

## "The Siege of Leningrad" / Hst WW II / Mr. Evers {Excerpted from Russia Besieged, vol. 6 of Time-Life WW II Series}

In the short term Leningrad was saved by Hitler's decision not to attack; but in fact its sufferings were just beginning. Hunger and cold, not the German Army, would now be the killers. Leningrad's only lifeline was across Lake Ladoga to the east. On the opposite shore, at Novaya Ladoga, a railroad line still linked the city to the rest of Russia and was its sole source of supply. But it was a thin, vulnerable lifeline. In the few weeks from mid-September to mid-November, barges on the lake managed to deliver 25,000 tons of food. This was a rate of 450 tons a day, and to survive, the city needed over 1,000 tons a day. Still, it all helped. Dmitry V. Pavlov, the officer in charge of Leningrad's food supply, wrote: "The 25,000 tons were only a fraction of what was needed, but they enabled Leningrad to last out for an extra 20 days, and in a fortress under siege every day counts."

Unless more food could be brought in, however, the people of Leningrad would slowly die, all three million of them. Pavlov took drastic measures. On October 12, he had 3,000 party workers check every ration card: citizens had to appear personally with their identity papers and prove that they were the rightful holders. As Pavlov had suspected, some people were using cards belonging to friends or relatives who had left Leningrad and joined the Army or had died. His men were also on the lookout for cards that had been forged by Leningrad black marketeers, or printed without authority.

The Leningrad Military Council made virtually any offense involving a ration card a capital crime. A woman who worked in a ration-card printing shop was found in possession of 100 cards and was immediately shot. After October

18, ration cards that did not bear the stamp of the party checkers became invalid. The process revealed that nearly 300,000 unauthorized cards had been in use. Their elimination meant a significantly fairer distribution of food.

But by now the food shortage was so desperate that there were some incidents of violence. Older Leningraders were robbed of their bread rations after leaving the bakery. Some youngsters were so crazed by starvation that they would snatch the bread from others' mouths. A witness recalled a confrontation outside a bakery: "A young boy tore the bread from the hands of a woman and ate it up before her eyes. She beat him with her fists, but she was too weak to take it back and had to watch as her bread disappeared. She cried like a child."

A desperate woman described in her diary the deadly effect of hunger: "Suddenly I sat down in a snowdrift. I sit and I don't understand why I have sat down. And suddenly I understood . . . it was so horrible and—above all—disgusting: to die, but from what? Not from a shell fragment, not from a bomb, but from hunger. This idea made me so sick, so miserable that I jumped up—I don't know where I got the strength—and even ran a few steps."

Yet incidents like these were isolated. Leningrad had no food riots. This was partly because such actions would have been punished by death. But it could also be credited to the stubborn loyalty of the Leningraders, who understood why supplies were short, and were determined to hold out.

On November 20, rations were reduced to their all-time low: 250 grams of bread a day for manual workers—only about a third of the amount normally needed by adults—and half this amount for office workers, dependents and children. The Leningrad authorities tried to find food substitutes. Anything was considered, however unpleasant, provided only that it could be made digestible and that it contained calories, the fuel of life that the people of Leningrad were rapidly depleting. Several barges of grain had been sunk by German bombing near the western shore of the lake. Divers were sent down and the grain was brought to the surface. It was moldy and vile tasting, but it was nutritious, and it was used as part of the dough mixture in city bakeries.

Even weirder ingredients were employed, including sawdust. Cattle and horse feed was issued to humans; the

horses ate only what humans could not digest—leaves and grass. Botanists pointed out that certain common plants were edible. The countryside was scoured for stinging nettles, which make a nourishing soup. Valuable bulbs disappeared from the city's Botanical Gardens.

All over the city, storerooms were searched and little caches of food discovered. In one warehouse 2,000 tons of sheep guts that had been stored away were found; they were processed into jelly, flavored with aromatic herbs to disguise the revolting smell and sold as part of the meat ration. People laid traps for dogs and cats, crows and sparrows, even rats and mice, and made soup out of them, often adding hair oil, vaseline or glue—anything for extra nourishment. The diary of a Leningrad woman recorded that she was existing on bread, salt water and cooked glue.

