

OLDER LENINGRADERS STILL REMEMBER THE BRIGHT, WARM SUNDAY when German forces invaded the Soviet Union. Many had already moved to their dachas outside the city in preparation for summer. 22 June 1941. Despite the nonaggression pact that the USSR and Germany had signed in August 1939, Soviet citizens had followed with unease the Nazi expansion into northern and central Europe and northern Africa. Still, it was hard to believe.

22 JUNE 1941. MORNING

I carried Lena out into the garden together with her colored rattles. The sun already ruled the sky completely.

A cry, the sound of broken dishes. The woman who owns our dacha ran past the house.

“Elena Iosifovna, war with the Germans! They just announced it on the radio!” she shouted, crying.

War! I am thirty-four years old. This is the fourth war of my life.

Elena Kochina, *Blockade Diary*

22 JUNE

This morning everything was as peaceful and calm as a still lake. The sun was shining and everything seemed to promise a perfect day. . . .

The fresh morning air, the sunshine streaming through the wide-open windows, and the fact that everything seemed to be going so well combined to give me a wonderful feeling of contentment and joy. . . .

At around nine o'clock, the phone rang. It was my husband calling from work. Though usually calm, he seemed greatly agitated. Without explaining why, he asked me not to go anywhere and to keep Dima at home. . . .

At noon my mother and I heard Molotov speak on the radio. So this was

it—war! Germany was already bombing Soviet cities. Molotov’s speech was halting, as if he were out of breath. His rallying, spirited appeals seemed out of place. And suddenly I realized that something ominous and oppressive loomed over us.

Elena Skriabina, *Siege and Survival*

### The City of Women

Early in those nine hundred days, the Siege of Leningrad became a woman’s experience. Indeed the battlefield was close by—so perilously close that some soldiers attempted to return to the city sporadically at night to bring a portion of their rations to their starving families. Yet the daily tasks of domestic life and labor, and the continual responsibilities of air-raid defense, were left to the women of the city. With the exception of essential military and political personnel, the city was bereft of able-bodied men under the age of fifty-five. Add to this the biological fact that men succumbed more quickly and more often to starvation. In her memoirs of the first and worst winter of the Siege (1941–1942), Ol’ga Grechina writes:

In November, according to official statistics, deaths of men over draft age (fifty-five) exceeded the normal death rate by 11,000. . . . 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 the city, even of the entire country.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the predominance of women in the city, deaths of men far outnumbered those of women even in the first months of 1942. The NKVD reported in January 1942 the deaths of 70,853 men (73.2 percent) and 25,898 women (26.8 percent). In February 1942, 57,990 (60.4 percent) men died and 38,025 (39.6 percent) women. Only in March 1942 did more women (42,842, or 52.6 percent) die than men (38,664, or 47.4 percent).<sup>2</sup> Exact ratios of men to women in the population can never be known. The Siege fell between



“Siege Room.” A unique exhibit at the Museum of Bread in St. Petersburg depicts the vitally important and emblematic objects in the circumscribed world of the Siege. From left to right: a water container for hauling water; the children’s sled (for hauling); the bread ration (next to the clock); the window taped to keep the glass from shattering; the window blanketed for warmth and to prevent light from attracting enemy fire; the clothes line; the *burzhuika*, a special small stove (on the stool on the right); and the typical Leningrad radio, on the wall, upper right, known as the “plate” (*tarelka*). *The Museum of Bread, St. Petersburg*

the city were kept. Researchers must piece together various reports, such as those of the NKVD above, or figures cited in other Soviet sources, such as reported by A. R. Dzeniskevich, to conclude that by 15 December 1942, 79.9 percent of all factory workers were women.<sup>5</sup> The testimonies that follow corroborate the various statistics that support a characterization of besieged Leningrad as a city of women. Together they highlight the need to study the effect of the Siege on this specific population.

## Women and War

Queen Athena—shield of our city—glory of goddesses!  
 Now shatter the spear of Diomedes! That wild man—  
 hurl him headlong down before the Scaean Gates!  
 At once we'll sacrifice twelve heifers in your shrine,  
 yearlings never broken, if only you'll pity Troy,  
 the Trojan wives and all our helpless children!

