was in place, Leningrad, along with all of the large Soviet cities, instituted a ration-card system: 800 grams of bread per day for factory workers, 600 grams per day for office workers and 400 grams per day for dependents. To give you some idea of what that means, 600 grams is the equivalent of maybe 14 slices of bread from a medium size loaf. So at this point it wasn’t much of a belt-tightening. Other items, including meat, were also rationed, but how strictly any of it was enforced is not clear. Food was not yet scarce. Stores still sold a variety of goods and restaurants remained open. The state, in fact, encouraged storefronts to look full, so as to forestall any nascent anxiety. At this early stage, rationing appears to have been less rigid

regulation than recognition of a need to be on guard, that food supplies would not be inexhaustible.

But the inexorable German march continued, and on August 28 – some six weeks after the first ration cards appeared – the Nazis took the small railroad junction of Mga, 35 miles southeast of Leningrad, effectively cutting off any railroad ties to Moscow. Now, for the first time, real alarm was felt. Moscow was alerted and rations were reduced across the board. Daily allotments of bread, for example, went from 800 to 600 grams for factory workers, from 600 to 400 for office workers and 400 to 300 for dependents. People could start to feel the pinch. On September 6, Peter Popkov, mayor of Leningrad, sent a follow-up telegram to Moscow reporting that the city was on the verge of exhausting its reserves and that unless food trains were expedited, the city would starve. His view was that at current consumption levels, with no improvement in deliveries, the city would be down to bare shelves in two to three weeks, maybe less.

Two days later, in an action that got everybody's attention, the Nazis bombed the Badayev warehouses, a cluster of wooden buildings containing much of the city's store of flour, sugar, meat, lard and butter. This complex, in place since the early part of the century, covered about four acres in the southwest quadrant of the city. Its vulnerability, in hindsight, was a reproach to all who questioned the city's foresight in preparing for crisis.

In an effort to impose order, Moscow dispatched to Leningrad Dmitri V. Pavlov, a 36-year executive of the Main Administration of Food Supplies of the Defense Commissariat. It was a good choice. Direct, honest and energetic, he saw, according to Harrison Salisbury, "from the moment of his arrival that only Spartan measures, applied with an iron hand, offered a chance for the city's survival." Right away he recognized that supplies from the outside were not feasible

any time soon. The only possible route was across the southern end of Lake Ladoga, and here, I think, some geographical clarification is in order.

This lake, which lies to the east and north of St. Petersburg, is the largest in Europe, and a colossus on the map. The Neva River flows out of it, some 50 miles south and west, through the city and into the Gulf of Finland. Although Ladoga's main body extends north, almost to the Finnish border, its southernmost point is a relatively small bay, some 20 miles wide. Throughout the war, the east and west sides of this bay (but not the south!) remained in Russian hands. It was the only connection between Leningrad and unoccupied Russia. Yet as the war got underway, it lacked any of the boats, piers, highways, railways or warehouses to make a supply route viable.

At the time he took over, Pavlov counted the number of mouths to be fed in the city alone at approximately 2.5 million, with another 300,000 to 400,000 in the suburbs and perhaps a half million in the military. Pavlov cut daily rations again, this time to 500 grams for factory workers, 300 grams for office workers and 250 grams for dependents. He halted the sale of food without ration coupons. He closed down the public commercial restaurants. He stopped the production of beer, ice cream, meat pies and pastry. He ordered the remaining stores of flour dispersed throughout the city.

As the golden days of late summer surrendered to autumn gales and an early first snow, reality set in. People began to understand that the unthinkable was to be their lot. Historian Anna Reid, whose 2010 book, *Leningrad*, is a first-rate account of what went on, describes it:

“This period – from September to the end of December 1941 – was when, as historian Sergei Yarov puts it, it – Leningraders ‘fell down the funnel.’ Over the course of three months, the city changed from something quite familiar – in

outward appearance not unlike London during the blitz – to a Goya-esque charnel house, with buildings burning unattended for days and emaciated corpses littering the streets. For individuals, the accelerating downward spiral was from relatively ‘normal’ wartime life – disruptions, shortages, air raids – to helpless witness of the death by starvation of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, children – and for many, of course, to death itself.”

Because it was a reality unassisted by any official word, it was surrealistic as well. Yes, people somehow knew, the railroad to Moscow was cut. But no one in authority said so. The press and the radio were silent. Everyone knew the war was going badly, but how badly? “We’re winning, but the Germans are advancing!” had been the summer’s ghoulish humor. So when corpses began to appear, the first response was incredulity. Survivor Lidiya Ginzburg, whose memoir is one of several that provides first-hand insight, says the concept of famine belonged ‘in the desert, complete with camels and mirages.’ One ‘didn’t believe that the inhabitants of a large city could die of hunger . . . On hearing of the first case of death amongst their acquaintances, people still thought: Is this the one I know? In broad daylight? In Leningrad? With a master’s degree? From starvation?”

