

The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1995

Myth, Memories, and Monuments



Lisa A. Kirschenbaum

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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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LISA A. KIRSCHENBAUM

West Chester University of Pennsylvania



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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.

Acknowledgments

From inspiration to realization is, of course, a long road. I would like to express my gratitude to the people who contributed to this book in all sorts of ways. I have benefited enormously from the advice and questions of friends and colleagues who read all or part of the book in its various forms: Eliza Ablavotski, Carol Avins, Jeffrey Brooks, Maria Bucur, Barbara Engel, Sibelan Forrester, Karin Gedge, Helena Goscilo, Peter Gray, Michael Hickey, Katherine Jolluck, Adele Lindenmeyr, Karl Loewenstein, Lynn Mally, Louise McReynolds, Benjamin Nathans, Claire Nolte, Kendrick Oliver, Cynthia Paces, Rochelle Ruthchild, Roshanna Sylvester, Barbara Walker, Robert Weinberg, and Elizabeth Wood. I extend my thanks to Steven Maddox for his generous help with photographs. Nancy Wingfield happily read and reread everything I sent her, offered invaluable suggestions and support, and helped me hunt down a very difficult-to-find reference.

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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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 Maalouf¹

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.

¹ Amin Maalouf, *The Rock of Tanios*, trans. Dorothy S. Blair (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 261. Cited in Ellen L. Fleischmann, "Selective Memory, Gender, and Nationalism: Palestinian Women Leaders of the Mandate Period," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 47 (Spring 1999): 142.

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.”² 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

² Andrei Dzeniskevich, “The Social and Political Situation in Leningrad in the First Months of the German Invasion: The Psychology of the Workers,” in Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch, eds., *The People’s War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 77.

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, monuments, 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

³ A. R. Dzenishevich, *Blokada i politika: Oborona Leningrada v politicheskoi kon'iunkture* (St. Petersburg: Nestor, 1998), 45–68. V. M. Koval'chuk, “Tragicheskie tsifry blokady (K voprosu ob ustanovlenii chisla zhertv blokirovannogo Leningrada),” in A. A. Fursenko, ed., *Rossia v XIX–XX vv: Sbornik statei k 70-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia Rafaila Sholomovicha Ganelina* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1998), 357–69. David M. Glantz, *The Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1944: 900 Days of Terror* (Osceola, WI: MBI Publishing, 2001), 180.

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.⁴ Apparently, Leningraders (now Petersburgers) 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.⁵ 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

⁴ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 384. Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (New York: Viking, 2000), 16–17, 213, 238–39, 329. Nina Tumarkin, “The Great Patriotic War as Myth and Memory,” *European Review* 11 (2003): 595, 609–10. Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson, “Unraveling the Threads of History: Soviet-Era Monuments and Post-Soviet National Identity in Moscow,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 (September 2002): 531–32.

⁵ Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between Memory and History,” in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1: 18.

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 efface 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.⁶ 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.⁷ Instead, I view "myth" as deeply connected to

⁶ Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *American Historical Review* 102 (December 1997): 1394, 1402.

⁷ Nina Tumarkin emphasizes the disjuncture between the survivors' "raw" memory and the state's "myth." Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 188. Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina argue that "only with the advent of glasnost" could "unvarnished" accounts

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.”

“appear in print in the USSR.” Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women’s Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), xxxi. Geoffrey Hosking contrasts “real memory” and “the mythologized substitute.” Hosking, “Memory in a Totalitarian Society: The Case of the Soviet Union,” in Thomas Butler, ed., *Memory: History, Culture, and Mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 118. Éléonora Martino-Fristot contrasts “tragic” individual memory and “epic” public memory, while also tracing their interactions. Martino-Fristot, “La mémoire du blocus de Leningrad, 1945–1999” (Ph.D. diss., Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2002).

⁸ The term “muddle of images” is from Samuel Hynes, “Personal Narratives and Commemoration,” in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 207. Studies of memory that have influenced my approach include Susan Crane, “Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory,” *American Historical Review* 102 (December 1997): 1372–85; Andrew Lass, “From Memory to History: The Events of 17 December Dis/membered,” in Rubie S. Watson, ed., *Memory, History, and Opposition under State Socialism* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1994), 87–104; Paula Hamilton, “Memory Remains: Ferry Disaster, Sydney, 1938,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 47 (Spring 1999): 192–210; Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁹ Derek Summerfield, “The Social Experience of War and Some Issues for the Humanitarian Field,” in Patrick J. Bracken and Celia Petty, eds., *Rethinking the Trauma of War* (London: Free Association Books, 1998), 22. See also Jennifer Cole, “Painful Memories: Ritual and the Transformation of Community Trauma,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 28 (March 2004): 87–105.