THE ILIAD (6.360–66)<sup>4</sup>

In modern warfare, the besieging of a civilian population is considered barbaric. Yet the Siege of Leningrad was not the only siege of World War II, not even on Soviet territory. And the recent tragedies of Sarajevo, Gorazde, and Grozny remind us that this ancient strategy may still be used in “civilized” Europe. It is not surprising that women and children while under siege in Leningrad were left to fend as best they could while men (and women) fought at the nearby front to defend the city.<sup>5</sup> Much has been written about what was exceptional about the Siege of Leningrad—its duration, its staggering human toll. Yet historians and other analysts have not focused sufficient attention on the realities of the Siege that make it atypical in other ways. Unlike most sieges in history, the citizens of besieged Leningrad no longer observed the historic division along gender lines between public (male front-line) and private (female home-front) reactions to war. Having embraced the role of public defenders of Leningrad, home-front women often perceived warfare, and heroism, differently. They inevitably provide a unique perspective on World War II and the Siege.

In the heroic epics of Greece, and in other prehumanist accounts of siege warfare, we are inspired to revere the acts of gods, or god-like heroes. Women's efforts are prescribed, and in the oral and written histories, circumscribed. In *The Iliad*, mortal women play predictable, and usually minor, roles. The noble women of Troy (as in the epigraph) make sacrifices to the gods and pray for victory and salvation. Occasionally they may respond, like Hector's wife, Andromache, with “womanly” timidity:

“Reckless one,  
 my Hector—your own fiery courage will destroy you!  
 Have you no pity for him, our helpless son? Or me,  
 and the destiny that weighs me down, your widow” (6.482–85).

And they fulfill the woman's role in traditional societies of lamenter or keener:

So the voice of the king rang out in tears,  
 the citizens wailed in answer, and noble Hecuba  
 led the wives of Troy in a throbbing chant of sorrow:  
 "O my child—my desolation! How can I go on living?  
 What agonies must I suffer now, now *you* are dead and gone?  
 You were my pride throughout the city night and day—  
 a blessing to us all, the men and women of Troy:  
 throughout the city they saluted you like a god.  
 You, you were their greatest glory while you lived—  
 now death and fate have seized you, dragged you down! (22.504–13)

From 1941 to 1944, women in Leningrad also served these traditional functions. Their lamentations, broadcast regularly over the radio and some eventually published, vied with those of the wives of Troy. Yet women's roles during the Siege were more various, and for a number of reasons. In comparison with premodern, if not ancient, times, women by the mid-twentieth century certainly enjoyed greater freedom—and responsibility—in both the public and the private domains. The Soviet woman had in many ways progressed even further than her western counterparts: since the days of reconstruction following the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet women had often engaged in what had traditionally been considered men's work. Thus women of the Siege of Leningrad, in such roles as doctor, military orderly, civil-defense worker, factory worker, and government official, crossed the boundary from the traditional passive and private role of women under siege to the military and public theater of war. This meant that their deeds, just like those of their sisters serving in combat positions, were *eligible* to be considered heroic.

Hector answers his wife's entreaty to choose peace and private life in the besieged Troy:

"All this weighs on my mind too, dear woman.  
 But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy  
 and the Trojan women trailing their long robes  
 if I would shrink from battle now, a coward." (6.522–25).

In the Siege of Leningrad, such a response was required of *all* the inhabitants of Leningrad, by the government and in response to the public's highly



V. Gushchina. “Portrait of the Guard of the Zhdanov Factory, M. I. Erëmicheva” (*Portret okhrannitsy zavoda imeni A. A. Zhdanova, M. I. Erëmichevoi*), 1945. A woman member of the People’s Militia guards the entrance to the Zhdanov Factory. *The Russian National Museum*

developed sense of patriotism. Mostly women and children, they too had to seek the courage of Hector.

It could be said that the “courage of Hector” represents the tenor of all official histories, whose goal is to maintain the social and political order. This is an endeavor that, in a stable society, usually has the support of a nation’s heroes and others who gather and disseminate information. Many heroines of the Siege of Leningrad contributed to the writing of its official history. Yet many others did not. Perhaps they simply were not asked. At the time, the private accounts of common people were not considered as significant to history as they are today. Perhaps for some women who had to be simultaneously mother, wife, worker, and “warrior,” loyalties became blurred. They could no longer respond as assuredly as Hector: “Fight for your country—that is the best, the only omen” (12.281). Even democratic societies do not welcome into their official histories those with confused loyalties. In the Soviet Union of Stalin, expressing doubt was a dangerous undertaking.