For the Germans, however, the starvation of Leningrad was, to quote Herman Goebbels, “an almost scientific method” of destroying the city. They had considered it very carefully.

Throughout the summer, with Hitler’s three army groups rapidly advancing across Russia, debate raged within the Nazi hierarchy as to what should be the primary target. Franz Halder, Hitler’s head of general staff, argued that Moscow, as Russia’s capital and biggest city, should have the honor. But Hitler continued to insist on Leningrad. He wanted the latter’s ordinance factories for his own uses and the Baltic fleet,

including Kronstadt, neutralized. Then, almost by default, Halder won the point.

The reason: Army Group North was overextended. Despite the brilliance of the Blitzkrieg tactics and the vast territory taken, the Germans had suffered 190,000 killed or wounded; they had lost many weapons. (Corresponding numbers for the Russians, by the way, were 214,000 killed or missing [including POWs], 131,000 wounded and many thousands more weapons than their foes. On September 5, Hitler finally agreed that if von Leeb had not captured Leningrad within ten days, Hoepner's Panzer Group Four could be transferred south for the push to Moscow.

In retrospect, some analysts say, this was the point at which Germany missed her best chance of actually taking Leningrad. Never again could Army Group North amass the mobility and firepower for a full-scale frontal assault on the city. With the Nazis as close as Evendale is to Cincinnati, the opposing forces faced one another in a standoff so well-matched that for more than two years, neither could muster the strength to truly do in the other.

But that did not mean the Germans were giving up. Rather, they were changing their approach. On September 8, members of the Wehrmacht staff headquarters held a meeting with a leading expert from the Munich Institute of Nutrition. How long, they asked him, could the city hold out before its entire citizenry died? Data provided included the current population, the amount of food on hand, the arc of winter temperatures etc. Professor Ziegelmeyer's response: Within a month, they will be forced to rations of 250 grams of bread per person – not enough to sustain life. He said, "It is not worth risking the lives of our troops. The Leningraders will die anyway. It is essential not to let a single person through our front line. The more of them that stay there, the sooner they will die, and then we will enter the city without trouble,

without losing a single German soldier.” Thus the strategy was born.

Almost immediately, and with increasing intensity through late October and November, the city felt its impact. Rations were reduced four times again that fall until, on Christmas Day, the allotment per factory worker was 350 grams daily, which was just a few slices, and per office worker or dependent, 200 daily. It wasn't enough to live on. Nor was it a sure thing even to procure one's allotment. Ration cards were parsed out sparingly. If you lost yours, you were out of luck. If you used a relative's, because he or she had died, you were cheating and could be executed. Even so, theft was rampant, and the black market too expensive and itself too limited to be of much use.

As stocks ran out, increasingly desperate people sought substitute foods: first their pets, the dogs, cats and horses around them, then glue from the back of wallpaper (supposedly, it was made with potato flour), joiner's glue – made from the bones and hooves of slaughtered animals – and the husks of linseed, cotton, hemp or sunflower seeds, pressed into blocks and normally fed to cattle. Some people ate lipstick. Others tried tooth powder, cough medicine, cold cream, industrial casein (an ingredient in paint), dextrine (used to bind sand in factory moulds), tank grease and machine oil.

“Today it is so simple to die,” noted diarist Yelena Skryabina that fall. “You just begin to lose interest, then you lie on the bed and never again get up.”

Writing in early October, she said, “People turn into animals before our eyes. Who would have thought that Irina, always such a quiet, lovely woman, would be capable of beating her husband, who she has always adored? And for what? Because he wants to eat all the time and can never get enough. He just waits for her to bring something home, and then throws himself on the food . . .

“The most grisly sight in our apartment is the Kurakin family. He, back from exile and emaciated by years in prison, is already beginning to bloat. It’s simply horrible! Of his wife’s former love, there is little left. She is constantly irritated and argumentative. Their children cry and beg for food. But all they get is beatings. However, the Kurakins are no exception. Hunger has changed almost everyone.”

