

H-Net Reviews

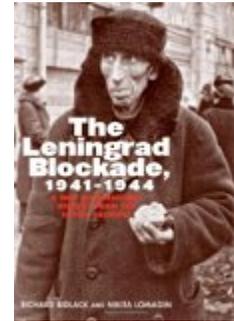
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Richard Bidlack, Nikita Lomagin. *The Leningrad Blockade, 1941-1944: A New Documentary History from the Soviet Archives*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. xxix + 486 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11029-6.

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When I was an undergraduate in the summer of 2004, I participated in a study abroad program with my university to St. Petersburg, Russia. Perhaps the most resonant image from that trip was a visit to Piskariovskoye Cemetery. This cemetery is dedicated to the victims of the German blockade of then-Leningrad, which lasted from 1941 to 1944. Of all the locations I visited during that trip, the cemetery was undoubtedly the most powerful, which made reviewing this book an excellent opportunity to gain more insight into how the blockade worked and how it affected the denizens of Leningrad.

The Leningrad Blockade seeks to address all aspects of the blockade. Only the first chapter is explicitly devoted to military history. The other five chapters consider political, social, and cultural history, along with some elements of military history (in particular, civil-military relations). Richard Bidlack and Nikita Lomagin rely heavily on documents from St. Petersburg, Moscow, Podolsk, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as published primary sources and the excellent museums in St. Petersburg. As the authors mention, until quite recently, most of the archival-based histories of the blockade were Soviet and inevitably subject to censorship. This book attempts to redress this gap in the literature.

The heart and soul of the book, for the historian at least, are sixty-six documents, translated into English, and interspersed throughout the text. They range considerably in length and scope. One document recounts an argument between Joseph Stalin, Leningrad party chief A. A. Zhdanov, and Leningrad Front commander K. S. Voroshilov over how to defend the city, whom to evacuate, and how to ensure that the city's Military Defense

Council was properly staffed and funded. Another, my personal favorite, shows the propaganda leaflets dropped by German bombers on the city, advising citizens of Leningrad to go over to German lines, where they will be fed and treated well. One of the most haunting documents includes entries from a ten-year-old boy's journal, detailing his diet (a soup made from carpenter's glue) and the death of his father.

Constructed around these documents is a narrative of the blockade. The first chapter is directly concerned with the military aspects of the blockade, including plans to defend the city and the breakout, led by Marshal Zhukov, in early 1943. It concludes with the so-called Leningrad Affair, one of Stalin's last political purges, in 1949. The Leningrad Affair was ostensibly about economic and fiscal mismanagement by the city's leaders after World War II, but was in reality an attempt by Stalin to eliminate dangerous rivals to his own power. The second chapter is devoted to explaining and understanding the relationship between Stalin, the city's civilian leaders, and the elements of the Leningrad Direction/Front's high command. It also includes a very interesting analysis of official Soviet attitudes toward the Russian Orthodox Church and the acceptance of the church's role in the city in exchange for support for the regime and donations to the war effort. The third chapter, "Policies of Total War," focuses on the military and industrial mobilization of the city, and begins to examine the role of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) within the city, a theme that persists in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 4 addresses the needs, concerns, and sacrifices made by everyday Leningraders. It includes the

complex political drama surrounding the hoarding and trading of food, as well as such crimes as theft and assault, and concludes with two diametrically opposed aspects of Leningrad life: cannibalism (especially murder in order to consume corpses) and charity from the church and wealthier citizens of Leningrad. Chapter 5 examines public opinion within Leningrad. Specifically, it looks at the level of popular support (or lack thereof) for the regime in Moscow and the local party chiefs (Zhdanov was particularly unpopular, since his figure remained rather rotund while those around him starved); their reaction to the United States' joining the war (mild) and invading Normandy (jubilant); and their attitudes toward Germany. The book's final chapter tries to establish the legitimacy of organized opposition to the regime. It concludes by saying that "no single, large anti-Soviet conspiracy within the blockade city has been substantiated, and the overall effect of organized anti-Soviet opposition was negligible" (p. 403). That did not, however, stop the NKVD from arresting and even executing a number of citizens for crimes real and imagined.

As the authors freely admit, "our work relies heavily on [David M.] Glantz's research for the military context of the siege," referring to Glantz's *The Battle for Leningrad, 1941-1944* (2002) and *The Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1944: 900 Days of Terror* (2001) (p. 9). Of all the book's chapters, the first is perhaps the weakest for this very reason, as a significant portion of it is based on secondary sources. There seems to be a certain sense of "get the dry military detail out of the way early," as evidenced

by the fact that chapter 1 is the only chapter without any of the sixty-six documents included. The other five chapters are much better, even when some of the material is extremely graphic and difficult to read. One of the biggest strengths of the book's presentation is a strong tendency to let the evidence speak for itself without unnecessary commentary, to underscore the grim reality of the lives of the most desperate Leningraders, as is particularly apparent in the section on cannibalism. The authors keep jargon to a minimum, and provide a handy glossary for when jargon is absolutely necessary. For example, the word *opolchenie* means "militia" in the British and American sense of volunteer military units, often locally based; however, the Russian word *militisia* refers to the police, so sticking to the Russian terms avoids unnecessary confusion.

Overall, this book is an excellent addition to the historiography on the blockade of Leningrad. It is accessible and well written, even for a general reader (provided they have a strong stomach). For the specialist, the documents are invaluable, and the bibliography contains plenty of primary and secondary sources. Even for my own research, into naval history in the first half of the twentieth century, I found some useful data regarding the role of the Red Fleet in the city's defense and the plans to scuttle the fleet upon the delivery of a specific code word. For a single volume history, it is both well documented and richly detailed, making it well worth the purchase price for anybody interested in the history of World War II, the Soviet Union, Germany, or Leningrad in particular.

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