The women of Leningrad had a different relationship to warfare than their patriarchs in besieged Troy or elsewhere in other premodern eras. By undertaking all responsibilities, both public and private,

they forged a new kind of courage. It was not simply an amalgam of the courage of Hector, the warrior, and of Andromache, the helpmate and supplicant, for these roles are often antithetical. These recollections of women survivors demonstrate that women warriors affect notions of traditional valor as much as they are affected by them.<sup>6</sup>

## Women's Lot/*Zhenskaia Dolia* (1941–1944)

During the Siege, the responsibilities of women in Leningrad increased greatly. In addition to caring for family members and, for some, continuing their prewar work outside the home, women were required to contribute in various ways to the defense of the city. As with statistics on mortality, there are no extensive and consistent records of the duties women performed. Information must be extrapolated from numerous sources.

Women responded immediately to the German offensive against Leningrad. Along with children as young as fourteen, they worked digging trenches and building fortifications. Salisbury reports that among the 30,000 Leningraders mobilized to “dig trenches, mine fields and dig gun emplacements, dugouts, and tank traps . . . the brunt was borne by women.”<sup>7</sup> Women's work in this arena was assumed. In newly published Communist Party documents delineating work on the Luga line of defense, officials are commanded to mobilize workers and the “local population.”<sup>8</sup> However, Zhdanov addresses directly the question of women's involvement in direct military action to defend Leningrad, permitting their voluntary enlistment in the People's Militia (*Narodnoe opolchenie*).<sup>9</sup> In the excerpt from her memoir *A Half Century Ago*, Sof'ia Buriakova provides a statistic. She was among a detachment of 3,000 individuals sent to the Luga line to dig antitank trenches. With the exception of the military leaders, all were women. Women built fortifications within the city as well. They formed workers battalions of 80,000 Leningraders, joining teenagers and old men to construct embrasures in buildings, pillboxes, and firing points.<sup>10</sup>

After the mobilization of eligible male factory workers to the front, tens of thousands of women, along with adolescents and pensioners, volunteered or were assigned to take their places.<sup>11</sup> The first winter of the war proved most devastating for those who were biologically least predisposed to endure starvation—the very young, male adolescents, and the elderly. As a consequence, the vast majority of the positions in industry were then held by women. Among the documents that follow, Valentina Bushueva recounts the hardships of work in the peat bogs and as a member of a coal workers battalion. Mariia Kropacheva reports that women workers at a chocolate factory declined the assistance of male workers at the mixing machines, which required considerable strength. The women were already producing at 300 percent over the norm.



Leningraders gather water on Nevskii Avenue, 25 October 1942. *The Central State Archive of Film, Photographic, and Audio Documentation, St. Petersburg*

Once intense bombing of the city began, women contributed to air-raid defense as well. At the end of the work day and after hours spent hauling water and standing in line to receive the ration, women served the local air-raid defense (MPVO) keeping watch on rooftops for incendiary bombs. Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva discusses the organization of these watches (*dezhurstvo*) in her diary entry for 2 August 1941, which she writes during her shift on the staircase of her apartment building.

It is usually assumed that in the Soviet Union, women physicians always dominated the field of family-practice medicine. In fact, this situation developed only during World War II and then persisted after the war, when men remained in relatively short supply. The specialty was demanding, including exhausting schedules of home visitations, and did not pay particularly well. As in the West, nursing was considered a woman's profession. During the Siege, primary medical care came to be the province of women. With the mobilization or evacuation of male surgeons and other male specialists, or their death in Leningrad, women physicians took on even greater

responsibilities. Anna Likhacheva chronicles below her research on supplemental nourishment in the clinic of the Red Banner Factory. Yuliia Mendel-eva describes her efforts to keep the Leningrad Pediatric Institute operating and to maintain it as a medical school, as a children's outpatient clinic, and as a hospital throughout the Siege. The surgeon Valentina Gorokhova provides a detailed description of practicing medicine in primitive conditions in an evacuation hospital.