For people who have never really been hungry, it may be hard to imagine death by starvation. It is painful only for a time. Terrible hunger pangs occupy you the first, the second, maybe the third day. But gradually, these subside. And in their place comes a quiet despair, a general feeling of weakness that becomes ever more pervasive. Suddenly, the stairs are too steep to climb, the shelf too high to reach, the toilet too difficult to clean. Your mind still works, but as if from a remove. You know what’s happening, but there’s nothing you can do about it. You see your legs wasting to toothpicks, arms shriveling, breasts turning into empty bags. Skirts and trousers can’t stay up. Strange bones appear. Or . . . the opposite. You puff up. You can’t wear your shoes, fit into your collar. Your cheeks look like they’re bursting. For many, diarrhea was the harbinger of imminent demise. Brought on by the many inedible elements in diets – the sawdust or shavings in bread, earth mixed with the burned sugar exhumed from the ground beneath the Badayev warehouses, and so forth – it took away whatever strength a person might have left and, within a few hours, he was dead.

To understand Leningrad in the early winter of 1942 is to know that several thousand people a day were dying like this. They lay down in their apartments and didn’t get up; they fell down in the streets and could not go on. People tripped on corpses covered in the snowdrifts. They watched others dragging corpses by sled to the city’s suburban cemeteries, where their loads were unceremoniously dumped. Coffins

were rare; the wood was too valuable for firewood. Day and night, the Germans continued to shell the city – and night was long. At a latitude paralleling the Shetland Islands, Leningrad has sun in midwinter from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m. The rest is darkness, and in January and February of 1942, with power plants down, it was darkness of a particularly unsettling quality – “like living at the bottom of a well, or in the depths of the ocean,” according to Anna Reid.

Under the circumstances, it comes as no surprise to learn that some were willing to overrun others to secure life over death. People in positions of power and influence, most notably the municipal government, the food distribution agencies and the armed services, fared best. They found enough food to survive nicely, and in many cases, used their clout to help cronies or, alternatively, to exact bribes from the many who desperately needed help but lacked access.

While the average Leningrader queued for hours in the dark and cold, often to come up short of what was designated or, worse, to get nothing at all, others stole, and in some cases murdered, to further their own ends. But it was risky. A grocery store director stole nearly 400 pounds of butter and 200 pounds of flour. She was shot. The chief of a Smolny region, that is, where the municipal government was headquartered, bread store and his assistant cheated their customers of four or five grams of bread per ration. They sold the surplus, taking furs, objects of art and jewelry in exchange. They were summarily tried and shot. The oppression of the Communist regime never relented.

Cannibalism was first officially reported in mid-December, 1941. The NKVD, the Soviet secret police, detailed nine cases, including a mother who smothered her 18-month-old daughter in order to feed herself and three older children and an unemployed plumber who had killed his wife in order to feed their teenage son and nieces. Over the next two months,

nearly 1,000 arrests for cannibalism were made. By the end of 1942, that number doubled – and here again, more than a few of the perpetrators were executed.

Diary reports tell of corpses stripped of thighs and buttocks. Police records recall two women caught in a cemetery carrying sacks containing bodies of three infants, which the women were planning to feed to their daughters. Others were caught stealing corpses from a hospital morgue or scavenging amputated limbs from a hospital operating room. But in the big-picture story of Leningrad during the siege, cannibalism was more footnote than chapter, more notable for its lurid fascination than its impact on that first winter. The typical ‘cannibal,’ it seems, was neither fiend nor thug, but, as Anna Reid sums it, “an honest, working-class housewife from the provinces, scavenging protein to save her family.”

In all of the chaos, Leningrad never descended into anarchy. Its leadership was weak in its initial propensity to deny the Nazi threat and in coming clean with its constituents about the magnitude of the peril they faced. I have noted its corruption in the overall allocation of food. At the same time, it was not afraid to impose harsh measures – the many summary executions being the most extreme – and when options for possible relief presented themselves – for example, hacking a new supply road through 120 miles of rugged forest, or establishing an “ice route” across Lake Ladoga – it did not shirk from exercising them.

The man in charge on the ground was Andrei A. Zhadanov. Difficult, domineering, and a lead architect of Stalin’s political purges of the thirties, he had once held tremendous power in Soviet high circles. Many had cited him as Stalin’s heir. But by 1941, his star had fallen and other Kremlin power-players forced him out. They would allow him to continue on as Leningrad’s chief, but no longer did anyone regard him as Stalin’s heir. In short order, Zhadanov set up a

Leningrad Defense Committee, converted the city's factories to military production, mobilized scores of thousands of volunteers and saw to the city's fortifications. He was not warm, but he was in command.

