



“YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WOMAN.”

WOMEN’S EXPERIENCE DURING THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD

This paper, written by Kelsey Norris, a senior History and Russian Language and Literature double major at the University of Chicago, analyzes the siege of Leningrad through the experiences of women, reflected in their own recollections, artwork, and poetry. From describing their role as guardians of traditional morality to articulating their alienation from their own bodies, the paper presents a multifaceted view of women and their life under the siege, suggesting that the siege brought the ideal of the “new Soviet woman” into focus.

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INTRODUCTION

The siege of Leningrad was one of the greatest tragedies of the Second World War, if not the entire twentieth century. Despite the signs given by the launch of Operation Barbarossa, the Soviet Union was ill-prepared for the German invasion, and within the first months of the war, German forces besieged Leningrad with the aid of the Finnish military. The siege lasted for 872 days, as bombing, shelling, disease, and starvation claimed the lives of 1.6 to 2 million civilians trapped within the blockaded city.¹ Of the 3,300,000 people who were trapped inside the city, only about 300,000 survived, all of who received the Medal in the Defense of Leningrad for their service.² The devastatingly high loss of life during the blockade was entirely avoidable. Hitler, however, deeming the Slavs an inferior race and being especially hostile towards Leningrad as "the cradle of the October Revolution," ordered that the city be starved into submission.³ Once German forces encircled Leningrad and destroyed its main supply of food in early bombing campaigns, the German military command expected the city to fall within a matter of months. They never imagined that Leningrad could withstand almost 900 days of siege.

THE SIEGE OF LENINGRAD: "A WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE"⁴

Tracing the historiography of the siege of Leningrad reveals a very compelling and perhaps even surprising story. After the war, the unvarnished history of the siege was suppressed until *glasnost* during Mikhail Gorbachev's regime. The National Museum of the Defense of Leningrad, dedicated to preserving the story of the siege, first opened in 1944, but the Soviet government closed the museum in 1953 until its reopening in 1989. Prior to *glasnost* and the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the historical memory of the Leningrad blockade was dominated by patriotic texts such as Vera Inber's *Leningrad Diary*, which portrayed how Leningraders, as loyal Soviet citizens, successfully defeated the invading German forces.⁵ Even Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin, in their comprehensive *A Book of the Blockade*, a text based on interviews with hundreds of *blokadnitsy*, practiced self-censorship and

¹ To put this statistic into perspective, the number of casualties during the Leningrad blockade surpasses the number of American soldiers and civilians who died in all the wars from 1776 to the present day. Simmons, Cynthia, and Nina Perlina. *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2002. Print. p. ix

² Skrabina, Elena. *Siege and Survival: The Odyssey of a Leningrader*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1971. Print. p. vii

³ Adamovich, Ales', and Daniil Aleksandrovich. Granin. *A Book of the Blockade*. Moscow: Raduga, 1983. Print. p. 28. As the secret directive 1-a 1601/41 declared, "The Fuhrer has decided to wipe the city of Petersburg from the face of the Earth. . . There is no interest whatever in continuing the existence of this large populated point after the defeat of Soviet Russia. . . It is proposed to ring it in a tight blockade and to flatten it to the ground by intensive artillery bombardment and constant aerial bombing. If as a result of the situation arising in the town a request to surrender is announced it will be rejected. . .

⁴ Simmons, and Perlina. *Writing*. p. 2

⁵ Vera Inber's diary was originally entitled in Russia *Pochti tri goda: Leningradskii dnevniki* in 1946. The diary was translated and published in English under the title *Leningrad Diary* in 1971.

excluded the more horrific aspects of the siege.⁶ Only in 1969, with the publication in the West of Henry Salisbury's *The 900 Days: the Siege of Leningrad*,⁷ did a more comprehensive portrayal of the blockade come to light.⁸ Along with the diaries of Elena Kochina and Elena Skrjabina, two émigrés who detailed their siege experiences in writing, Salisbury's account provides a more realistic depiction of the event, including stories of atrocities such as cases of cannibalism. Indeed, in more recent years, the historiography of the siege has taken a new turn, building off these more reliable sources to emphasize the fact that the siege of Leningrad placed a heavy burden primarily on Soviet women.⁹

In the first days of the war, Soviet men were called to the front lines in droves. As a result, with the exception of male political leaders, the elderly, and certain skilled factory workers who received exemptions, Leningrad was bereft of men. Once the food shortage became severe, men were often the first to die because their lower levels of essential body fat (3-5 percent), compared to women's levels (8-10 percent), made them more susceptible to starvation.⁹ Literary scholar and *blokadnitsa* Olga Grechina, noting the dearth of men in Leningrad, recalled in her memoirs:

In comparison with the number of women in the city, there were very few men, and one was immediately struck by their inability to adapt to the tragic conditions of life. They began to fall down in the streets, take to their beds in their apartments, to die and die and die. . . The long-suffering women of Leningrad suddenly realized that on them lay the fate not only of their family, but of their city, even of the entire country.¹⁰

Aware of the burden placed upon them to protect their city, able-bodied Leningradian women between 16- and 45-years-old were mobilized in numbers reaching the hundreds of thousands. Women formed the vast majority of the approximately half-million civilians assembled to build anti-tank ditches and defense fortifications along the Pskov-Ostrov and Luga rivers, and 1,500 women were mobilized to work in peat bogs to provide the city with fuel.¹¹ Additionally, women worked in factories, replacing the men who were sent to the front, and were largely responsible for the production of necessary war ammunitions. The factory industries' reliance upon female workers is evident in the fact that 76.4 percent of all

⁶ Simmons, Cynthia. "Lifting the Siege: Women's Voices on Leningrad (1941-1944)." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 40.1/2 (1998): 43-65. *JSTOR*. Web. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40869962>>. P. 49, footnote 26. In an interview with Cynthia Simmons, Daniil Granin explained that he, along with his co-author Ales Adamovich, understood that a lot of the material they collected was not permissible for publication due to the regime's censorship policies and thus they practiced self-censorship.

⁷ Only in quite recent history have more details concerning the incidence of cannibalism in Leningrad come to light. Secret police reports released in 2002 reveal that approximately 300 people were executed and 1,400 were imprisoned for cannibalism. Jones, Michael K. *Leningrad: State of Siege*. New York: Basic, 2008. Print. p. 5

⁸ Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina's *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*, along with Simmons's articles, "Lifting the Siege: Women's Voices on Leningrad," and "The City of Women: Leningrad (1941-1944)" reflect this more recent development in the historiography of the siege.

⁹ Simmons and Perlina, *Writing*. p. 2

¹⁰ Simmons and Perlina, *Writing*. p. 2

¹¹ Simmons and Perlina. *Writing*. p. xii, 233 (footnote 54)

"YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WOMAN."

Leningrad's industrial employees and 79.9 percent of all factory workers during this period were women.¹² Although the ideology of the "new Soviet woman" under the Socialist regime no longer allowed women to adhere so stringently to their traditional gender roles, Vera Inber's poem *Victor (Победительница)*¹³ illustrates that women were still transcending social expectations by working in the factories:

Ты уезжала с заводом своим на Урал.
Бросила дом свой, ни разу о нем не заплакав.
Женским рукам удивлялся горячий металл,
Но покорялся однако.¹⁴

You left with your factory to the Urals.
Abandoning your home, and not for a single moment not weeping for it.
The hot metal is surprised at the women's hands,
But it submits all the same.

After completing an arduous day of work, women were responsible for keeping watch for incendiary bombs and cleaning the city in order to prevent the spread of disease. Many women also served on the Leningrad Front, thus playing a direct role in the war's unfolding. For example, Svetlana Magayeva recalls in her memoirs how her 18-year-old cousin, Klava, volunteered at the front as a nurse, taking Svetlana's blue hair ribbon with her as a talisman.¹⁵ Young women volunteered at the front, not only as medical professionals, but also as soldiers in some cases, with many of them even gaining the rank of senior sergeant and sergeant-major. In an interview, Major-General Emelyan Logutkin, who served on the front, stated, "We got about 17,000 young women and girls from Leningrad. They were a splendid lot . . . I have a good knowledge of history in general, and of our military history. I don't think there's ever been a case in our history when regular units of our troops were made of women."¹⁶ Throughout the war, women played an invaluable part in keeping Leningrad alive for the almost 900 days of siege, overcoming their traditional gender roles in order to defend their city.

"WE MUST PRESERVE THIS FOR HUMANITY" — MOTIVATIONS FOR RECORDING THE SIEGE EXPERIENCE

To evaluate women's experience during the siege more fully, one must consider not only the context in which memoirs and diaries about the event were published, but also the

¹² Simmons and Perlina. *Writing*. p. xii

¹³ It is important to note that in Russian, the title is in the female gender, so the title literally means "Woman Victor."

¹⁴ Inber, Vera. "Pobeditelnitsa (Победительница)." *Ленинград Блокада Подвиг*. Web. <<http://blokada.otrok.ru/poetry.php?t=107>>. Please note that all the English translations of the poetry are my own.