Many have noted the immensity of women's work during the Siege. Some have commented on its variety as well. It is not surprising, however, that official published documents do not address these parameters. In the party documents published, for example, in *Leningrad under Siege*, officials quantify volunteers in the MPVO or workers in factories without regard to their sex. In the personal documents that follow however, women fill in many of the details that are absent from official reports, and they often bring a new perspective to work that in peacetime was done by men.

## The Feminine Perspective

Most able-bodied men who remained in Leningrad held higher-level positions in government, law enforcement, the military, or industry, while women, although they may have held such positions, were still responsible for "*Kinder, Küche, and Kirche*" (children, kitchen, and church).<sup>12</sup> Accordingly they write in their diaries and memoirs, or even recall, aspects of life that may have been unknown or unimportant to their male comrades under siege. Yet preserving daily life, above all obtaining food and water, acquired the utmost strategic significance. The history of the Siege must document these traditional activities as a "line of defense."

### *Byt (Kinder, Küche)*

Perhaps the most frequent theme of the narratives that follow, "home and hearth" (the English equivalent of *Kinder* and *Küche*), the Russians call *byt*. In *At the Writing Table*, Lidiia Ginzburg notes the inversion of values during the Siege in the hierarchy of human activity. She recalls that the intellectuals of the 1930s were accustomed to thinking of food in terms of its psychological attributes. It meant comfort, relaxation, friendly conversation.



N. Petrova. "The Boot-Cleaner," (*U chisti'shchitsy sapog*), 1945. A woman shoe shiner renders her services to a woman soldier in an attempt to "keep up appearances," even in the midst of the Siege. *The Russian National Museum*

They felt, condescendingly, in the 1930s that a dependence on food was characteristic of the “lower order.” Later, during the Siege, intellectuals learned to appreciate food as physical nourishment along with the processes of gathering food and preparing it. However, they were often ill fit for life’s basic demands. Ginzburg observes that when the intellectuals finally did get involved in the preparation of food, they overdid it. They ruined dishes by their constant “doctoring” of recipes.<sup>15</sup> The ability to maintain the household and feed the family, generally considered to be banal women’s work, during the Siege acquired supreme significance. The gathering and preparation of foodstuffs and the transformation of the inedible into the edible constitute the major themes of the documents in this collection. Among them, Tamara Nekliudova’s “War-Time Menu” and Vera Miliutina’s “Ode to Grass” serve as emblems of this overriding concern.

Although obtaining food overshadowed all other activities of everyday life (*byt*), these women survivors complement official history with the details that consumed their time and energy. A number of them describe the ordeal of transporting a deceased family member to the cemetery and attempting to find and pay someone to dig a grave. Valentina Petrova and Sof’ia Buriakova provide information on working churches during the Siege. Natal’ia Stroganova chronicles the fate of her family members in her house-keeping journal and praises the work of the janitors of her building, who cleared snow and kept watch at night. Many of the *blokadnitsy* (such as Stroganova, Petrova, and Miliutina) provide information on the fate of ordinary individuals whose disappearance during the Siege received no official acknowledgment—a relative arrested by the NKVD or ethnic Germans who were expelled from Leningrad. Against this background of unfounded suspicion, only Avgusta Saraeva-Bondar’ encountered a real spy. She recounts her sighting of a *raketchik*, a traitor who signaled to the Germans from within the city. As Nataliia Rogova of the Russian National Library characterized the contribution of these women, they not only preserve the nation’s memory, they provide the “small” stories of the Siege. Thus their narratives alter the general historical perspective.