¹⁰ I have used the translation in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege*, 106. Ol’ga Grechina, “Spasaius’ spasaia: Chast’ I: Pogibel’naia zima (1941–1942 gg.),” *Neva*, 1994, no. 1: 212.

¹¹ Gerald D. Fischbach and Joseph T. Coyle, “Preface,” in Daniel L. Schacter, ed., *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), ix. The anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin proposes that “identity and memory are virtually the same concept.” Boyarin, “Space, Time, and the

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.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.”¹⁵ 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.

¹² Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 777.

¹³ Fleischmann, “Selective Memory,” 143–44.

¹⁴ Stuart L. Charmé, *Meaning and Myth in the Study of Lives: A Sartrean Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 151.

¹⁵ Hynes, “Personal Narratives,” 207. 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.

study of the London Blitz, that myths “are important historical events in their own right.”¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.

¹⁶ Malcolm Smith, *Britain and 1940: History, Myth, and Popular Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 6.

¹⁷ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), 1–3. Jean R. Freedman, *Whistling in the Dark: Memory and Culture in Wartime London* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 1–2, 14. Smith, *Britain and 1940*, 2–9.

¹⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). On “collective remembrance,” see Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, “Setting the Framework,” in *War and Remembrance*, 9–10. On “collected memory,” see James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), xi–xii. See also Hynes, “Personal Narratives,” 206; Boyarin, “Space, Time,” 23.

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.¹⁹ 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.”²⁰

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.²¹ 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.²² However, recent work in cognitive psychology has called

¹⁹ Lars T. Lih, “Vlast’ from the Past: Stories Told by Bolsheviks,” *Left History* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 29.

²⁰ Michael David-Fox, “Cultural Memory in the Century of Upheaval: Big Pictures and Snapshots,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2 (Summer 2001): 612.

²¹ The phrase “current discourse on trauma” comes from Patrick J. Bracken, “Hidden Agendas: Deconstructing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,” in *Rethinking the Trauma of War*, 38. Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997). On cross-cultural variations, see Selma Leydesdorff et al., “Introduction: Trauma and Life Stories,” in Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff, and Graham Davis, eds., *Trauma and Life Stories: International Approaches* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1–26. On the history of the concept of trauma, see Paul Lerner and Mark S. Micale, eds., *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). On the history of PTSD, see Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

²² Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, eds., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed*

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.²³ 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.²⁴

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, the 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.”²⁵ 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

Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Saul Friedlander, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). Y. Zerubavel, “The ‘Mythological Sabra’ and Jewish Past: Trauma, Memory and Contested Identities,” *Israel Studies* 7 (2002): 115–44.

²³ J. D. Read, “Introduction to the Special Issue: Trauma, Stress, and Autobiographical Memory,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 15 (December 2001): S1–S5. Stephan Porter and Angela Birt, “Is Traumatic Memory Special? A Comparison of Traumatic Memory Characteristics with Memory for Other Emotional Life Experiences,” in *ibid.*, S101–17. Dorthe Bernsten, “Involuntary Memories of Emotional Events: Do Memories of Traumas and Extremely Happy Events Differ?” in *ibid.*, S135–58.

²⁴ Bracken, “Hidden Agendas,” 38.

²⁵ Summerfield, “The Social Experience,” 23, 34.

in the peculiarities of the “Russian way of thinking about life, death, and individual need” that make “notions of psychological trauma . . . as foreign as the imported machinery that seizes up and fails in a Siberian winter.”²⁶

The Leningrad case emerges as a particularly clear example of the centrality of social connection and shared values in surviving and remembering war. Chapter 2 documents how, from the first days of the war, the local media infused Leningrad’s wartime experience with mythic narratives and images, encouraging Leningraders to understand themselves as “heroic defenders” of a moral and civilized community. Later chapters turn to memoirs, diaries, and oral histories to demonstrate how Leningraders, struggling to cope with the painful realities of the blockade, to make sense of tragedy, and to rebuild their lives, often internalized state myths and incorporated the media’s images and slogans into their own memories (Chapters 5 and 7). The myth, whatever its objective truth, offered a means of endowing losses with meaning as the necessary and terrible price of victory. It also raised expectations that the victory would somehow redeem the losses.

Myth, Legitimacy, and Disillusionment

A central theme of the book’s story about blockade stories is the role of myth in the construction and eventual delegitimization of Soviet identities. Recent work on Soviet identities has challenged not only the totalitarian model that represented Soviet people as coerced and terrorized but also the so-called revisionist interpretation that insisted on the agency of Soviet citizens actively pursuing their individual self-interests. Studies focusing on Soviet identities have emphasized instead the “mechanisms by which individuals became enmeshed . . . in the broad agendas and language of the regime.”²⁷ Focusing on the 1920s and 1930s, these studies trace how

²⁶ Merridale, *Night of Stone*, 251, 16.