One man described a soup made from "gray cabbage"—a hard, wooden-like leaf that was cooked in salt water without any fat, and gave off an overpowering odor. Served to the employees at his power station, it filled the room with its stench. "One has to eat it without breathing."

Leningrad's death toll began to rise. People were dying of starvation in rapidly growing numbers—11,000 in November, 53,000 in December, according to official figures that were certainly lower than the true count. Even the workers with the larger rations were dying by the thousands. A factory supervisor said, "How many workers came to this office saying: 'Chief, I shall be dead today or tomorrow.' We would send them to the factory hospital, but they always died." The city's dirge was recorded by one resident in his diary: "Death . . . death . . . Everywhere death. . . . In Leningrad only one thing happens—dying. . . . Leningrad is dying. Slowly and painfully. . . . The city is perishing."

Nobody had the energy to bury the dead. Gravediggers were too weak to hack holes in the frozen ground. When someone died, the corpse was wrapped in a sheet and taken on a child's sled to the gates of the cemetery. Army engineers, summoned from the front, dynamited pits for mass burials. And sometimes the authorities discovered



Pulling a cart loaded with corpses, three Leningraders arrive at the Volkovo Cemetery, littered with unburied dead. In the winter of 1941, while the city was under siege, the ground was frozen so hard that only dynamite could loosen it for graves, and wood was so scarce that every bit had to be used for fuel and there was none left for coffins.

that the bodies had pieces of flesh carved from them.

This is the one aspect of the siege not described in Soviet histories or memoirs. But there were numerous reports from Russian sources indicating that hunger finally drove some Leningraders to cannibalism. According to the reports, it was practiced on the dead at first. Then there were cases of murder for food by starvation-crazed people. Finally, there were reports of human flesh being sold. Soldiers, the best-fed people in the city, reportedly were killed on their way home from the front. They started going about armed and in groups. One rumor had it that children were beginning to disappear, and parents kept their youngsters off the streets. Other stories spread that gangs of well-fed cannibals roamed the city; the stories added terror to all the other anxieties. Anyone who looked healthy was under suspicion—as were the little meat cakes that could still be bought for enormous prices in the black market.

As the year wore on, cold weather intensified the suffering of the people of Leningrad. The city's oil and coal supplies were disappearing, and by the end of September there was no central heating. Without it, the pipes froze and the water supply was cut off. The people were forced to take buckets and draw water from the muddy River Neva.

Parties of women and young girls were sent into the forests to cut timber, which they loaded onto trucks on a narrow-gauge railway track that they had built themselves. On the outskirts of the city unoccupied wooden houses, whose owners had been evacuated, were hacked to pieces and used as fuel for the city's stoves, which were now the only means of combating the cold. Soon Leningraders kept their overcoats on permanently, when they went to sleep as well as at work or in the streets.

But no matter what they did, they suffered terribly, and there was no relief from the bitter weather. A student described the "feeling of being cold" that plagued them: "One gets up with it, one walks with it; one goes to bed with it. It seems to wander around somewhere under the skin; it penetrates the bones and sometimes it seems as if it even enters the brain. One can't escape from it." Many people froze to death before they could starve to death.

Yet as the temperature fell during November and Leningraders huddled together in their frigid apartments, there were some who realized that the cold could be their ally as well as their enemy: the only thing that could save them now was ice—ice over Lake Ladoga, providing a solid highway to the rest of Russia.

The weathermen could not predict how soon this would happen. In some years the lake did not freeze over until January. That would be too late this year. By January nearly everyone would be dead. Four inches of ice would be needed to support a man or an unladen horse; eight inches would support a truck with a one-ton load. One day of 5°F. (−15°C.) temperature would make four inches of ice; eight days at the same temperature would make 12 inches, or enough to support a whole convoy.

Leningrad's leaders not only knew this, but had been making plans to use the frozen lake. The situation was growing more urgent every day. During the early autumn a few supplies had trickled into the city. They had come by train to Tikhvin, east of Leningrad, been transferred to a point on Lake Ladoga and then carried across the water on barges. But in October, a German force under General Rudolf Schmidt had moved to cut this supply line, and on November 9, Tikhvin fell. With Tikhvin in the enemy's control, there was no existing overland route. A few tons of dehydrated food were being flown into the city each day, but nowhere near enough for everyone; even this puny amount was reduced when the airfield at Novaya Ladoga, on the east shore of the lake, was bombed. And when the lake finally did freeze solid, what use would it be if there were no rail link to the other Russian cities?

