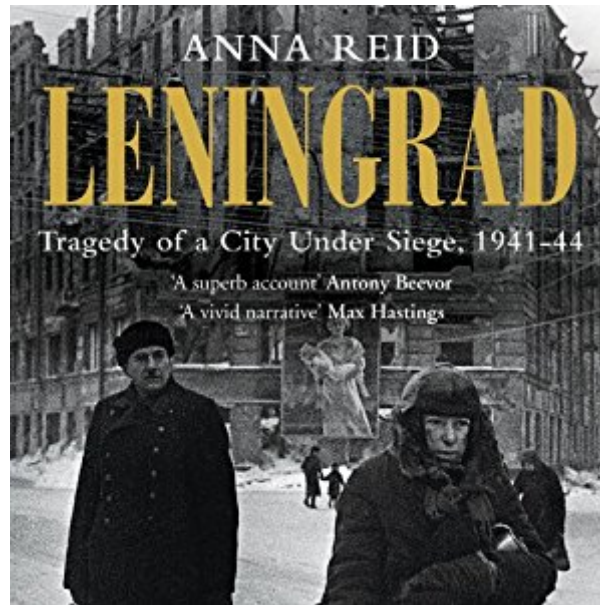


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Leningrad: The Epic Siege Of World War II, 1941-1944



Synopsis

On September 8, 1941, 11 weeks after Hitler's brutal surprise attack on the Soviet Union, Leningrad was surrounded. The German siege was not lifted for two and a half years, by which time some three quarters of a million Leningraders had died of starvation. Stripping away decades of Soviet propaganda, and drawing on newly available diaries and government records, Anna Reid chronicles the Nazis' deliberate decision to starve Leningrad into surrender, the incompetence and cruelty of the Soviet war leadership, the horrors experienced by soldiers on the front lines, and, above all, the ordeal of life in the blockaded city. Leningrad tackles a raft of unanswered questions: Was the size of the death toll as much the fault of Stalin as of Hitler? Why didn't the Germans capture the city? Why didn't it collapse into anarchy? What decided who lived and who died? Impressive in its originality and literary style, Leningrad gives voice to the dead and throws new light on one of the twentieth century's greatest calamities.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 15 hours

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios for Bloomsbury

Audible.com Release Date: March 26, 2013

Language: English

ASIN: B00C1MHW4W

Best Sellers Rank: #160 in [Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > World](#) #522 in [Books >](#)

[Audible Audiobooks > History > Europe](#) #899 in [Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Military](#)

Customer Reviews

Anna Reid has written a shocking tale about the most murderous siege in history. In September 1941, Leningrad was surrounded for two and a half years. Though there are still arguments about the number of those who perished during this horrible episode of WW2, most experts agree that around 750,000 people lost their lives during the siege, or in other words: more than a third of the city's population. Mrs. Reid uses a lot of newly published materials, such as diaries (both Russian and German) and other documents, many from Russian archives which were hitherto closed, to show the monstrosities perpetrated by the Nazi beasts in Leningrad. After the collapse of Communism, government archives opened, giving access to internal Party memos, security service reports on

crime, public opinion and the operations of various government agencies, the case files of political arrestees, and transcripts of telephone calls between Leningrad leadership and the Kremlin. The most significant result of the siege was starvation. Hundreds of thousands died on empty stomachs. Theft and crime were rampant because of the hunger, and there were also notorious cases of cannibalism—a fact which was constantly denied by the authorities until 2004. One of the NKVD reports stated that "a mother had smothered her eighteen-month-old daughter in order to feed herself and her three older children; a twenty-six-year-old man, laid off from his tyre factory, had murdered and eaten his eighteen-year-old roommate; and unemployed plumber had killed his wife in order to feed their teenage son and nieces, hiding the remains in the Lenenergo workers' hostel".

Reid approaches the siege of Leningrad differently than Harrison Salisbury in his 1969 classic "900 Days." Her focus is not Stalin or Andrei Zhdanov, his designated Communist leader in the beleaguered city, or, an analysis of the German or Russian military maneuvers and strategies in the attack, or, defense of Leningrad or the inexplicable politics of the Kremlin. Her concentration is its inhabitants; scheming to merely stay alive, scrounging for morsels of food, avoiding starvation, trying not to be that white sheeted corpse on the Nevsky Prospekt, or staying out of the murderous clutches of the NKVD. The vignettes of death are palpable; the reek of rotting bodies as the Spring of 1942 approaches, the pain of hunger, permeate the pages overwhelming the reader as the months from 1941 to 1944 click by. A whole chapter is devoted to cannibalism. Relying on poignant, well written memoirs and diaries, these writers' erudite evocation of the inhuman conditions of starvation and the meager life for the survivors describe life in Leningrad better than any writings now. As the pall of death overwhelms, and one starts to sense repetition, Reid smartly switches the story line interspersing diary excerpts from a German soldier so the reader can see the siege from the German side. The Russian counterattack at Myasnoi Bor is a well written departure demonstrating the absurdity of military strategy under Stalin. Respite also comes when Reid describes the books read by the starving diarists, and then mentioning that these books are burned for heat. She adds touching poetry from the City's remaining poets like Olga Berggolts and Vera Inber. Reid's research is detailed and her approach underscores her passion about this aspect of Russian history.

Anna Reid's new history of what may be the most horrific chapter of the bloodiest theater of World War Two is a welcome addition to a body of literature that up to 1969 had been terra incognita West of the Iron Curtain. Near the height of the Cold War, New York Times journalist Harrison Salisbury

presented readers with a monumental study of the Nazi blockade of the USSR's second largest city: the longest siege since biblical times. From the autumn of 1941 into 1944, Czar Peter the Great's "Paris of the North" was routinely bombed and shelled by the Germans. From 1941 to 1943 thousands of inhabitants perished from starvation thanks to a combination of German policy and Communist corruption and incompetence. Since Russia in 1969 was still a totalitarian state where the ruling Communists had a vested interest in perpetuating the myth of their heroic leadership in the struggle against the cruel invader, Salisbury deserves enormous credit for getting out the basics of the story. His narration is as compelling as that of any great novel and he makes an excellent case of how close The USSR came to losing the war thanks to the incompetence of Kremlin military leadership. His biggest failure, and Reid's biggest strength, is the starvation winter phase of the struggle. From 1941 to 1943, Leningrad had neither road nor rail contact with the rest of unoccupied Russia except for the tenuous links provided by Lake Ladoga. Between 750,000 and two million people perished over that period. Salisbury suggested that this tragedy was at least semi inevitable. Reid makes a convincing, and damning, case that a combination of monumental incompetence and the corruption of the city's Communist leaders made a bad situation far worse than it had to be.

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