Introduction

Nothing but a legend, you say? You want nothing but facts? Facts are perishable, believe me, only legends remain, like the soul after the body, or perfume in the wake of a woman.

Amin Maalouf

The almost nine-hundred-day siege of Leningrad constituted one of the most dramatic and tragic episodes of World War II. Even before it ended, the siege became one of the war’s most widely told stories. Both the Soviet and the Allied press transformed besieged Leningrad into legend, a compelling story of steadfastness and heroism. Inside the blockaded city, Leningraders undertook a startling array of commemorative projects, ranging from keeping diaries to producing documentary films. Perhaps the best known of these contemporary commemorations is Dmitrii Shostakovich’s monumental Leningrad Symphony. Begun in blockaded Leningrad, the piece had more than fifty international premiers in 1942 and became an emblem of the city’s suffering and its strength. In the summer of 1942, the remnants of the Leningrad Philharmonic, supplemented by musicians stationed at the Leningrad front, performed the symphony in Leningrad itself. Broadcast by radio throughout the city, the concert immediately became part of the epic story of the blockade. One of the violins played that evening became a museum piece.

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The extraordinary and unexpected plight of blockaded Leningrad easily lent itself to mythmaking. Just weeks after the surprise invasion of 22 June 1941, rapidly advancing German troops threatened the city. By the end of August, the local newspapers and radio were exhorting Leningraders to become “heroic defenders” on the “city front.” Thus, the epic terms in which the state media would narrate the siege were set quite early. Of course, not all Leningraders responded as the authorities hoped. A minority blamed the military disasters on the Communists and called for Leningrad to be declared an open city. Still, the extent of defeatist sentiment in Leningrad should not be exaggerated. As the historian Andrei Dzeniskevich concludes, “The overwhelming majority of workers maintained loyalty to the party and the Soviet state.”

Indeed, thousands of Leningraders became involved in local defense, working overtime in the war industry and standing watch on rooftops to extinguish incendiary bombs in buckets of sand.

The first air raids came in early September. The blockade began shortly thereafter. On 8 September 1941, German forces occupied the southern shore of Lake Ladoga (east of the city) and, together with Finnish troops north of the city, severed all land routes in and out of Leningrad. Facing determined resistance from the Soviet Army, the Germans failed to capture the city. They decided to rely instead on siege and starvation. The front lines stabilized within four kilometers of the city, and Leningraders found themselves cut off from what they began to call the mainland.

During the late fall and throughout the winter of 1941–42, the city’s population – predominantly women, children, and the elderly – faced conditions that defy imagination. Temperatures in January 1942 reached forty degrees below zero centigrade (minus forty degrees Fahrenheit). Leningraders suffered the bitter cold in a city without heat, electricity, running water, or public transportation. Between 20 November and 25 December, the daily bread ration for dependents fell to a low of 125 grams (not quite 4.5 ounces, perhaps fifteen or twenty small bites of bread). Thousands died of starvation every day, and corpses piled up in streets and courtyards.

The situation within the city improved somewhat in early 1942, when an ice road across frozen Lake Ladoga, dubbed the “Road of Life” by the media, began to carry convoys of food into the city and to transport

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the sick and starving to the mainland. With the arrival of spring, the worst period of the blockade came to an end. The evacuation of civilians continued during the summer as flotillas replaced the ice road across Lake Ladoga.

The city remained within easy reach of German artillery, but something like normalcy returned. During the winter of 1942–43, the city’s population was far smaller than it had been a year earlier, and better prepared for a winter under siege. Now German artillery fire took more lives than starvation. In January 1943, a Soviet offensive opened a narrow corridor that allowed the reestablishment of a rail connection to the mainland, albeit under heavy fire. A year later, fireworks – which some Leningraders mistook for artillery fire – marked the victorious lifting of the blockade. The human losses were staggering. Conservative postwar estimates put the number of dead at 670,000. More recently, historians have suggested a figure of one million deaths due to starvation as a reasonable approximation. No city in modern times has withstood greater losses.\(^3\)

Since the war, and particularly since the early 1960s, the remarkable story of the blockade has been retold in countless memoirs, interviews, previously unpublished diaries, histories, films, poems, and museum exhibits. This book tells the story of these stories. Rather than attempting to reconstruct the experience of the blockade, the book aims to trace how, in the half century between the beginning of the Soviet-German war and the end of the Soviet Union, both the people who survived the siege and the state that claimed it as evidence of its own legitimacy remembered and recounted it.

At first glance, the story of the story of the blockade appears to be a relatively straightforward tale of the shifting tactics of the propaganda state. Desperate to mobilize the population, the wartime state extolled the resourcefulness, self-sacrifice, and self-reliance of heroic Leningrad. Shostakovich won the Stalin Prize for his symphony, and Leningrad won the designation “Hero City.” Once the war had been won, Josef Stalin, eager to claim responsibility for the overall victory, suppressed the story. The blockade museum, opened during the war, was shuttered. Work on

building war memorials ceased. After Stalin's death in 1953, his political heirs, in search of their own legitimizing myths, revived the story of the blockade, building new monuments and museums and staging elaborate rituals of remembrance.