Soviet forces, military and civilian, were mobilized for a great effort in the area east of Leningrad. There were two objectives: the recapture of Tikhvin, and the construction of a new road from Zaborye, a railhead for trains from Moscow, to Novaya Ladoga.

If the first aim was obvious, the second bordered on the fantastic. The "road" would be a 200-mile-long circle along forest tracks, through uninhabited bogs and occasional tiny

villages. Yet, amazingly, it was completed on December 6. It hardly deserved to be called a road, but at least a path had been cleared. Several hundred laden trucks were immediately dispatched along it to Novaya Ladoga.

The trucks could cover no more than 25 miles a day. One convoy took 14 days to reach Novaya Ladoga and return to

Zaborye. In some places there was no room for two trucks to pass each other. There were steep hills and a slippery snow surface. On one stretch, 350 trucks became stuck. This obstacle course could never have done much to save Leningrad. Luckily, it did not have to, because on December 9, the first aim was also accomplished: Soviet forces under General Kirill Meretskov recaptured Tikhvin.

By mid-November the ice had begun to form on Lake Ladoga. On November 17 two parties set off on foot across the ice, roped together and wearing life belts, planting markers every few yards to indicate a route across the lake. The ice was thick enough to support them, but there were occasional unfrozen areas that had to be circled. It took the parties 16 hours to reach Kabona, 20 miles across the lake from Osinovets. A few hours later an officer set out alone on a horse. He followed the marked route and reached Kabona in four hours. Two days afterward a Soviet general crossed by the same route in a light car.

By November 20, with Leningrad's food rations cut to their lowest point, the ice was thickening; and that day a column of horse-drawn sleds set out for Kabona. They returned, loaded with dehydrated food. It was a start, but not the answer to Leningrad's problem. The sleds could transport only goods that were already stored in Novaya Ladoga and brought down by sled to Kabona. A sled could carry from 200 to 250 pounds. Even with a thousand sleds crossing the lake every day, only 100 tons would be delivered. The normal prewar daily consumption of flour alone had been 2,000 tons. This had been cut to the starvation level of 500 tons. Leningrad needed not only 1,000 tons of flour and other foods but also oil, guns and ammunition.

On November 22, motor vehicles were used for the first time on the lake. Sixty trucks crossed it that night, bringing 33 tons of flour to Leningrad. But the tonnage brought across the lake fell far short of the city's needs, and an unexpected thaw slowed deliveries at the end of November.

The Russians' recapture of Tikhvin on December 9 was the turning point, opening rail connections to Novaya Ladoga and other east-bank ports. But the Germans had blown up all the railway bridges, and it took the Russians almost a month to repair them. Rations were increased slightly on December 23, but the people were still starving. In January, however, the ice road began to fulfill its true function. A branch line was built to take goods by rail straight to Kabona; several more roads were cleared on the frozen lake.

At the height of its activity as many as 400 three-ton trucks chugged across the ice road every day. Not only did they bring vital supplies, they also helped by evacuating some of the city's residents—11,000 in January, 117,000 in February, 221,000 in March, 163,000 in April. Because of these evacuations—and because so many Leningraders had died—life improved for the others; there were fewer mouths to be fed and more food. On January 24, the daily bread ration for workers was increased to 400 grams; on February 11, it was increased again.

During the spring and summer another half million people were evacuated by boat across the lake. An oil pipeline was laid on the lake bed, as well as a cable to supply electricity. By March food was no longer a major problem, and thanks to the Lake Ladoga lifeline, rations could actually be set at a higher level than in the rest of the country. Some Leningraders still died from the delayed effects of starvation; but food and medical treatment were now available, and the death rate slowly returned to normal.

Nobody knows how many people perished that winter in Leningrad. The official total is 264,000. But this figure was laid down during the Stalinist years, when Leningrad's sufferings were minimized. Most Western scholars believe that the number of deaths from starvation during the entire siege exceeded one million, and that several hundred thousand more were killed by bombs, shells or gunfire. By contrast, the United States and Britain together suffered fewer than 800,000 deaths during all of World War II.