¹⁵ Magaeva, S. V., and Albert Jan Pleysier. *Surviving the Blockade of Leningrad*. Trans. A. V. Vinogradov. Lanham, MD: University of America, 2006. Print. p. 34-35

¹⁶ Adamovich, Ales', and Daniil Aleksandrovich. Granin. *A Book of the Blockade*. Moscow: Raduga, 1983. Print. p. 128

writers' motivations for recording their siege experiences themselves. Lack of paper at the time made maintaining a diary difficult, as exemplified by Elena Kochina, who wrote her diary entries on pieces of wallpaper, newspaper, and forms.¹⁷ Although not all-encompassing, the prevailing motivation for women to maintain diaries during the siege was to serve as witnesses of an historic event. Poet Vera Inber exemplifies this motivation to observe and record history, since Inber decided to travel to Leningrad at the start of the war and remained there throughout the blockade. Though Inber's husband, a doctor, received the option to work in Archangel or Leningrad, Inber wrote to a friend that, "as a poet, [she] should in time of war be in the centre of events; naturally Leningrad would be much more interesting."¹⁸ A desire to witness and record the suffering of the siege also compelled 18-year-old artist Elena Martilla to continue attending the only art school that remained open in the city and to depict the horrific, unforgettable images of the event. Her art teacher, Professor Yan Shablovsky instructed her:

Lena, things are getting very bad here. I don't expect to survive this. But someone must make a record of what is happening. Go out with a sketchbook and start drawing what you see. You are a portrait artist — so draw pictures of Leningrad's people under siege — honest pictures, showing how they are suffering in these diabolical circumstances. We must preserve this for humanity. Future generations must be warned of the absolute horror of war.¹⁹

While the desire to serve as witnesses to history explains many of the *blokadnitsy*'s decisions to chronicle their experiences, the question remains as to what motivated *blokadnitsy* to write memoirs specifically. For *blokadnitsa* Olga Grechina, the ignorance and callousness of the modern Leningraders, who would say, "We're tired of hearing about your siege. Everyone suffered during the war," motivated her to record her experience.²⁰ Although many such accounts of the siege were subject to self-censorship, the authors' motivations provide some reassurance regarding the veracity of the records surrounding the event.

WOMEN AS THE PRESERVERS OF HOME AND HEARTH

One of the reoccurring motifs of these siege accounts involves the expectation that women would continue to fulfill their traditional domestic duties throughout the blockade. The lack of preparation for the German invasion, in addition to the bombing of the Badaev warehouse — the primary food stockpile and "the heart and stomach of the city"²¹ — resulted in a deadly food shortage, which transformed women's traditional duty of preparing meals into a desperate battle for survival.²² While accounts of the siege universally illustrate the

¹⁷ Kochina, Elena. *Blockade Diary*. Trans. Samuel Carroll Ramer. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1990. Print. p. 29

¹⁸ Inber, Vera. *Leningrad Diary*. [New York]: St. Martin's, 1971. Print. Introduction.

¹⁹ Jones, Michael K. *Leningrad: State of Siege*. New York: Basic, 2008. Print. p. 149

²⁰ Simmons and Perlina. *Writing*. p. 109

²¹ Inber, Vera. p. 16.

²²The following data illustrates the extent of the food crisis that gripped Leningrad since the very early days of the siege. "They counted supplies of grain as well as flour, live cattle and pigs as well as meat in cold stores, and poultry and canned goods. Pavlov concluded that the supplies of grain and flour would last thirty-three days, the supplies of cereals thirty days, the live and dead meat thirty-three days, the fats forty-five days and the sugar

"YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WOMAN."

blokadnitsy's obsession with food and the anguish of starvation, women were primarily responsible for collecting rations, scouting for food, and preparing whatever they could obtain for their families. In Lidiya Ginzburg's piece of documentary fiction based on her own experience of the blockade, she explains, "men cope particularly badly with [ration] queues. . . The siege queues were inscribed into an age-old background of things being issued or available, into the normal female irritation and the normal female patience. On the other hand, almost every one of the men who turned up in a shop tried to get to the counter before his turn . . . one thing they do know — a queue is women's business."²³ Along with queuing up for rations, which typically required waking before dawn, trudging to a bakery on foot since public transportation had stopped running, and standing in line for hours upon end, many women also struggled to acquire food on the black market. Diarist Elena Skrjabina, for example, wrote about the physical and emotional difficulties of trading cigarettes, her husband's boots, and a ladies' pair of shoes for 16 kilos of potatoes and two liters of milk.²⁴ In Elena Kochina's diary, on the other hand, the author describes her and her husband's joy at discovering over two pounds of wallpaper glue made of macaroni waste products. When Elena's husband began desperately stuffing the glue into his mouth, Elena tore the box from his hands, dismissed his imprudent suggestion to make porridge with the glue, and authoritatively decided to make soup out of it instead, which they could then subsist on for 10 days.²⁵

