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0521863260 - The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments

Lisa A. Kirschenbaum

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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 battlefield 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.

Lisa A. Kirschenbaum is an associate professor of history at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (2001). She is the recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities and grants from the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies of the Woodrow Wilson Center. She has published articles in *Slavic Review* and *Nationalities Papers*, and she has contributed to the *Women’s Review of Books*.

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*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.

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Conversations with Susan Gans on the nature of trauma and memory helped me to refine my thinking on these issues. In the early, indeed formative, stages of this project, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in Susan Suleiman's National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) seminar on representations of the occupation and World War II in French literature, history, and film. The seminar's lively, interdisciplinary discussion had a profound impact on the overall shape and approach of this book. I am happy to thank the seminar's participants, as well as the other groups that have responded to papers and presentations over the years, including the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, the Center for Gender Studies at the European Humanities University (Minsk), the Women's Studies Center at the University of Łódź, and the Centre for Metropolitan History at the University of London.

I am indebted to the librarians and archival staff at the Central State Archive of St. Petersburg, the Central State Archive of Literature and Art of St. Petersburg, Harvard University, the Hoover Institution, the Library of Congress, the National Archives and Records Administration, the Russian National Library, and West Chester University. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, and West Chester University.

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Memory,” in Peter Gray and Kendrick Oliver, eds., *The Memory of Catastrophe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 106–17; “Gender, Memory, and National Myths: Ol’ga Berggol’ts and the Siege of Leningrad,” *Nationalities Papers* (<http://www.tandf.co.uk>), 28 (September 2000): 551–64.

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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