Leningrad was to remain besieged. But its supply corridor was now open for good. Life returned to something approaching normalcy. Newspapers resumed publication. Theaters and movie houses reopened. And the Leningrad Philharmonic performed Dmitry D. Shostakovich's *Seventh (Leningrad) Symphony* to a packed house on April 9, 1942.

The focus of war shifted to other cities—Moscow, Stalingrad. Only when the Soviet Army launched its massive counterattack would the Germans retreat from their siege lines around Leningrad. But not until January 27, 1944, would fireworks arc over the city, to mark the end of Leningrad's 900-day agony.

## Excerpted from, "The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad" by Harrison E. Salisbury {in Reader's Digest True Stories of World War II}

### Excerpt 1

The first days of hunger were always the worst. If a man had only a slice of bread to eat and nothing more, he suffered terrible pangs the first day. And the second. But gradually the pain faded into quiet despondency and a weakness that advanced with frightening rapidity. What you did yesterday you could not do today. The stairs were too steep to climb. The wood was too hard to chop, the shelf too high to reach. Each day the weakness grew. But awareness did not decline. You saw yourself from a distance. You knew what was happening, but you could not halt it.

You saw your body changing, the legs wasting to toothpicks, the arms vanishing, the breasts turned into empty bags. Or the opposite happened—you puffed up. You could no longer wear your shoes. Your cheeks looked as though they were bursting. Your neck was too thick for your collar. Half of Leningrad was wasting away; the other half swelled and swelled.

People began to stuff their stomachs with food substitutes. They tore off wallpaper and scraped off the paste, which was supposed to have been made with potato flour. Some ate the paper. Later they chewed the plaster. And on the streets there were fewer and fewer dogs.

Pavlov, the food specialist, drove relentlessly to muster every ounce of provisions. Work had started on the site of the Badayev warehouses: there 900 tons of sugar and 1,000 tons of scorched flour were reclaimed from the earth. Eight thousand tons of malt were salvaged from closed breweries and mixed with flour for bread. Five thousand tons of oats meant for horses were seized—the horses starved or were slaughtered. Scientists worked out a formula for edible wood cellulose made from pine sawdust. It was added to bread, and nearly 16,000 tons were consumed during the blockade.

### Excerpt 2

The Haymarket occupied the heart of Leningrad. For 200 years it had been a center of pushcart and stall trade, of peddlers, flower girls, and prostitutes; and before the war a great peasant market had flourished there. This had long been closed. But as starvation deepened, trading for food began again.

By winter it had become the liveliest place in Leningrad, a market of exchange where paper money had virtually no value. Bread was the common currency, and vodka held second place.

Everything was for sale at the Haymarket. Here stone-faced men sold glasses filled with Badayev earth—plain dirt dug from the cellars of the Badayev warehouses, into which tons of sugar had poured when the buildings had burned down in September. After the great fire subsided, reclamation teams under Food Director Pavlov had pumped out the molten sugar for days, but thousands of tons still saturated the ashes and earth in the cellars. Soon men and women were slipping into the site with picks and

hacking away. They sold earth from the first three feet of soil for 100 rubles a glass, that from deeper in the cellar for 50 rubles.

One could buy wood alcohol—it was said [falsely] that if it was passed through six layers of linen it could be safely drunk—tooth powder, which could be used for making pudding (if mixed with starch), and library paste in bars like chocolate.

There was usually bread too, sometimes whole loaves. But the sellers displayed it warily or clutched the loaves tightly under their coats. They were not afraid of the police, but they desperately feared the hungry robbers who might at any moment draw a knife or knock them over the head.

Back of the Haymarket, in a tangle of side lanes, was the region of the czarist slums. Here Feodor Dostoyevsky had written *Crime and Punishment*; here was the house of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Here, throughout the 19th century, had been the noisy dives and notorious dens into which many a man had walked never to emerge alive again. Redolent with the fumes of cheap vodka, tobacco, and perfume, it had been an area of thievery, blackmail, murder.

All this, of course, had long since been abolished by the Revolution. No more prostitution, no more crime—or so it was said. But now the area around the Haymarket was once again the center for every kind of crime in the besieged city. Figures straight from the pages of Dostoyevsky roamed the streets.