Stalin's own support for Leningrad has been questioned on grounds that he was paranoid about its potential to challenge his power and jealous of its political/cultural traditions. Yet the harder evidence points to an almost manic interest in saving the city, articulated by frustrated telegrams to his generals questioning their tactics and their inclination to withhold unpleasant information. When, by early September, Voroshilov's incompetence had become so obvious that it had to be dealt with, Stalin replaced him with Marshal Zhukov, arguably Russia's best military mind. Unfortunately, the assignment lasted only about a month. By the beginning of October, the Germans' Army Group Centre was making real headway in its march on Moscow, forcing Stalin to assess his priorities, and one of the first was bringing Zhukov back to defend the capital. Later in the fall, as the Nazi threat to Moscow intensified, the Soviet leader went so far as to suggest that Leningrad might have to be surrendered. Urging totally impractical demands on Zhadanov in a frantic effort to break the siege, he concluded one memo: "We demand quick, decisive action from you. Concentrate eight or ten divisions and break through to the east. It's necessary either way, whether Leningrad holds on or is given up. For us, the army is more important."

In other words, Moscow was so imperiled that the goal must be getting Leningrad's encircled troops out and south – where they could be of help to the capital. While that didn't happen, Stalin and Zhukov were able to force Leningrad's factories to supply them with guns, shells and mortars throughout October and November of 1941, until those factories had to shut down. The sacrifice was substantial. Had

Leningrad been able to use those armaments for itself, securing a land route out of the city south of Ladoga – where the Germans had only a tenuous foothold – it is possible that hundreds of thousands might have been saved from starvation and the defense factories could have resumed normal production to the benefit of the Soviet war effort as a whole. As it was, the weapons sent to Moscow were not enough to tip the balance there, but, again to quote Anna Reid, “they drained Leningrad of the resources either to break the siege or – save at the cost of mass civilian death – to survive it.”

In November of 1941, on the eighty-third day of the siege, ice across the southern end of the Lake Ladoga thickened just enough to support traffic, and thus was born the famous “Road of Life,” responsible for much of Leningrad’s ultimate salvation. Over the next four months, some half a million people got out over the ice, and some 271,000 tons of food came in. So did a lot of military supplies and fuel. Yet neither the creation nor the utilization of this route was easy. In the beginning, the too-eager Soviets pushed the unproven ice beyond its limits and lost 40 trucks in a seven-day period. The long road they had built to reach the lake, from the nearest railhead still in their hands, was worse than primitive. Early on, 350 trucks caught in snowdrifts had to be abandoned. Temperatures on the lake in mid-winter were zero at best, many were underdressed for the cold, vehicle maintenance was a constant problem, and German guns were relentless. Like any desperate measure, The “Road of Life” was pursued because it was the only option available.

By April of 1942, the civilian population of Leningrad had fallen from the 2.5 million when the blockade was sealed to just over 750,000 – a reduction of nearly three-quarters. Many had died, and many were evacuated – via the lake. Although the official Soviet totals were about 632,000 dead from starvation and another 18,000 from shelling, historians are

certain that many more died of “dystrophy,” officialdom’s euphemistic term for the tragedy it didn’t want to acknowledge formally. Harrison Salisbury put the figure at 800,000 dead from starvation. Anna Reid puts that at the upper end, but says that 750,000 is probably a good number. The number evacuated appears to be roughly one million – a relatively few by airlift, but many hundreds of thousands across the lake – by ice first, and by water transport the following summer.

What, ultimately, allowed Leningrad to survive the siege? Certainly the reduced population was important. More supplies to fewer people made a huge difference. Equally important was the Germans’ failing campaign in Moscow; by mid-December of 1941, it was clear they would not be able to take the city. Just as the U.S. came into the war, the Nazis were in perilous straits all over Russia. Hitler, refusing to recognize it, pushed his armies to slog furiously for another ten months, until, finally, the brutal battle of Stalingrad crushed him.

One other element in Leningrad’s triumph, almost certainly the most significant, was the grit and determination of its people. Anna Akhmatova, a highly regarded intellectual and well-known poet, recorded early on for Radio Leningrad, the official radio broadcasting network, an exhortation to her fellow citizens that has been preserved. In it, she speaks quietly: “The Germans want to destroy our city – the city of Peter, the city of Pushkin, of Dostoevsky and Alexander Blok, the city of great culture and achievement. This city is part of my life. In Leningrad I became a poet. I, like all of you, live with one unconquerable belief – that Leningrad will never be fascist.” Her defiant words captured a spirit that never deserted the city.

You could see this defiance in the determination of so many to keep working, no matter how awful their circumstances. You could hear it in their applause for the plays and concerts they attended – starving people watching

starving players – well into the fall, clinging to what they had known as normal. You could feel it in the commitment to keep reading – to keep the life of the mind alive. People read many books, but they read *War and Peace* the most. Throughout the winter, almost unbelievably, the library never closed.

