The besieged: a story of survival by Catherine Walton Published by Biteback, September 2011

Reviewed by Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

Some years ago I developed an obsession with the Siege of Leningrad. The city was encircled by the Nazis in September 1941, two months into Operation Barbarossa.
As the cradle of the Bolshevik Revolution, it ignited in Hitler a compulsive fascination far beyond its strategic value. Leningrad was marked out, not for conquest and subjugation, but for obliteration.

On the day the circle closed, the Nazis bombed the city's food stocks. The old wooden warehouses sent flames three miles into the sky. Months later, chunks of earth impregnated with traces of molten sugar fetched astronomical prices on the black market. Throughout the winter - the coldest in a century - the city's authorities cut the ration, and cut again. Three thin slices of bread, eked out with sawdust and cellulose. Soldiers got 500 grams; manual workers 250. Dependents got 125; the equivalent of about 200 calories, in temperatures that dipped to minus forty. Modern British soldiers on Arctic exercise consume 5000 calories a day.

Nothing could be got without a ration card. Deaths went undeclared till the end of the month, so that the deceased's card could bestow the only inheritance of any remaining value. To lose one's card was a death sentence. Furniture was burned, floors ripped up, libraries gutted; the leather bindings boiled for soup, the pages incinerated in the bellies of reeking stoves whose toxic fumes killed the starving quicker. Jewels, furs, heirlooms, pianos, vodka; everything was for sale for a handful of calories. Thieves were shot on sight. Cannibalism has always been officially denied. In the zero hour of absolute need, it seems to the authorities that the last decency must be fastidiously preserved.

Without food, without running water, without electricity, without transport, the city froze, like a liner foundered in the vast silence of an Arctic icefield. The earth turned to iron. Corpses pulled on children's sleds were stacked at the gates of the cemeteries. Others lay where they fell, trampled in the snow by the living, too weak to walk around them. The radio stayed on air, broadcasting, between programmes and air raid warnings, the ticking of a metronome.

To the north east of the city, Lake Ladoga slowly, slowly frozen to a depth which would allow the convoy of essential supplies to be brought to the city from the free 'mainland'. In January 1942 the first supply trucks began their journeys under bombardment across the Road of Life. Food in, people out. Many of the rescued were too far gone to live. But it was the beginning of the possibility of survival.

Leningrad was relieved 27 January 1944; almost 900 days under siege. Perhaps a million and a half million souls perished. Half the population.

I don't know why the Siege gripped me so.

A lifelong fascination with Russia crystallised around it. Siege books - history, memoir, fiction - including Caroline Walton's 2003 novel - make up about a quarter of my Russian library; more than Stalin, more than Chechnya, way more than Peter and Catherine, the last Romanovs, Vladimir Ilyich, Rasputin. Like the plot of Oedipus, like Macbeth, the trajectory of events gained an irresistible tragic momentum that could end only one way - the unheeded warnings from diplomats and spies of German forces massing on the borders, the decimation and retreat of the Red Army, Navy and Fleet, the mobbed evacuations and sacking of the shops, the warehouses in flames; a ferocious inverse velocity, racing through the shortening days and endless nights to the silent dark apartments in which the metronome ticked.

Then something happened that changed forever the nature of that dubious voyeurism. I witnessed the long illness and death of someone close. Eating became difficult, then impossible. I saw close up what this book calls *the psychosis of hunger*. The irritability, the mood swings, the emergence of a cavernous, unkempt old man from the body of a beautiful young one. How the eyes sink in the head, how the neck can no longer support the weight of the head, how the flesh webs around the emphatic hollows of armpit, collarbone, jaw. Rings loosen, clothes balloon. The personality condenses, amplifes what may have been minor notes in a healthy placid life. The lethargy, the loss of rationality; the uncanny sensation of being with a person who is alive but who has already crossed over.

And as I thought back on the siege obsession, I could not help wince at my wellfed indulgence, and wonder whether I was being visited with some kind of punishment in kind. Whether I was getting my *just desserts*. How I had *devoured* books and programmes, what a *voracious appetite* I had had for the subject, how my *chickens were coming home to roost*. All, of course, in the worst possible *taste.*

In the West I noticed how people are fascinated by tragedy, says Lena, the author 's Russian friend and flatmate. *Your press revolves around it. Your relish for it shocked me - perhaps it reinforces your frantic pursuit of pleasure*.

The Besieged is written in a style which publishers and reviewers designate as *deeply personal*. Gonzo history; the protagonist's own journey an integral part of the telling.

Caroline Walton arrives in Leningrad in 1999. She is an Englishwoman, a Russophile with no Russian ancestry, whose father served in the Arctic convoys bringing vital supplies to Russia across the most dangerous waters in the War. It's her third trip to the city. The generation of *blo kadniki*
she has come to interview is very old; if not now, the chance will be lost forever.