What complicates this picture of a memory fabricated by and for the state is the fact that long after the Soviet collapse, the images, tropes, and stories of the state-sanctioned cult of the war continued to show up in the oral and written testimonies of blockade survivors – even survivors who were generally unsparing in their attacks on the Soviet state. The freer atmosphere created by the era of glasnost in the late 1980s and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 undoubtedly expanded the limits of the speakable. It became possible, for example, for survivors to condemn Stalin's refusal to declare Leningrad an open city. Nonetheless, the stories told by the survivors of the blockade, the blokadniki, remained remarkably stable. Few, for example, were eager to claim that they themselves had advocated surrender. The so-called Leningrad epic, like the myth of the people's war more generally, outlived the state that sponsored it. Apparently, Leningraders (now Peterburgers) had at some point made the story of heroic Leningrad their own.

The wartime ubiquity of blockade stories and the degree to which the blockade was “commemorated in advance” help to explain this paradoxical outcome. Many contemporary accounts of the blockade aimed to transform the overwhelming, painful, and confusing experiences of the city front into a coherent narrative of historic events. These narratives often appeared in the official media and were told in state-approved terms. However, because the tellers, whether “ordinary” Leningraders or well-known contributors to the Soviet media, were people who had experienced the air raids, shelling, and starvation firsthand, individual memories often shaped official narratives, even as official narratives worked to sanitize, co-opt, and contain memory. Entangled from the outset, official

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representations and individual recollections could not be easily distinguished and separated, even by survivors critical of the Soviet state.

Tracing the complicated interweaving of the political and the personal in stories of the blockade requires an approach that is at once chronological and thematic. The first part of this book (Chapters 1–3) focuses on the prewar and wartime narratives and commemorations that provided the framework for later memories and monuments. The second part explores immediate postwar efforts to rebuild the city and erase the memory of the blockade (Chapter 4) and the return of stories and monuments dedicated to the blockade in the 1960s and 1970s (Chapters 5 and 6). The book’s final part, which analyzes how and whether blockade stories shifted in late- and post–Soviet Russia, as well as the return of the city’s prerevolutionary name (Chapters 7 and 8), brings the story up to 1995. Each part is also organized thematically around the interactions of individual memories with state-sanctioned myths, urban space, and efforts to construct monuments and rituals of remembrance. The Epilogue addresses the question of the meanings of memories, myths, and monuments as fewer and fewer people who lived through the blockade remain to tell the tale.

Memories and Myth

Blockade stories are at once deeply personal and profoundly political. The state’s “memory created from above” often distorted or omitted a great deal, but it also deftly appropriated the “everyday” memory of survivors. The power of blockade stories lay precisely in their complicated fusion of mythologized versions of individual life histories and of the nation’s history. Struggling to cope with painful memories and to endow tragedy with meaning, survivors 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. Thus, the book does not attempt to draw sharp distinctions between the allegedly “raw,” “unvarnished,” “real” memories of survivors and the presumptively politicized myths – or lies – created by the state. Instead, I view “myth” as deeply connected to...
memory. While it may not have been absolutely true, the myth of heroic Leningrad nonetheless offered a real and indispensable means of turning the “muddle of images” that people collected in wartime into meaningful and memorable narratives.8

War, as the psychiatrist Derek Summerfield has pointed out, “is a public and collective experience, leaving memories which can be described as social as much as personal.”9 I use “memory” to designate the elements in this amalgam that are primarily personal or autobiographical: the stories told by individual survivors to themselves or others that describe what Ol’ga Grechina called, in her 1994 memoir, “the blockade that I suffered, the one that is mine.”10 Such stories constitute a vital constituent of individual identity, the “scaffolding upon which all mental life is constructed.”11 Often, but not always, they maintain a personal, intimate tone, and insist, as Grechina’s does, that “it is all the honest truth.”


Personal narratives, in short, often claim to be purely personal and thus to provide privileged access to the truth of the blockade and the individual. Such claims are easily and often taken at face value. By contrast, pairing “memory” with “myth” offers a means of calling attention to the ways in which personal memories—especially personal memories of the social trauma of war—are shaped by what Summerfield calls “social memory” and what I call myth.

“Myth” in this context is not meant as a synonym for state-manufactured falsehood, a tendentious account of the blockade in need of debunking. Neither is it meant to evoke the common understanding of myth as a fictitious, even fantastic narrative used to explain the unknown. Instead, the term is meant to suggest the shared narratives that give form and meaning to the recall of past experience. In “its original sense,” as Stuart Charmé points out in his study of biography, “‘myth’ [mythos] refers to plot.” In any individual life, this plot is “not apparent in the immediate quality of experience.” On the contrary, it must be imaginatively constructed.