These anecdotal experiences illustrate how, during the siege, women simultaneously transcended their traditional domestic duties in order to perform the tasks abandoned by the men serving on the front, and yet also continued to fulfill their traditional gender roles. Indeed, these traditional domestic roles reached their greatest intensity during the most desperate days of the siege. As Elena Skrjabina wrote in her diary, "If I should fail, the whole family will perish. Who would bring these pathetic bread rations on which our lives depend?"²⁶

THE STRUGGLE FOR NORMALCY

Despite such dire circumstances, many *blokadnitsy* endeavored to maintain a semblance of normalcy during the siege by maintaining certain everyday routines. Public libraries remained open, actors continued performing at theaters, and students attended schools, even as already paltry rations steadily decreased and the sight of corpses, wrapped in sheets on their way to city cemeteries, became increasingly common during the severe winter of 1941-1942. One of the most remarkable examples of women's efforts to maintain normalcy entailed celebrations of both national and personal holidays. Several diaries and memoirs recount New Year's Eve celebrations during the winter of 1941-1942. In her memoir, Svetalana Magayeva, who was only 10-years-old during the blockade, recalls attending a 1942

and confectionery sixty days. These estimates were alarming, and the city's Party leadership realized if food was not brought into the city the population would die within two months." Magaeva. and Pleysier, *Surviving*, p. 13

²³ Ginzburg, Lidiya, Alan Myers, and Aleksandr Kushner. *Blockade Diary*. London: Harvill, 1995. P. 39

²⁴ Skrjabina, Elena. p. 28.

²⁵ Kochina, Elena. p. 51

²⁶ Skrjabina, p. 62

New Year celebration, where she “even received a New Year’s gift from Father Frost”: “At the time I received the gift, I thought I was dreaming or in a state of delirium caused by hunger. But the gift was not an illusion; it was real. It was a piece of bread along with a sweet stick of glucose.”²⁷ Every day, 14-year-old Svetlana saved some of the granulated sugar her family members used to drink with their tea, so that by the time her mother’s birthday arrived, she had amassed about 300 grams of sugar to give as a present to her mother.²⁸ Such efforts to maintain a semblance of normalcy by recognizing national and family holidays further demonstrates how women continued to perform their traditional gender roles as preservers of home and hearth.

THE DISINTEGRATION OF MORALITY

As historians Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina discuss in the introduction to *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women’s Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*, women also continued to fulfill their traditional gender roles by acting as “arbiters of morality.”²⁹ Despite that Adamovich and Granin deemphasize the extent of criminal activity during the siege in *A Book of the Blockade*, diaries and memoirs abound with records of individuals stealing bread rations, fallen corpses in the street stripped of their belongings, and, most horrifyingly, rumors of cannibalism.³⁰ *Blokadnitsa* Sofia Nikolaevna Buriakova recalls that upon hearing of her brother’s death, she immediately suspected her brother’s neighbors of having murdered him in order to steal his ration card. Furthermore, while visiting the cemetery to bury her father, Buriakova was more horrified by the depravity of the gravediggers than by the sight of the communal trench graves in which the deceased were laid out in three rows, with each including as many as 200 corpses. Buriakova writes that “having grown numb from work, having lost a sense of what was permissible, the gravediggers stooped to all sorts of disgusting jokes, even blatantly violating the deceased. On the road leading to the communal grave a tall corpse had been stood with a cigarette sticking out of his mouth, his frozen, iced-over arm pointing the way to the trench-graves.”³¹ Still, Simmons and Perlina neglect to mention that women not only acted as “arbiters of morality” in society but also recognized their own moral failings. For example, Vera Inber recounts in her diary that when she and her husband were caught on the street during an air raid, an elderly woman approached them, desperately begging them to help her find her ration card which she had lost in the snow. Inber recounts, “I was overcome by fear and exhaustion, and I had reached the end of my tether. I said, ‘Look for yourself. We cannot.’” But Inber’s husband, ignoring her words, helped the elderly woman find her lost card, and

²⁷ Magaeva, S. V., and Albert Jan Pleysier. p. 64.

²⁸ Adamovich, Ales’, and Daniil Aleksandrovich Granin. *Leningrad Under Siege: First-hand Accounts of the Ordeal*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2007. Print. p. 155-156

²⁹ Simmons and Perlina. *Writing*. p. 11-13

³⁰ Adamovich, Ales’, and Daniil Aleksandrovich Granin. p. 82 “Some stories came our way — vague, second-hand ones — about bread being stolen (by adolescents or men, who suffered most from hunger pains and proved to have the least power of endurance). But when we began to question people, to ascertain how many times they had themselves seen it happen, it turned out, nevertheless, that there were not many instances. In such a big city, of course, all kinds of things happened.”