Some of the most resolute ordered their days as if three meals were still the reality, even though they were dividing a few grams of bread into breakfast, lunch and dinner. The discipline helped sustain them. Others did what they could to keep clean, to keep moving and to share with friends anything good that might come along – a piece of frozen horse meat from the front, a packet of real coffee, a pot of library paste from which could be made a jelly.

Many just did what they could. Young Communists carried water from the Neva to the bakeries and brought half-dead people to the hospitals on their sleds. Truck drivers beat their way across Lake Ladoga, the people at Radio Leningrad kept broadcasting alive, youngsters working in frigid factories managed to turn out shells and bullets. Said Harrison Salisbury, “Living in the cold, hungry, dark city, people held themselves together by the consciousness of being needed. They began to die when they had nothing to do. Nothing-to-do was more terrible than a bombing raid.”

By the spring of 1942, the warm air, the lengthening days and a new growing season gave the city a new face. Every available patch of land sprouted crops. Tram service resumed. People began receiving mail once more. A new commander of the Leningrad Front, Lieutenant-General Leonid Govorov, took over just as the Germans launched their biggest air raid yet. The country’s leading theoretician in artillery tactics, he was able to reconfigure the city’s defenses in important respects – until, at last, the Red Army gained some real firing power.

The event that came to symbolize the resurgence of the city was a performance, on August 9, of Dmitri Shostakovich’s

Seventh Symphony. Begun just as the siege took hold, it was completed by early October and played for a few musician friends who were quick to recognize its power. The opening movement introduced two themes: the sturdy Russian people in their peaceful, joyous life and the brutal Fascist invasion – senseless and implacable. Quickly understanding its propaganda value, the Russian authorities evacuated Shostakovich to a country town outside Moscow. There he orchestrated the symphony, and soon enough, it was making its way into the great orchestra halls of Europe and America. “If you have ears to hear and heart to feel,” intoned a British announcer as the London symphony broadcast it to the empire, “I am sure you will agree that the music tells a story of sublime heroism, of unquenchable faith in victory.”

To perform the work in the city of its inspiration, Leningrad’s Radio Committee Symphony was tapped. Directed by Karl Eliasberg, the orchestra had been dormant since mid-December, and by late February, twenty-seven of its musicians had perished. Nonetheless, the call went out. Initially, only sixteen musicians showed up. Eliasberg, none too strong himself, began going from apartment to apartment urging participation. The cold was still searing, people’s faces were covered with soot and lice crawled over their collars. But they began to play. A first concert was held on April 5.

By mid-July, rehearsals for the Shostakovich were underway. Dramatically short of the resources needed to pull it off, the orchestra brought in brass players from military bands. All were given manual workers’ ration cards. Microfilm of the score arrived by air from Sweden, and each musician copied out his own part by hand. On the morning of the concert, Govorov launched Operation Squall, blasting all the enemy’s artillery positions so that they would be unable to stop the music. The performance, necessarily ragged, was emotionally overwhelming nonetheless.

“Some wept,” remembered a woman in the audience, “because that was the only way in which they could express their excitement, others because they had lived through what the music was now expressing with such force, many because they were grieving for those they had lost, many because they were overcome with the mere fact of being present here in the Philharmonia.” During the finale, everyone stood. “It was impossible to listen sitting down. Impossible.”

Hearing the music ring out from loudspeakers across no-man’s-land, the besieging Germans were said to have realized that the war in the East would never be won, that Leningrad and Russia were invincible. At least, says Anna Reid, that is the spin that Russians like to put on it now, although at the time it was anything but clear. The siege lasted another 17 months, and never in all that period did the Germans relax their aggression. Never was life for the inhabitants of the city easy or normal. But the worst was over.

Andrei Krukov, a musicologist in St. Petersburg and the leading authority on the Seventh Symphony performance that August day, was 13 years old when it took place, and he was keeping a diary. “It was an incredible event,” he said, “and conductor Karl Eliasberg made it happen, but I also want to pay tribute to Leonid Govorov. A push was needed – an incentive to get it all going – and Govorov provided it, allowing soldiers from the army to join the orchestra. At the time, this was a quite exceptional decision.”

Krukov, speaking more than a half century later to military historian Michael Jones, then took a larger view of the siege, and the heroism of the people who endured it: “The suffering was on an unimaginable scale,” he said, “yet, astonishingly, Leningrad did not succumb. People somehow found the strength to reach out and help others, and by doing this, something mysterious yet deeply powerful came into

being. We were fighting a battle to keep a human face, to stay human beings. And we won it.”