### Arbiters of Morality (*Kirche*)

In these survivors’ narratives, we find a reflection of the third sphere of traditional women’s work—the moral upbringing (*vospitanie*) of the family. The responsibility of instilling societal and religious values in the younger



L. Lebedinskaia. A teapot from the tea set “Leningrad in the blockade” (*Chainik iz serviza “Leningrad v blokade”*), 1944. A commemorative tea set produced by the famous Lomonosov Porcelain Factory to celebrate the lifting of the Siege. Pictured on the teapot are the Narvskii Gates, where the Red Army held the front line against the invaders. *The State Hermitage Museum*

generation must explain in part the revelations of these unofficial histories. These narratives differ dramatically from valorous accounts of the Siege in their narrator’s stance as an arbiter of morality. These women often sit in judgment of behavior, their own as well as the government’s. Again, we can recall Lidiia Ginzburg’s indictment of her own class, the intelligentsia, in the relative inability of its members to cope with the hardships of the Siege. Liubov’ Shaporina continues this self-accusation. Despite her ordeals, she does not exempt herself from the alleged spinelessness of the Russian intelligentsia.

Not all the judgments are as sweeping as these. Other Siege survivors confess to relatively lesser failings. Ol’ga Freidenberg writes of the often ruinous effect of the Siege on the human psyche and regrets her ill temper in comparison with her mother’s tolerance. And Avgusta Saraeva-Bondar’ admits to imitating the sound of an air-raid alarm after the Siege had ended and laments the distress that it caused the inhabitants of the apartment building.

The most outspoken of the *blokadnitsy* in this collection is Ol'ga Freidenberg. She comments on the unfair stigma on those attempting to be evacuated from Leningrad, the senselessness of not surrendering the city, the inequities of the ration system, and much more. Liubov' Shaporina likewise attacks Stalin, his policy on the city, and the continuing arrests on political grounds of innocent people. Ol'ga Grechina ponders the criminal act of her friend's mother, who embezzled her patients' money in order to evacuate her sons, Jews who she feared would perish in a pogrom. Grechina can understand this crime but cannot accept the evacuation of these two young men, who should have fought for their country. Kseniia Matus laments the sacrifice of soldiers sent untrained as "cannon fodder" to the front. These women also hail contributions that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Ol'ga Freidenberg praises the common people who simply carry on during the Siege.<sup>14</sup> Vera Kostrovitskaia indicts the director of her ballet school for profiteering and cruelty toward the students and immortalizes a Navy band's gift of music to their besieged neighbors. As the instruments of official propaganda fell ever more silent in Leningrad, women played their traditional role of preserving private and familial values with increasing authority. It is in their role as arbiters of morality that these women make the greatest contribution to the official history of the Siege.

Until recently, little has been written on the role of religious communities and the practice of faith in besieged Leningrad.<sup>15</sup> However, these documents reveal the significance of faith and organized religion not only during the war but also in Soviet society in general. The women cite specific events and concerns that reflect their spiritual yearning. Valentina Petrova still recalls the Russian Orthodox churches that remained operating during the Siege. Liubov' Shaporina remembers Easter, 1942, celebrated under intense bombardment and in conditions of extreme starvation. Sof'ia Buriakova laments her meager offering to relatives who came, as was their family's tradition, to celebrate Trinity Sunday and their saint's day. Many of the *blokadnitsy* reveal the religious and spiritual significance of their extreme attempts to provide their dead with the proper rites of burial (Èl'za Greinert, Sof'ia Buriakova, Natal'ia Stroganova). This documentation of their Siege experience calls into question the commonly held view of Soviet society as strictly secular. In fact, women in Soviet society, and particularly during the Siege, supported religious life also in the traditional, formal sense of *Kirche*.

## Lost Beauty and Youth

During many of the interviews conducted in preparation for this volume, women survivors of the Siege regretted the loss of their girlhood beauty and vitality, of what were potentially the best days of their lives. In the documents that follow, some survivors reveal their most intimate thoughts in response to the Siege as an assault on a woman's body and her potential to experience life as a woman. In *At the Writing Table*, Lidiia Ginzburg addressed this theme as well. She reacted to the process of losing body fat and made an excruciatingly personal observation on the notion of the "front":

The hostile world, approaching, advances outposts. Its closest outpost suddenly turned out to be one's own body . . . in the winter it had an eternal potential for suffering—with its ever new corners and ribs . . . while people discovered in themselves bone after bone, there occurred an alienation from the body, a splintering of conscious will from the body as a phenomenon of the hostile external world.<sup>16</sup>