The necessity of constructing meaningfully plotted memory may be especially acute in the case of chaotic, painful, unmanageable recollections of war. Examining personal narratives from World War I, Samuel Hynes emphasizes that “myth here, it scarcely needs saying, is not a synonym for falsehood; rather, it is a term to identify the simplified, dramatized story that has evolved . . . to contain the meanings of the war that we [or survivors] can tolerate, and so make sense of its incoherencies and contradictions.” This simplified, dramatized narrative can, Hynes argues, both “confirm, but also perhaps construct” the “memories of men who fought but did not write about their wars” because it endows the “incoherence of war” with “order and meaning.” It is precisely this sense of a tolerable narrative distilled from and, in turn, shaping personal memories that I mean to evoke with the term myth. My interest is not in ascertaining the accuracy of myths, but in emphasizing, as Malcolm Smith does in his Politics of Memory,” in Jonathan Boyarin, ed., Remapping Memory: The Politics of TimeSpace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 23. See also George Mosse’s concept of the “Myth of the War Experience,” “which looked back on the war as a meaningful and sacred event” but was not “entirely fictitious.” George L. Mosse, Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 7.

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study of the London Blitz, that myths “are important historical events in their own right.”

Like the myth of the London Blitz, which may be its nearest analogue, the simplified, dramatized story of the Leningrad blockade grew out of the state’s effort to mobilize an urban population under attack. In both cases, the media worked to persuade individuals that their personal sorrows, along with their seemingly small contributions to the war effort, carried historic, if not epic, importance. Stories of remarkable fortitude and courage, authenticated by images of Londoners singing in shelters or of young women standing watch on Leningrad's rooftops while the bombs fell, transformed the everyday horrors of urban war into heroic legend. Both myths drew on experiences remembered by individuals while providing those who lived through the war with compelling and uplifting frameworks for narrating – and therefore remembering – their own experiences. Both proved exceptionally durable.

Such durable myths are sometimes identified as “collective memory” or “social memory.” I have avoided these terms primarily because they lack the emphasis on narrative provided by myth. Other scholars have criticized these terms because they create the misleading impression that collectives somehow “remember” just as individuals do, and have suggested “collective remembrance” and “collected memory” as alternatives. While these terms convey the process by which individuals participate in the construction of public remembrances and monuments, they are less effective than myth in underlining the centrality of shared narratives in the construction of individual memories. Moreover, myth, unlike terms that emphasize retrospective “remembrance,” leaves open the possibility that the experience remembered and the act of “collecting” memory may be simultaneous. This was certainly the case in wartime Leningrad, where the process of planning and constructing museums, memorials, and archives began long before the blockade ended.

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In the Soviet case, where the “evolution” of simplified, dramatized stories involved a great deal of state intervention, ideology might provide a workable substitute for myth. However, it too lacks a clear emphasis on narrative. Myth may be understood as ideology turned into a story – by both the state seeking legitimacy and individuals seeking meaning in traumatic events. Richer in local detail and more dynamic than ideology, myth may also be more readily internalized.  

Focusing on the construction of mythical narratives provides a powerful means of exploring ideology and memory as, in the words of the historian Michael David-Fox, “mutually interactive phenomena that can mold one another in powerful ways.”

The idea that individual memories cannot be cleanly separated from myth – in the sense outlined here of shared, simplified narratives – draws on recent studies in cognitive psychology and on work in psychiatry that emphasizes the social dimensions of memory. Such work critiques the “current discourse on trauma,” which views abnormal, so-called traumatic memory as the universal result of traumatic events, with perhaps some variation across cultures. The emphasis on the universality of traumatic memory leads to the conclusion that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may affect victims of traumas that range, as the title of an important book on treating trauma has it, from domestic abuse to political terror. The concept of the “unrepresentability” of trauma, the difficulty if not impossibility of assimilating it into “normal” memory, has been particularly influential and contested in studies of the memory of the Holocaust. However, recent work in cognitive psychology has called

22 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds., Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (New York: Routledge, 1992). Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed...
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into question the “special,” abnormal status of traumatic memory. It is by no means a settled proposition that the cognitive processes involved in remembering extremely happy events differ appreciably from those involved in remembering traumatic ones. At the same time, psychiatrists involved in treating traumatized individuals in war zones from Rwanda to Bosnia argue that the discourse on trauma “has systematically sidelined the social dimensions of suffering; instead it promotes a strongly individualistic focus, presenting trauma as something that happens inside individual minds.” Questioning the universality of PTSD, they emphasize that the meanings individuals attach or come to attach to their own suffering shape their perceptions and memories of the war experience.

This critique of the discourse on trauma is relevant to a study of the memory of blockaded Leningrad, where, as in the more recent conflicts that have stimulated the critique, trauma in question involved an attack on an entire community, and responses were necessarily both individual and social. The belief that sacrifices served a just and worthwhile cause, the ability to “draw on social or political values, and on cooperative effort and solidarity” made it possible for those experiencing war to view themselves not as “passive victims” of trauma but as “active citizens.” None of which is to deny that such experiences often produce lasting damage. Rather, the central point, for humanitarian aid organizations and historians, is that “war-affected populations are largely directing their attention not inwards, to ‘trauma,’ but outwards, to their devastated social world.” The damage that they see is in the world, not in themselves. From this point of view, the finding that the Soviet veterans and survivors of the war interviewed in the 1990s “do not remember trauma” is not so surprising, and does not necessarily require an explanation grounded