³¹ Simmons and Perlina. *Writing*. p. 101.

"YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WOMAN."

then the couple led the woman off the street to safety. In admitting her own apathy towards the elderly woman who may well have died without her ration card, Inber suggests that the desperate conditions of the siege caused a widespread disintegration of morality.³²

In her diary, Elena Kochina candidly acknowledges how the conditions of the siege wholly changed her values. When she discovers that her husband, Dima, had stolen bread from the bakery, Kochina abandons her traditional moral judgment that theft is morally wrong and attempts to justify Dima's crime by arguing that the salespeople at the bakery are themselves robbing the population by profiting from the siege conditions. Kochina recalls the first time Dima arrived home with a stolen loaf of bread, manically laughing, and recounts: "I looked at him with horror. What could I say to him? That it's not good to steal? That would sound idiotic. So I just remarked: 'Be more careful.'"³³ Later in her diary, Kochina details her and her husband's preparations to evacuate Leningrad via the Road of Life, the route across the frozen Lake Lagoda leading out of the besieged city. Kochina recounts her preparations: "For the journey I put on Galya's bloomers. . . Putting them on I thought of how I had been revolted, just quite recently, when Dima took someone else's pants. And now I was doing exactly the same thing. The concept of honesty has evidently become a dead letter to us."³⁴ While Soviet women acted as "arbiters of morality," witnessing and judging society's crimes, they were also aware of their own shortcomings as the horrific conditions of the siege slowly undermined their own value systems.

Despite this environment of crime and immorality, the siege also encouraged great acts of heroism and respect for seemingly unimportant values. Even during the coldest days in the winter of 1941-1942, for instance, when people were desperate for firewood, Leningraders never destroyed any of the trees that adorned their public parks. In an interview, Olga Grechina proudly recounted, "But I wanted to say that even though it was so deadly cold, and almost everyone's windows were broken, even then not one Leningrader cut down a living tree. No one ever did that. Because we loved our city, and we could not deprive it of its greenery."³⁵

THE RESURGENCE OF RELIGION

As women during the siege acted as "arbiters of morality," they also became increasingly active in the religious community. As many of the *blokadnitsy* noted, the war served, in a way, as a cruel reprieve from Stalin's terror, as most explicitly demonstrated in the regime's more lenient stance towards the Orthodox Church, in contrast to earlier harsh anti-religion campaigns. During the siege, ten Orthodox churches were open throughout Leningrad, with daily services that attracted a decent attendance. Every day of the siege, even during air raids, the Metropolitan Aleksi led a procession with an icon around the Cathedral of St. Nicholas.³⁶ Even though many individuals attended mass, as Valentina Petrova did at

³² Inber, Vera. p. 33.

³³ Kochina, Elena. p. 60-61

³⁴ Kochina, Elena. p. 102

³⁵ Simmons and Perlina, *Writing*. p. 111. The fact that no one ever cut down any of the trees was evidently a point of pride, since in her diary, Vera Inber also notes, "All the fences, amongst them ours, have disappeared. But the beautiful centuries-old birch and lime tress have been left alone." Inber, Vera. p. 55

³⁶ Simmons and Perlina, *Writing*. p. xx

the Nikol'skii Cathedral, many people feared repression from the regime if they demonstrated their religious sentiment in public.³⁷ While recovering from severe starvation in a house for children, Svetlana Magayeva recalled seeing one of her teachers praying for her son: "She whispered to me that she had prayed to God to protect her son from war and to return him to her. She did not want anyone to know that she had been praying and asked me not to tell the others that I had seen her pray. I promised I would not tell anyone."³⁸ Furthermore, Elena Martilla drew a picture of a woman stationed at the entrance of an apartment block, on watch for incendiary bombs and cradling her sleeping child. Martilla was quick to hide the drawing when she realized that she had subconsciously integrated religious imagery into the drawing by creating a Leningrad Madonna.³⁹ The suffering of the siege compelled women to transcend their gender roles in order to defend the city and, at the same time, motivated them to embrace their traditional role as preserver of morality by involvement, openly or covertly, in the Orthodox Church.