Ginzburg despaired at the loss of her femaleness, her identity.<sup>17</sup> Her horror may have resulted also from the recognition of starvation as the final invasion of the body politic at war on her last vestige of privacy and individuality—her own flesh.<sup>18</sup>

Many of our chroniclers remarked on the physical effects of starvation that eventually made it difficult to distinguish males from females and the young from the old. Kseniia Matus, then an eighteen-year-old oboist with the Leningrad Symphony, recalls looking out over the audience during one of the heroic performances during the Siege and being unable to determine the sex of the onlookers. In the excerpt from *Grave Months for the Blockaded City*, Elena Martilla remarks more than once that people called her, a young artist of eighteen, "Grandma." One evening, near to death, Martilla takes a mirror and keeps herself alive through the night by painting her self-portrait: "I'm a young woman and forced to be snuffed out, but I'll die with a paint brush in my hand."

Women speak and write of the effects of the Siege and war on their prospects for a normal life and the difficult choices they were forced to make between their private destiny and that of their country. Kseniia Matus describes a romance with a young man that is experienced in an atmosphere of the relative freedom of war. She eventually rejects her lover, however. The

war reveals his self-absorption and cowardice, faults that in ordinary times might have gone unrecognized. Ol'ga Grechina discusses the real shortage of eligible young men during and after the war. She admits her good fortune in being able to find a husband, and a handsome and healthy one at that.

Even before World War II, communist ideology provided for a broader sphere of experience for Soviet women. They had made inroads into masculine realms of work. During the Siege, women of necessity took on even the most traditionally male jobs in heavy industry and defense while maintaining the traditional responsibilities of keeping house and raising children. The personal narratives of women who suffered the Siege of Leningrad shed light on all spheres of existence. Their reminiscences complement official reports of the defense of the city and labor production and provide insight into the day-to-day struggle of the inhabitants to survive. They also reveal the private struggles of women to fulfill the responsibilities and experience the joys of wife and mother, and of girls to survive and fulfill their dreams as women.<sup>19</sup>

## Women's Life Writing

ТАКИМИ МЫ СЧАСТЛИВЫМИ БЫЛИ;  
Такой свободой бурною дышали  
Что внуки позавидовали б нам.

We felt so exalted,  
We breathed such stormy freedom,  
That our grandchildren would have  
envied us.

OL'GA BERGGOL'TS, "FEBRUARY DIARY"

We are approaching the documents that follow primarily as memoirs. Traditionally, we distinguish memoir from autobiography on the basis of the writer's perceived emphasis on milieu or context over personal life story. In the case of women writers, however, we have been made aware of the non-traditional ways in which women have revealed their lives in writing. That what is easily recognizable as memoir might also serve the function of life writing follows from the reality that large segments of society, among them

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women, have not had access to the poetics of autobiography. Regenia Gagnier describes the notion of selfhood that underlies the writing of autobiography, narrowly defined:

a meditative and self-reflective sensibility; faith in writing as a tool of self-expression; an attempt to make sense of life as a narrative progressing in time, with a narrative typically structured upon parent/child relationships and familial development; and a belief in personal creativity, autonomy and freedom for the future.<sup>20</sup>

For much of history, women have lacked (and in some cases, still lack) the sense of “empowerment” that enables the writing of traditional autobiography.

In *Terrible Perfection*, Barbara Heldt studied the Russian tradition of women’s autobiography. She observed that women were compelled or permitted themselves to write their lives only when they felt they could contribute to the broader sphere of public life.<sup>21</sup> She categorized the first Russian female autobiographers as revolutionary (Vera Figner, for example), political prisoner (Evgeniia Ginzburg), and cultural conservator (Nadezhda Mandel’shtam). Heldt glimpsed, in these twentieth-century autobiographies, the promise of full-fledged authority, which will recognize the value of recording a woman’s private life. Thus we should keep in mind, in reading the documents that follow, not only their significance for the history of the Siege of Leningrad. We must recognize their often muted autobiographical intent and, thereby, their contribution to Russian women’s life writing.