²⁷ Stephen Kotkin, “The State – Is It Us? Memoirs, Archives, and Kremlinologists,” *Russian Review* 61 (January 2002): 50. Work in this vein includes Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Jochen Hellbeck, “Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi (1931–1939),” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44 (1996): 344–73; Hellbeck, “Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts,” *Russian Review* 60 (July 2001): 340–59; Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Anna Krylova, “Soviet Modernity in Life

individuals developed Soviet identities by learning to “speak Bolshevik” or by constructing their own “personal Bolshevism” in autobiographies and diaries.²⁸

From this perspective, disillusionment emerged not as a result of subversive or dissident ideas but as the consequence of previous illusions. Believing (or suspending disbelief) too well and too long in the face of too much adverse evidence, Soviet people somehow reached a “moment of repudiation.” Stephen Kotkin’s list of such possible moments includes

one of the famines, one’s arrest or that of a relative, the Hitler-Stalin pact, first-hand contact with capitalist societies as a result of World War II, the ‘welcome back’ from the war with the Gulag, the postwar reimposition of the kolkhoz [collective farm], the Secret Speech, 1956 in Hungary, 1968 in Prague, the shock from the first tourist or business trip to the postwar West.

Unable to account for the new data, belief, like the exhausted regime itself, simply collapsed, and Soviet people, figuratively and literally, left the Soviet experience behind.²⁹ Problematising the categories of “collaboration” and “resistance,” studies that focus on Soviet identities point to the conclusion that not dissent but circumstances, particularly the increasingly undeniable fact that Soviet socialism would never bury the consumerist economies of the West, subverted the regime. Nonetheless, the fundamental question remains: What made it possible for people “enmeshed” in the regime’s language to conclude in a single moment of clarity that their efforts to write themselves into the state’s story had been disastrously misplaced?

A study of the construction, repression, reinvigoration, and reconfiguration of the myth of the blockade helps to explain the tsunami of disillusionment that eventually overwhelmed the Soviet state by calling attention to the delegitimizing potential of the Soviet Union’s chief legitimizing myths. In the 1960s, when the state established a veritable

and Fiction: The Generation of the ‘New Soviet Person’ in the 1930s” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2001).

²⁸ On “speaking Bolshevik” see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 198–237. Hellbeck calls the diarist Stepan Podlubnyi’s “appropriation of public norms” his “personal Bolshevism.” Hellbeck, “Fashioning,” 361.

²⁹ Kotkin, “The State,” 49–50. See also Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31–34, 42–48, 67–73; Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 436; Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Language, Ideology, and Culture of the Last Soviet Generation” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1997); Paul Hollander, *Political Will and Personal Belief: The Decline and Fall of Soviet Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

cult of the Great Fatherland War – the war that had saved European civilization from fascism and established the Soviet Union as a super-power – it revived wartime language and myths that recalled the mood of unity and shared purpose that it hoped to reestablish.³⁰ The language and myths of wartime, which differed in substantial ways from the state's prewar language, also contained reminders of the unfulfilled expectations raised by the war. As Boris Pasternak observed in the epilogue to *Doctor Zhivago*, the war raised brittle hopes that the "reign of the lie" had finally ended.³¹ Ludmilla Alexeyeva, who was fifteen in 1941, remembered the war as providing a similar sense of the possibility of taking "real" action. The German invasion persuaded her that "I had to act. I had to act as an individual. All of us had to. Our leaders were wrong. They needed us. They needed the public. By realizing that, we became citizens." The conviction that "our leaders were wrong" did not necessarily entail a rejection of Soviet myth. On the contrary, Alexeyeva credited the official media's account of the murder of the partisan Zoia Kosmodem'ianskaia with providing a deeply influential model of individual action and citizenship.³² The war cult had the unintended consequence of perpetuating such (unrealized) visions of Soviet citizenship and the Soviet person.

A comparison with the equally persistent myth of the London Blitz underscores the potential for disillusionment contained in memories of the blockade. The Blitz was widely perceived (how accurately is another question) as a moment of profound national renewal. As Malcolm Smith notes, not only the war generation but also the "generation of the 1950s and 1960s" looked back on 1940 with nostalgia as "the turning point of

³⁰ Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*. Amir Weiner, "The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity," *Russian Review* 55 (October 1996): 638–60. Kotkin, *Armageddon*, 44–45.

³¹ Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Max Hayward and Manya Harari (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 507. See also Bernd Bonwetsch, "War as a 'Breathing Space': Soviet Intellectuals and the 'Great Patriotic War,'" in *The People's War*, 137–53. I discuss the wartime shift in official language more fully in "'Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families': Local Loyalties and Private Life in Soviet World War II Propaganda," *Slavic Review* 59 (Winter 2000): 825–47.

³² Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 19, 20–21. On the Zoia myth, recently debunked as largely a creation of the press, see E. S. Seniavskaia, "Geroicheskie simvoly: Real'nost' i mifologiya voyny," *Otechestvennaia istoriia*, 1995, no. 5: 38–39; translated as "Heroic Symbols: The Reality and Mythology of War," *Russian Studies in History* 37 (Summer 1998): 61–87. See also Rosalinde Sartorti, "On the Making of Heroes, Heroines, and Saints," in Richard Stites, ed., *Culture and Entertainment in Wartime Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 176–93.

British history,” when “the war against fascism produced a war for the New Jerusalem of the welfare state and Keynesian economics.”³³ Soviet veterans and *blokadniki* also often bathed war memories in nostalgia. But theirs was a nostalgia for wartime *élan* and what might have been, not for the dawn of a new world.³⁴ In Leningrad, where the myth of the blockade became connected to the long literary tradition of mythologizing the city, its history, and its inhabitants, war stories proved an especially rich source of alternative identities rooted in, but also potentially moving beyond, the Soviet experience and the language of the Soviet state.

The City of Memory

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps.

Italo Calvino³⁵

Leningraders lived simultaneously in the real city – the city of communal apartments, queues, and crowded trams – and the city of memory. By “city of memory” I mean the imagined city that city dwellers carry in their minds. Indeed, for those who love and know a city intimately, the memories mapped onto urban places may be more real than the “real” city. It is the reality of this city of memory that makes it possible to claim, as Brian Ladd does in his study of twentieth-century Berlin, that “Berlin is a haunted city.”³⁶ But it is not the city’s buildings and streets that “tell its past.” Its ghosts live in the minds of its inhabitants, who see the city’s spaces as animated by memory, who navigate the real city by remembering where a certain bakery or a friend’s apartment used to be.³⁷

The centrality of the written word in both Russian and Soviet culture and the importance of Petersburg for Russian literature added an important and pervasive element of myth – shared, dramatized narratives – to the city of memory. As Katerina Clark has noted, what in literary studies

³³ Smith, *Britain and 1940*, 4.

³⁴ E. S. Seniavskaja, *Frontovoe pokolenie, 1941–1945: Istoriko-psikhologicheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1995). Bonwetsch, “War as a ‘Breathing Space,’” 137–39.

³⁵ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harvest Books/HBJ, 1978), 11.

³⁶ Brian Ladd, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1.

³⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 108.

is conventionally called the Petersburg myth or theme or text “has been an obsession of Russian intellectual life since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century.” The myth of the city sometimes threatened to overshadow the city itself, as writers often expressed the “sense that Petersburg at some level ‘exists’ only as the focus of a myth of Petersburg, that is, only in books.”³⁸ The architects who built the much-reviled high-rise apartment complexes on the outskirts of Leningrad after the war underscored the importance of the myth of the “older more ‘real’ Leningrad (which is Petersburg)” when they argued that “writers need to come and inhabit this hinterland of mute giants – people it with human characters before the people that live here will feel that they themselves really exist.”³⁹ The stories, images, and themes – particularly the theme of destruction and redemption – that characterized the Petersburg myth provided a frame for individual experiences and memories of the city that largely ignored Soviet categories and the Soviet state’s efforts to transform urban space.

That war invaded a city steeped in myth and memory meant that the ghosts of the blockade inhabited an already haunted landscape. Thus, the interaction of the myths and memories constructed around the blockade with the dense texture of myth and memory that Leningraders associated with familiar urban places constitutes a second important theme of the book. Chapter 1 explores the prewar terrain of the city as a landscape of memory. It traces how the Soviet state’s efforts to impose its own meanings on the cityscape, coupled with the city dwellers’ practice of imagining the city as a complex web of personal and mythical stories, facilitated the construction of wartime myths, which drew on the themes of apocalypse and spiritual purification central to the older Petersburg myth. Chapter 3 returns to the question of place and memory, exploring the role played in wartime commemorations by images of the uncanny city, where familiar neighborhoods became war zones and the housewife’s

³⁸ Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 4, 3. On the Petersburg theme, see Vladimir Toporov, “Peterburg i ‘Peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury’ (Vvedenie v temu),” in *Mif. Ritual. Simvol. Obraz: Issledovanie v oblasti mifopoeticheskogo* (Moscow: Progress, 1995), 259–367; Jennifer Jean Day, “Memory as Space: The Created Petersburg of Vladimir Nabokov and Iosif Brodskii” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2001), 3–39.

³⁹ Geoffrey Barraclough, “Late Socialist Housing: Prefabricated Housing in Leningrad from Khrushchev to Gorbachev” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1997), 82, 92. Olga Sezneva finds a similar need for urban myth in post-Soviet Kaliningrad. Sezneva, “Living in the Russian Present with a German Past: The Problems of Identity in the City of Kaliningrad,” in David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 47–64.