DISAPPOINTMENT AND DISILLUSIONMENT — THE DISINTEGRATION OF RELATIONSHIPS

In the conclusion of Cynthia Simmons's and Nina Perlina's collection of women's siege writings, they suggest that the predominant, if latent, theme of the women's siege experience was their suffering in having to endure a life alone, without family. "We could not help but sense a persistent, if underlying, motif — these women, though victorious suffered tremendous losses. Their greatest tragedies — after the death of their beloved children, husbands, brothers, parents, and friends — are revealed when we identify those aspects of a woman's natural peacetime existence that remain in

this collection *unchronicle*d. They all have to do with life lived without men."⁴⁰ While the loss of an almost entire generation of men is quite tragic, robbing many women of their husbands and stealing from many women the chance to marry and have children, I would



Figure 1: Elena Martilla's *Leningrad Madonna*
Jones, Michael K. *Leningrad: State of Siege*. New
York: Basic, 2008. Print.

³⁷ Simmons and Perlina, *Writing*. p. 125

³⁸ Magayeva, Svetlana. p. 99

³⁹ Jones, Michael K. *Leningrad: State of Siege*. New York: Basic, 2008. Print. p. 171-172.

⁴⁰ Simmons and Perlina. *Writing*. p.209.

"YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WOMAN."

suggest that there is an even more tragic element concerning women's relationships with men during the siege: in the rare instances when relationships are mentioned, they are characterized by utter disillusionment and lead to the conclusion that during the darkest times, companionship provides no solace. The oboist Ksenia Matus, who performed in the concert of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony on Leningrad Radio, recalled her disappointed romance with a fellow musician whom she refers to as V. Matus describes in great detail how, soon after V was drafted, she read an article informing her that V qualified for an exemption from service. Matus thus spent three days travelling around the city, moving through all the bureaucratic organs in order to secure V's deferral. Only a few days after securing his release, V went to return his military uniform and was promptly informed that his deferral was invalid and sent back to the front. Matus underwent the entire bureaucratic process once again and secured a deferral for V a second time. Happily reunited, Matus and V engaged to be married, but their chance for happiness was poisoned because the deprivations of the war made all too acutely clear V's "shameless selfishness," especially after everything Matus had done to save him from military service.⁴¹

In an even more heartrending portrayal, Elena Kochina's diary details the disintegration of her marriage. In the beginning of her diary, Kochina presents her husband Dima as a loving husband and a doting father devotedly caring for their infant daughter, Lena. After the outbreak of war, Dima was one of the few men granted a labor exemption, and so when Kochina missed the opportunity to evacuate with the institute where she worked, she was one of the few women not separated from her husband. In the early days of the siege, Dima continued to be a tender husband, saving the lunches he received at the factory for Kochina. However, as blockade conditions worsened, bread rations decreased, and hunger began to set in, Kochina witnessed her husband's transformation into someone she hardly recognized. As early as October 1941, Kochina suspected Dima of eating from their reserve of bread, despite their agreement to save it, and she also began to suspect Dima of surreptitiously eating the millet she had been saving for their daughter Lena. Kochina wrote in her diary, "I've noticed that during the last few days the millet is quickly disappearing. It's got to be Dima who is eating it. Every day when I leave the house I hide it in a new place: in the chimney, under the bed, under the mattress. But he finds it everywhere."⁴² Kochina eventually confronted Dima in the act of eating Lena's millet and decided to carry the millet with her wherever she went. Although initially sympathetic and understanding of Dima's desperate hunger, Kochina soon became outraged at his behavior, especially upon discovering that he ate Lena's special bread ration as well. Kochina explains the transformation in her relationship with her husband:

Dima and I have become like one organism. If one of us is sick or feels poorly, or is in a bad mood, the other instantly feels it painfully. And at the same time we've never been as remote from one another as now. Each of us struggles silently with his own sufferings. There's no way we can help one another. After all, it's my heart (only I hear its irregular beat), my stomach (only I feel its aching emptiness), and my brain

⁴¹ Simmons and Perlina. *Writing*. p. 152-155

⁴² Kochina, Elena. p. 47.

(only I feel the whole weight of unexpressed thoughts) – only I can force them to endure. We realize now that man must be able to struggle alone with life and death.⁴³

While enduring the siege, Kochina also suffered through the deterioration of her marriage, the repeated betrayals of a husband so possessed by hunger that he would steal food from the mouth of their infant daughter, and the discovery of the bitter truth that despite all the consolations of companionship, man is inherently alone. As Lidiya Ginzburg explained in her work of documentary fiction, “In the circumstances of the siege, the first and closest degree of the social guarantee was the family, the cell of blood and existence with its inexorable demand for sacrifice. People say: the ties of love and blood make sacrifice easier. No, it’s much more complicated than that. So painful, so fearful was it to touch one another, that in propinquity, at close quarters, it was hard to distinguish love from hatred – towards those one couldn’t leave.”⁴⁴