Barbara Heldt also observed that in Russia, where women took up their pens later and in fewer numbers than did their counterparts in the West, they are best represented, in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, in the genres that emanate more from the private sphere—autobiography and poetry. Beth Holmgren later demonstrated that it was this very marginalization of women and their writing that enabled them to serve as cultural conservators during the Stalinist Terror: “despite significant restrictions and deprivations, the domestic sphere under Stalin benefited from this political neglect and women acquired a valuable low profile along with their secondary status.”<sup>22</sup> The Siege survivors represented here did not labor to preserve the memory of cultural icons who were victims of the purges, as Nadezhda Mandel’shtam recalled her husband, the poet Osip Mandel’shtam, or as Lidiia Chukovskaia strove to commemorate the life of her friend, the poet Anna Akhmatova. The *blokadnitsy* did on occasion write of the undeserved

fate of well-known individuals—for example Ol’ga Grechina deplored the suspicion that fell on the folklorist Vladimir Propp because of his German heritage. However, with respect to Russian “high” culture, their focus was generally more diffuse.

These women, in their own behavior, attempted to preserve a nebulous but keenly sensed Russian culture, and they lament the waning of the customs that revealed it. Saraeva-Bondar’ grieves over the loss of Leningraders who embodied the *intelligentnost’* that characterized the city. Stroganova describes her pain at being slapped by her father during the Siege “against old Petersburg tradition.” Ol’ga Freidenberg writes disarmingly, in comparison with her often esoteric scholarly prose, of the sacramental quality of setting a festive table in honor of her birthday. The surviving pieces of family china represented “a parade of a home and a spirit that has been preserved; it was my own personal triumph. Only Mama and I could understand the importance of this holiday table.” For Natal’ia Rogova, of the Russian National Library, the valiant actions of the *blokadnitsy* represent the preservation not only of the city but also of art and culture. Yet, it is interesting that Rogova, the daughter of Siege survivors, refers to a genderless “people” who saved the city. Typical even of the middle generation of Russian women today, Rogova does not identify the sacrifice of, primarily, women. As Toby Clyman and Diana Greene recognized in their analysis of Lidiia Ginzburg’s autobiography from the Siege (Ginzburg intentionally referred to victims of the Siege as “people”), Russian women may not openly reveal or even realize the gendered nature of their experiences: “Her work, like that of many cultural conservators, displays, but does not own, her complex difference.”<sup>23</sup>

Although our “cultural conservators” do not qualify as either revolutionaries or political prisoners (Heldt’s other categories of women autobiographers), they are impelled to speak and write by a similar sense of injustice. We have referred to their writing previously as testimony. They felt obliged to give witness to what they were experiencing. Yet, their accustomed position on the periphery, in the private realm, emboldened them to write more openly than the men who also bore witness. They not only wrote of the private side of war. They exercised the relative freedom that they had sensed within the home, even at the height of the Terror of the preceding decade. Liubov’ Shaporina’s and Ol’ga Freidenberg’s written indictments of Stalin simply astound the reader.

In many of the documents that follow, women pass judgment not just

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on their own actions or those of family members—in the tradition of enforcing the moral or religious code within the home—they criticize and condemn acquaintances, the government, and society at large. We can account for their temerity in part as a result of the freedom they enjoyed as low-profile women. Yet they experienced an even greater sense of liberation due to their even more liminal status in war. In Stalin’s time, Soviet citizens experienced relative freedom in a limited number of otherwise undesirable places; for instance, the labor camp or the mad house. The chaos of war constituted a similarly liminal and relatively free state.<sup>24</sup> Women at war were thus “doubly” free to write of their convictions and, even if unconsciously, of their lives.

In these letters, diaries, memoirs, and works of documentary prose, we can recognize some traditional impetuses of Russian women autobiographers—the attempt to preserve culture and expose social injustice. Yet, it is often left for the reader to identify the Siege as a *woman’s* experience or the document as a piece of *women’s* life writing. The significance for Russian literature of women’s writing on the Siege and women writing their lives during the Siege has escaped the attention, at times, of even the professional Russian reader. The publishing house Soviet Writer (*Sovetskii pisatel’*) rejected Lidiia Razumovskaia’s piece of documentary prose, included here, and returned her manuscript with the critique: “All of this is just about herself. There is no background.” It is our hope that this volume will draw greater attention to the contributions of the *blokadnitsy*, not only to the history of the Siege, but also to the heritage of Russian women’s life writing.