The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1995

Myth, Memories, and Monuments

The siege of Leningrad constituted one of the most dramatic episodes of World War II, one that individuals and the state began to commemorate almost immediately. Official representations of “heroic Leningrad” omitted and distorted a great deal. Nonetheless, survivors struggling to cope with painful memories often internalized, even if they did not completely accept, the state’s myths, and they often found their own uses for the state’s monuments. Tracing the overlap and interplay of individual memories and fifty years of Soviet mythmaking, this book contributes to understandings of both the power of Soviet identities and the delegitimizing potential of the Soviet Union’s chief legitimizing myths. Because besieged Leningrad blurred the boundaries between the largely male battlefront and the predominantly female home front, it offers a unique vantage point for a study of the gendered dimensions of the war experience, urban space, individual memory, and public commemoration.

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Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.
To my parents, Diane and M. Barry Kirschenbaum,
and to the memory of Reginald E. Zelnik (1936–2004)
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Preface

In August 1991, a small group of Communist diehards launched a coup against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. I happened to be in Moscow at the time, and I learned of the coup when a neighbor, who had been listening to the radio, banged on my door and let me know that we were now living in a state of emergency. Over the next three days, I was an eyewitness to the opposition to the coup that centered on the White House, the headquarters of the government of the Russian Federation, and its newly elected president, Boris Yeltsin. I read the broadsides and leaflets produced to fill the gap left by the absence of regular newspapers. I watched the plotters’ televised press conference. I listened to a parade of dignitaries – including Yeltsin, Elena Bonner, and Evgenii Evtushenko – make speeches from the balcony of the White House. I saw an elderly woman admonishing young soldiers perched on armored vehicles along Kalinin Prospekt. I lent a hand in efforts to build a barricade on Manezh Square.

It was during those three days that the seeds of this project were planted. The sense that we were living through and, in a small but not unimportant way, making history was ubiquitous, largely unquestioned, and a bit unnerving. Events looked more threatening, more dramatic, and especially more coherent on CNN than they had on the steps of the Russian White House. All the same, what I read and saw on television immediately became part of my memory of those days. I left Moscow the day after the coup ended, fascinated by how people come to represent and understand their life stories as part of history. Eventually my interest in this process led to the Great Fatherland War, a formative moment in the nation’s history and in the life histories of the people who fought and suffered in it.
Preface

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Finally, I need to thank the people whose contributions are more profound and more difficult to list. To my parents, Diane and Barry Kirschenbaum, I owe my love of books and of unusual travel opportunities. Their enjoyment and encouragement of my work have been an enormous gift. My other great teacher, Reggie Zelnik, did not live to see the publication of this book. I hope that it reflects something of his light and humane touch.

To John Conway, my husband, who has never known me not to be working on this book, goes the greatest thanks of all – for his love, friendship, insight, and dinner table conversation.

A Note on Transliteration and Translation

I have used the Library of Congress system of transliteration, except in the cases of a few very well-known names, such as Yeltsin. Following Joseph Brodsky’s lead, I have transliterated the city’s nickname as “Peter.” All translations are my own, except where noted.
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