THE STARVING BODY AND WOMEN’S SENSE OF SELF-ALIENATION

While the trials of the siege alienated women from their significant others, the suffering women endured during the blockade also alienated them from their own bodies. Bemoaning their loss of youth, beauty, and femininity reflects this sense of estrangement. Lidiya Ginzburg noted in her documentary, “During the period of greatest exhaustion everything became clear: the mind was hauling the body along with it.”⁴⁵ Their sense of detachment and even disgust at the sight of their emaciated bodies pervades women’s records of the siege. Anna Likhacheva, a doctor, wrote in her diary details of her work overseeing the distribution of “supplemental nourishment” to victims of dystrophy.⁴⁶ In her explanation of the proper quantity of fats and sugars to reintroduce into the diet of a starving person, Likhacheva explains that a certain regimen “produces wonderful results on a starving organism that has gone a long time without normal nourishment. I experienced this personally at the beginning of May, when I received supplemental feedings for six days.”⁴⁷ The trauma of the siege compelled Likhacheva to adopt a startling clinical tone for a document as personal as a diary, and this tone illustrates how the effects of starvation alienated Likhacheva from her own body so that she refers to her body as “a starving organism.”

Along with the sense of detachment from bodies they hardly recognize as their own, many women, such as Elena Kochina and Lidiya Okhapkina, lamented the fact that siege conditions left them so emaciated that their breast milk had run dry and they could no longer nurse their infant children. For Kochina and Okhapkina, the inability to breastfeed their children reflected how the war had personally assaulted their bodies and robbed them of an integral part of their identity – their ability to fulfill their role as mothers. Okhapkina describes the excruciating experience of hearing her infant daughter’s endless crying and feeling wholly powerless to nourish her. Okhapkina explains,

⁴³ Kochina, Elena. p. 70.

⁴⁴ Ginzburg, Lidiya. p. 7

⁴⁵ Ginzburg, Lidiya. p. 9

⁴⁶ The term “dystrophy” was a euphemism for starvation quite frequently employed in siege writings.

⁴⁷ Simmons and Perlina. p. 59

"YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WOMAN."

My Ninochka cried all the time . . . in an attempt to get her to sleep, I gave her my blood to suck. There had been no milk in my breasts for a long time, and the breasts themselves had completely vanished, gone. So I pricked my arm above the elbow with a needle and applied my daughter's mouth to the place. She sucked gently and then fell asleep.⁴⁸

Vera Inber poignantly captures the drastic transformation a woman's body underwent during the siege, leaving women feeling genderless, robbed of their femininity. Inber's poem *Pulkovskii Meridian* includes the stanza,

У женщин начинается отек,
Они всё зябнут (это не от стужи).
Крест-накрест на груди у них все туже,
Когда-то белый, вязаный платок.
Не веришь: неужели эта грудь
Могла дитя вскормить когда-нибудь?⁴⁹

For the women, edema had started to set in,
They all suffer (and this is not from the severe cold).
Crisscrossed around their chest they have pulled tighter,
The once white, knitted scarf.
You cannot believe it: is it possible that this chest
Could have one time fed children?

When Okhapkina evacuated with her children from Leningrad and reunited with her husband after ten months of separation, their joyful reunion was tainted by the fact that her husband initially could not recognize her. Okhapkina describes her first evening reunited with her husband: "When I had undressed, I stood naked in front of my husband. 'See what I have become,' I said. I was nothing but skin and bone. My chest was especially awful, just ribs. And I was a nursing mother when the war began. My legs were skinny, hardly plumper than a half-liter bottle. Vasili looked at me and started to blink his eyes again."⁵⁰ For Okhapkina, as for many other women, the war and the starvation of the siege was a personal assault, alienating her from her own body, robbing her of her breast-milk to fulfill her maternal role, depriving her of her femininity, and making her feel repulsive in the eyes of her husband.

⁴⁸ Adamovich, Ales', and Daniil Aleksandrovich. Granin. *Leningrad Under Siege: First-hand Accounts of the Ordeal*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2007. Print. p. 117

⁴⁹ Inber, Vera. "Pulkovskii Meridian (Пулковский меридиан)." *Ленинград Блокада Подвиг*. Web. <<http://blokada.otrok.ru/poetry.php?t=101>>.

⁵⁰ Adamovich, Ales', and Daniil Aleksandrovich. Granin. *Leningrad Under Siege: First-hand Accounts of the Ordeal*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military, 2007. Print. p. 185

THE POETRY OF VERA INBER

Throughout the war, poetry played a very important role in boosting the morale of the besieged and of the military forces. Poets and writers such as Vera Ketlinskaya, Olga Berggolts, and Vera Inber were frequently called upon to read their work on radio broadcasts and to soldiers on the front. In analyzing selected works by Vera Inber, the question arises as to how much insight these works provide into women's experiences during the blockade. Although Inber's poetry poignantly illustrates many of the motifs in women's diaries and memoirs concerning the siege, most of her poetry written during this period was blatant propaganda to raise the spirits of war-weary citizens and serve as a rallying call to defend the motherland. This description aptly characterizes poetry such as Inber's "*Beat the Enemy!*" featured on a TASS propaganda poster (Figure 2).