Here and there passed a man or woman with a face full, rosy, and soft, and a shudder ran through the crowd. For these were the most terrible people of their day.

In January, a young man named Dmitri and his girl, Tamara, determined to buy a pair of *valenki*, thick felt boots, for a friend. (By every kind of economy, Tamara had managed to put aside a pound and a half of bread to trade for the boots.) They made their way to the Haymarket.\*

At first they could find nothing they wanted, but eventually they saw a very tall man who was extremely well dressed by blockade standards, wearing a fine fur hat, a heavy sheepskin coat, and beautiful gray boots. He had an impressive beard, and despite the starving times, he seemed to be filled with strength. In his hands he held a single woman's boot, exactly the kind the young people wished to buy.

They bargained. The man asked about two pounds of bread for the boots. Dmitri offered the one and a half pounds. The giant examined the bread and finally agreed to take it. The other boot, he said, was at his flat in the tangle of streets nearby. With some trepidation the young man started off with the tall peddler. Tamara warned him. "Better to be without *valenki* than without your head," she said, half joking.

The two men entered a quiet lane and soon came to a building that had not been damaged by either German gunfire or bombing. Dmitri followed the tall man up the staircase. The man climbed easily, occasionally looking back. As they neared the top floor, an uneasy feeling seized Dmitri. There leaped into his mind the stories he had heard, terrible tales. The tall man looked remarkably well fed.

At the top floor the man turned and said, "Wait for me here." He knocked at a door, and someone inside asked, "Who is it?"

"It's me," the man responded. "With a live one."

Dmitri froze at the words. Then the door opened, and he saw a hairy red hand and a muglike face. From the room came a strange, warm, heavy smell. Suddenly a gust of wind in the hall caught the door, and in the swaying candlelight Dmitri had a glimpse of several great hunks of white meat, swinging from the hooks on the ceiling. From one hunk he saw dangling a human hand with long fingers and blue veins.

At that moment the two men lunged toward

Dmitri. He leaped down the staircase and managed to reach the bottom ahead of his pursuers. To his good fortune, a military truck was passing through the lane.

"Cannibals!" Dmitri shouted. Two soldiers jumped from the truck and rushed into the building. Shots rang out, and in a few minutes the soldiers reappeared, one carrying a greatcoat and the other Dmitri's bread, which he returned to him.

Dmitri thanked the soldiers. Then they got back into their truck and were off to Lake Ladoga, where they were part of the ice-route team. Before leaving, they told Dmitri that they had found the hocks from five carcasses hanging in the flat. Five—all of them human.

Cannibals? Who were they? How many were they? It is not a subject the survivors of Leningrad like to discuss. But the stain of the story slips in here and there, in casual references, in memoirs. "In the worst period of the siege," one survivor noted, "Leningrad was in the power of the cannibals." He claimed to know of cases in which husbands ate their wives, wives ate their husbands, and parents ate their children. Others say that the practice was rare, that it happened only when people went crazy.

The truth is that cannibalism for profit existed, and the center of trade was the Haymarket. Starving men and women did not inquire too closely as to the nature of the ground-meat patties that were offered for sale. The hard-eyed men and women who sold them stood like rocks in their heavy boots and coats, and shrugged their shoulders at any questions. Take it or leave it. The prices were fantastic—300 to 400 rubles for a few patties.

Sometimes the flesh was cut from the dead. In fact, the evidence of butchery of corpses was widespread. Many a Leningrad woman, pulling a child's sled behind her, bringing the body of a husband or child to a cemetery, was appalled to see that fleshy parts had been cut from the corpses, which lay about like scattered cordwood. Crisly as was the practice of necrobutchery, no law forbade the disfigurement of corpses or prohibited consumption of the flesh.

Among the fantastic tales that circulated in Leningrad were the stories of circles or fraternities of eaters of human flesh. The circles were said to assemble for feasts, attended only by members of their kind. These people were the dregs of the human hell that Leningrad had become. The lowest depths were those occupied by persons who insisted on eating only "fresh" human flesh, as distinguished from cadaver cuts. Whether these tales were true was not so important. What was important was that Leningraders believed them, and this added the culminating horror to their existence.