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As Russia Remembers the Leningrad Siege, Some Are Fighting for the Right to Mourn

Locals are resisting the glorification of the deadliest episode in their city's history.

By Daniel Kozin

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ST. PETERSBURG — In a leafy courtyard just off the busy Liteiny Prospekt, small groups of locals huddled close together on Saturday morning, holding candles to commemorate the deadliest episode in their city's history.

On this day in 1941, Nazi troops completed their encirclement of Leningrad, as St. Petersburg was called in the Soviet era. An estimated one million peopled died in the siege that would last for 872 days — of starvation, disease and shelling.

The stories of those who lived to tell the tale are hair-raising. Speaking to The Moscow Times, Dmitry Kirilovich, 86, recalled going to a market in the city with his mother to search for food in the first months of the siege, which locals call the "Leningrad Blockade."

"It was January and there was a woman standing on the steps outside [the market]. She was holding a bowl with two or three of these thick grey cutlets, but no one was buying them. People said they were made from human flesh. We never went back there after that."

In order to survive the hunger and deadly cold that winter, Dmitry Kirilovich said his family had caught and strangled a stray cat for food.

Every year on Sept. 8 — the day that the blockade began — thousands of St. Petersburg residents still pay their respects to its victims. In recent years, however, they have found it increasingly difficult as official events have shifted the focus from mourning to celebrating Soviet military achievement.

Since 2015, a state-sponsored group has organized a procession through the city led by a military band and cadets carrying Soviet-style flags. This year, they were joined by members of the pro-Kremlin Night Wolves motorcycle gang.

Flanked by World War II-era rocket artillery, the bikers roared down St. Petersburg's streets to the accompaniment of military music.

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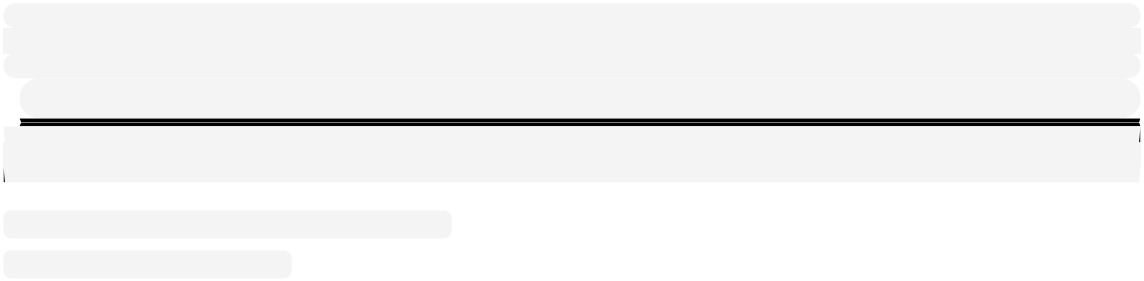

Displays of military equipment, patriotic music and the distribution of food in army-style kitchens are a hallmark of celebrations on Jan. 27, the day the Leningrad Blockade was lifted in 1944, and May 9, when Russia celebrates the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in the war.

These patriotic features have now found their way into Sep. 8, a day that was traditionally set aside to remember the victims of the siege.

“The style and tone with which the authorities remember the blockade are abhorrent,” Lev Lurie, a local historian, told The Moscow Times.

Meanwhile, there is little room for questioning the victorious narrative. In 2014, the opposition-leaning Dozhd television outlet was forced off cable television after posting a survey on its website that asked if Leningrad should have surrendered to the Nazis to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

“Our government, and the country as a whole, have a deep desire to not think about the dead; to not think about tragedies," Lurie added. "We know how to celebrate, but we don’t know how to mourn."

‘Why should they be forgotten?’

Together with a group of local activists, Lurie has launched a grassroots movement called the Committee of Sept. 8 to coordinate public readings of the blockade victims' names.

They picked up the idea from Yury Woolf, a St. Petersburg native who first started the readings in the courtyard of his apartment building in 2016. “I just wanted to pay my respects to my relatives... and then I thought about the other people who died in my building: Why should they be forgotten?” he told The Moscow Times.

This year, the initiative was picked up by 60 venues in the city, including museums, schools and residential buildings. “We wanted to launch a city-wide event that is devoid of politics and elements of celebration, in which normal citizens can participate and pay their respects to the people who were lost,” Anastasia Printseva, who runs the project, told The Moscow Times.

“People are constantly trying to stick the blockade into some kind of camp... you have to be either with the government or a militant liberal. But we just wanted for people to read the names of the victims."

On Saturday morning, dozens of locals gathered at the Anna Akhmatova Museum to remember the names of the people from around the neighborhood who had died in the blockade.

At noon, following a short Orthodox vigil, participants took to the microphone, one by one, clutching pieces of paper with the names of their relatives and neighbors.

“They say that God remembers them, but let people remember them, too. If God doesn't exist, at least people will have uttered their names,” Inna Busheva, 53, a local who read eight names at the event, told The Moscow Times.

Later on Saturday, local activists picketed a ceremony marking the start of the construction of a new museum dedicated to the siege. Almost four decades after being closed down by Soviet authorities, the original museum was re-opened by locals in 1989, but is now set to be replaced by a glitzy 6-billion ruble ($86 million) supercomplex. Critics argue that the new museum is part of a state effort to control memories about the blockade.

Lurie, the historian, says attempts to reinterpret the siege date back to the end of World War II, when the official version stressed “that the million people who perished in the city did so in a heroic battle against Hitler’s invaders because they loved the Communist Party and the Soviet Union."

“But when people say: ‘We can do it again [about winning the war],’ the response should be: ‘Do we really want to repeat the blockade?’”

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