Inber herself explained in a lecture the purpose of poetry to beseech her fellow poets: "Let us do our utmost so that the poetry of the Fatherland War (in particular the poetry of Leningrad) should be worthy of that great goal it serves — the destruction of Fascism and the triumph of justice."⁵¹ However, the fact that Inber's poetry served as war propaganda does not preclude it from providing insight into women's experience of the siege. Comparing Inber's poetry to her diary reveals the sincere nature of her poetry. Although optimistic considering the circumstances, Inber's diary does include some pessimistic statements concerning the survival of Leningrad that she excluded from her poetry.⁵² On the whole, however, Inber's poetry is quite genuine, expressing many of the thoughts she records in her diary, such as her concern about the destruction of the city (she is especially preoccupied with the bombing of the Botanical Garden) and her grief at the death of her infant grandson.⁵³



Figure 2: TASS Poster
"Beat the Enemy!"

<http://www.neboltai.org/>

⁵¹ Inber, Vera. p. 161

⁵² Inber, Vera. p. 43. For instance, in her diary entry on January 4, 1942, Inber wrote, "It seems to me that unless the blockade is broken within the next ten days the city cannot hold out... Leningrad has had all it can take from this war."

⁵³ Inber, Vera. "Pulovskii Meridian (Пулковский меридиан)." *Ленинград Блокада Подвиг*. Web. <<http://blokada.otrok.ru/poetry.php?t=101>>.

Я внука потеряла на войне...

О нет! Он не был ни боец, ни воин.

Он был так мал, так в жизни не устроен,

Он должен был начать ходить к весне.

I lost my grandson in the war...

Oh no! He was not a soldier, not a warrior.

He was so small, not yet settled in life.

He should have started to walk towards spring.

"YOU ARE FIRST AND FOREMOST A WOMAN."

We can also see how Inber's work portrays one of the most prominent motifs of women's experience during the siege – the fact that women transcended their traditional gender roles and fulfilled men's duties in order to defend their city. Inber's poem *The Nurturing Woman's Hand* (*Заботливая женская рука*) explains how women are not only tender, affectionate mothers, but can also perform many heroic actions in defense of their country. In the poem, women are on duty during an air raid, extinguishing fires from incendiary bombs, braving the din of shelling to rescue the wounded, and preparing defensive fortifications "with unwomanly strength" ("с неженской силой"). In the last stanza of the poem, women have wholly transcended their traditional gender role – they have been transformed into soldiers who never miss a shot aimed at the fleeing German forces. It is especially interesting to note how Inber's portrayal of women in her war's end poem *Victor* (*Победительница*) departs from her earlier depiction of women during the war. In celebration of victory, Inber reminds her female readers:

Минуло время тяжелой военной заботы.

Вспомнила ты, что, помимо профессий мужских,

Женщина прежде всего ты.⁵⁴

The time of heavy war work has passed.

You remembered that aside from the professions of men,

You are first and foremost a woman.

Inber's poem concludes at the woman returning home to her traditional gender role, caring for her child while she gently whispers for someone to be quiet and not wake up the baby.

CONCLUSION

The dearth of men in Leningrad during the war made the siege of Leningrad a woman's experience. In the face of the men's absence, women were expected to replace men in the factories, prepare defense fortifications, and protect the city from incendiary bombs, among many other traditionally male duties. All the while, women also fulfilled their traditional responsibilities, such as maintaining home and hearth and preserving societal morality, all increasingly difficult tasks during the severe conditions of the siege. Women managed to assume both roles, all while suffering from starvation, the disintegration of relationships, and alienation from their own bodies. Their experience of the siege illustrates how the ideology of the "new Soviet woman" – woman as man's professional equal, full-time worker, loyal Communist citizen, and devoted mother and wife – persisted in the darkest days of the siege of Leningrad.

Его зимою, от меня вдали,

На кладбище под мышкой понесли.

And so far away from me this winter,

They carried him under arm to the cemetery.

⁵⁴ Inber, Vera. "Pobeditelnitsa (Победительница)." *Ленинград Блокада Подвиг*. Web.

<<http://blokada.otrok.ru/poetry.php?t=107>>

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TITLE IMAGE

Woman sticking up agitation poster in blockaded Leningrad, 1943

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