But she is dogged by exhaustion, unable to write, haunted by memories of an old affair, an abandoned lover. She burrows into her own motives for circling this dark subject. Two old ladies on a city park bench, nostalgic for the Stalin era, *pick a strange choice for a golden era...but perhaps the past is the only place where they find solace. Was I not searching for something similar when I arrived... scouring dusty streets for a part of my life that will never return ?*

She is nervous of treading in the hallowed ground; asking questions which may wound, or offend, or miss their mark. The mythology of the Siege and its heroic resisters is a key part of the legend of the Great Patriotic War. It proves impossible to discuss without reference to the Communist collapse and the ideological vacuum that followed. To contrast the communitarianism and paradoxical joy of siege life pared down to stark moral choices with the materialism and directionlessness of modern Russian life.

Communist propaganda, snorts Lena's Aunt Nadya. *All this cradle of the revolution crap. The Communists appropriated our siege experience and rewrote it...the truth is we all did things that made us ashamed.*

Daily survival was above all a struggle against despair, and Walton charts a parallel course of descent and redemption. She is at odds with Lena, describes herself as uncharitable. Images of the tale Snow Queen resurface again and again; one intuits her unspoken anguish that she is its hero, Kay, pierced with a fragment of the Queen's mirror, turned to a splinter of ice in the heart. She starts to hallucinate, the vanished streets superimposed upon the present; a couple kissing on a park bench against a background of stacked blackened corpses.

The book is a struggle against despair. The writer finds her own salvation among these veterans, the singers, dancers, musicians, orphans, soldiers, nurses, citizen-survivors. *Creativit y is the answer to despair, and creativity is linked to humanity*
. says musician Arkadii Kotlyarsky. That creativity found expression in wartime life, and in performances which were a vital
exchange
between performer and audience.

It's funnier than you might expect. The *blokadniki* are a glorious gallery of eccentrics. There are audiences with ballerinas, gymnasts, musicians, actors and trapeze artistes, who performed for those as starved and frozen as they were themselves;
human shadows
. Many interviews take place over the groaning tables of Russian teatimes. A dancer who spent the war performing for the troops complained that all the porridge she ate at the Front made her chubby. It's inevitable that descriptions of finding corpses chewed by rats should overlap with biscuits halfway to the author's mouth, and the urgings of the hostess to have another mouthful.

It's not a form of history-writing which will appeal to everyone. Some may argue that its search for personal salvation in the long ago sufferings of an alien nation is Western narcissism. But that misses the point. This is a book about now as much as then; for how one survives in wartime, but also in the everyday.

People's Artist Ivan Dmitriev: *It was the people who gave to others who survived. The person who withdrew into himself, who ate his ration all at once under his blankets - and I saw this happen - usually died.*

The splinter of ice in the eye of the observer melts. The point of art in extremis - in everyday - is not simply to observe, but to transform. The *blovadniki* are transformed for life. So is the author. So, by invitation, is the reader.

An old actor describes his career, how he accumulated emotional material from the war, speaks of the death on the Finnish Front he witnessed of a young lieutenant from Leningrad.

"One of our writers," I say, "Grahame Greene was his name, spoke of the sliver of ice in the heart."

"The detachment of the observer ?"

"Yes," I reply, "but it's not really ice, is it ?"

Dmitriev shakes his head. "The observer merely records, I wanted to transform."

He sighs. "Later I went to the lieutenant's address in Leningrad. An old woman opened the door. Is this the home of Lieutenant Gusin ? I asked and saw her eyes widen in fear. I am his mother, she replied. I saw then that she was only about forty years old. He's alive and well and sends his love, I said, and left before she could offer me anything to eat or drink."

Dmitriev picks up his sticks. "Since that time, over many years, Gusin has returned. There are so many characters in here". He taps his chest."An enormous cast. They all come back."

Nearing the book's conclusion, the tone lifts towards ecstasy. I am reminded that fasting is a tool of the shaman; heightening the senses, tearing away the veil of familiarity.

Aunt Nadya: *Our existence was stripped to its most basic elements. A small pleasure that would go unnoticed in peacetime becomes enormous. The sight of a blade of grass pushing up through the ground after that first winter was so precious it made me almost drunk with happiness.*

Walton's visit coincides with the publication of the siege diaries of Boldyrev, which split taboos wide open and meets with a mixed reception. *Lord, did it make me hungry,* says Lena. *I went through borscht, blinis, potatoes and cutlets - everything on the canteen menu.*
Through debunking the pieties, the rigid Soviet socialist-realist hero is humanised, the frozen statue brought to flawed, authentic life.

This is the last book on the Siege I will read. Absolutely.

Writing as Paula Jaegar, Elayne Jude is the author of TROIKA, a trilogy of plays about Russia, to be premiered in London 2012.

Examples of her photographic work, and blog, can be found at www.17dragonsphotography.com and see also www.twitter.com/elaynejude