

Sergey Yarov. *Leningrad 1941-42: Morality in a City under Siege*. Translated by Arch Tait. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017. 460 pp. \$20.00, e-book, ISBN 978-1-5095-0802-0.

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After February 24, 2022, it is difficult to think about the Nazi German siege of Leningrad without conjuring the parallels and echoes of current events. Since that recent date, the successor to the Red Army—once defender of today’s St. Petersburg—has encircled and all but annihilated some of the very Ukrainian cities it historically liberated. Where there was once a First Ukrainian Front surrounding and taking Berlin, there is now a front in Ukraine. Such sad ironies and strange role reversals of Vladimir Putin’s war of aggression in Ukraine abound as one reads *Leningrad, 1941-1942: Morality in a City under Siege*.

The author of the present volume, the late Sergey Yarov (1959-2015), was a Russian academic who held positions at the European University in St. Petersburg and the Herzen Russian State Pedagogical University, among others. His work focused on Russia in the twentieth century and the siege of Leningrad, specifically. In the book reviewed here, he zeroes in on public and individual ethics and morality in Leningrad during the worst siege months referred to as the Time of Death.

Leningrad contains a foreword by John Barber, an author’s preface, a concluding section, and ten chapters organized under three thematic parts. In part 1, “Concepts of Morality in 1941-1942,” Yarov explains the prewar moral universe and the ways it was shaped and changed by

the pressures of war. Part 2, “The Ethical Dimension,” turns attention to centers of individual and group ethics, such as the family, the state, and the party. Finally, part 3, “Means of Reinforcing Morality,” analyzes how Leningraders attempted to keep others within the moral framework as well as the methods they used to self-regulate in the terrible and deprived world of the siege. In his conclusion, “Leningraders in the Time of Death: Human and Superhuman,” Yarov discusses the overall outcomes of his study and the limits of normal coping mechanisms in extremis.

Yarov’s extensive archival work is the gem of this book. *Leningrad* is an astounding work of primary source collection and analysis. The author foregrounds the voices of those present in 1941-42 in sizable block quotes. This, in fact, characterizes so much of the book that it could stand in as a primary source reader for those interested in assigning excerpts for such purposes.

In his preface, Yarov explains that he crafts *Leningrad* by turning to neglected memoirs, diaries, and letters that have “until very recently been handled with an excess of caution” (p. ix). Here he also notes that earlier scholars laboring under the required Soviet narrative of heroic sacrifice by Leningraders in the Great Patriotic War shied away from using these same sources to excavate the more human and flawed moments of siege

life. Freed from these strictures by the time in which he worked, Yarov is able to offer new findings from previously used as well as novel sources.

Primary writers well after the war further tried to fit “the official Soviet trope of ordeals engendering heroism” while “eyewitnesses,” also writing after the fact, “tailored their testimony to the conventional rhetoric” (p. x). Yarov avoids these source problems by using earlier wartime materials where possible and reading between the lines and through to the subtext. These are practices known to any historian but also uniquely familiar to those versed in Sovietology. The skills of those once called Sovietologists in the West are again gaining relevance as the present Kremlin resident forces Russia down an increasingly isolated path.

Yarov’s subject is, of course, a tremendously difficult and saddening time of misery, death, and degradation. Even as he seeks to understand ethics, morality, and their fractures under pressure, the author maintains a laudably deep sensitivity to the fundamental unfairness of any latter-day value judgment. His treatment of Leningraders’ best and worst moral examples harkens back to Christopher R. Browning’s reminder that “persecution does not ennoble victims. A few magnificent exceptions notwithstanding, persecution, enslavement, starvation, and mass murder do not turn ordinary people into saints and martyrs.”[1] Browning was referring to the lives and reactions of Jews trapped within the Starachowice slave labor camps, though readers familiar with Holocaust history will recognize important parallels with the moral and ethical decisions people had to make during the siege and in the camps. Leningraders too—as Yarov explores throughout the book—had to endure life immersed in something of what the Holocaust survivor Primo Levi famously termed the “law of the Lager.”[2] At Auschwitz, as Levi explained, there were still rules

even if they did not match those of the outside world.

“Traditional moral standards were respected only if they did not endanger life,” Yarov points out, though Leningrad was not a place devoid of rules (p. 78). Yarov also explains how theft, robbery, and looting may have been the most common moral and ethical failings in Leningrad, but a code remained firmly in place. Food earmarked for children was held sacrosanct, exploitation of privilege was roundly castigated, and a failure to share would cause ostracization, to name just a few abiding tenets of a “siege ethics” that stand in parallel to Levi’s law (p. 322).

Yarov does his best work in the recovery of sometimes-uncomfortable stories in which the teller must let down the walls of official narrative and possibly open themselves to the critique of readers. In a section of chapter 3 called “Infringement of Ethical Standards: Arguments Used in Self-justification,” the author delves into sources whose “primary function was not to explain to others, but to comfort the writer.” Here he is able to show through these voices that the very existence of such lengthy explanations of personal conduct is “compelling evidence of the rootedness of moral values” even in the worst days of the siege (p. 87). Morality endured, and therefore so did pained exculpation of personal failings in contemporaneous diary, memoir, and letter writing.

Passages such as these and Yarov’s previously mentioned reliance on quoting large sections of primary text throughout give *Leningrad* heightened value. In addition to its predictable home in classes on the Second World War, the book will find particular use in philosophy, ethics, morality, and sociology courses, though it is never needlessly burdened by the buzzwords of those or any other field of study. Likewise, lay readers will find interest in *Leningrad* for both its extensive primary passages and Yarov’s piercing analysis of the human condition under siege.

In an era now put off balance by a Russian army besieging Ukrainians in places like Mariupol, *Leningrad* is an important and—sad as it is—timely book. Yarov offers a window into the terrible “choiceless choices” and negotiations of personal and group ethics and morality among a trapped population.[3] That window and those lessons are now made all the more relevant by the same nation once forced to endure the Time of Death by the real Nazis—*real* Nazis, as opposed to the imagined Nazis Putin falsely alleges he is currently fighting in Ukraine.

Notes

[1]. Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York: Norton, 2011), 297.

[2]. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: BN Publishing, 2008), 97.

[3]. Lawrence L. Langer, *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 72.

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