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Representation, Experiences of Survival, and the Politics of Suffering

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The Blockade of Leningrad was a tragedy, a drama, and a moment of truth about human practices and the human condition: how we respond to duress, how and when we obey and disobey, how we make meaning from the meaningless, and so much more. Sources for this event are far from exhausted: much remains hidden in classified archival files or files not yet read. Diaries have been one favorite source of information, whether for insights into norms and practices or as a form of text in its own right¹. Following the post-Soviet tradition of publishing archival materials once archives were open, various scholars have published entire diaries or fragments from diaries. One newer archive, unique for being virtual (on the internet), is Prozhito. This archive provides a wealth of accounts (over 7500 documents and growing) from different places and times and in different formats: letters, recollections, and diaries; some previously published (in books, newspapers, etc.) and some unpublished; from wartime and peacetime; and from various parts of the USSR. The sheer quantity of materials can overwhelm those seeking a particular theme or topic of interest, such as the Blockade.

The book under review, *la znaiu, chto tak pisat' nel'zia*, brings together some diaries from Prozhito, along with analyses and useful descriptions of each diary. The diaries are the core of this volume, by Aleksandr Bardovskii, Anisim Nikulin, Sofia Gutshabash, Nina Obukhova-Dukhovskaya, Berta Zlotnikova, Alexander Grishkevich, and Vladimir Tomilin. Bardovskii's diary (which he did not survive to complete) reveals psychological costs, doubts about civilians and colleagues and elites (mixed with respect for them), and how rumors

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showed the limits of Bolshevik discursive control. His view of Soviet power is contradictory, as he shows respect and subtle skepticism about Bolshevik leadership, including Stalin. If Bardovskii's faith (in victory, the Party, humanity) is challenged by Blockade suffering, Nikulin remains a believer in victory and in Soviet civilization. This is not because he is sheltered from suffering. He is responsible for disposing of the dead, no easy task and one that makes him think about humanity and Soviet civilization. One of his strategies is to categorize Leningraders as useful and useless, loyal and abnormal (e. g. cannibals). This sense of order seems to sustain him, as does his own sense of duty to the Party, the state, and the Soviet people (especially Leningraders). His is, in the end, a heroic narrative. Sofia Gutshabash provides a schoolgirl's point of view, alerting us to universals of suffering and the importance of variation across age and experience. Hers is not a diary *per se*, but rather a diary with comments or corrections after the fact — a running commentary, as it were. "Entries" are not as detailed as in other diaries, but they are raw and to the point: quick accounts of the basics of how to obtain extra food (e. g. from school or a hospital) or the raw sensations and observations of starvation (feeling tired, seeing others slowly perishing, etc.) that adults might overthink or overanalyze (or avoid). Here we catch a glimpse of the loss of innocence.

Unlike other diary authors in this volume, Obukhova-Dukhovskaya provides some details about changes in routines that others took for granted. Here, too, we get a sense of loss of innocence as one traumatic cost of war. She describes the unnatural transformation of her body and of the city: effects of starvation on her physique and the loss of light on the streets, both making a sense of gloom come to life in physical realities. Her diary also reveals the politics of family life, in particular how families were sites of intimate support and of intimate conflict. A young girl of university age when war broke out, Zlotnikova's diary provides insights into how the Blockade was a destroyer of dreams (realization of self through creative labor). Her desire to be in the theater or journalism — some creative occupation — lies in ruins. At the same time, her account also reveals how she struggled with this sense of loss and attempted to find her own place of usefulness in the war effort, which sometimes found expression in her relations to others. This is less a typical diary than a collection of observations from a Party member and state official — an interesting combination of intimate self and institutional self (to the extent that the two can be separated, which I believe is possible in that no self can be reduced to institutions alone). Structured by vignettes rather than dates (so that we don't have the usual temporal flow of a diary), Grishkevich offers the view of the Party through one of its own, rather than through the formal work of agitprop and the like. This makes it similar to Nikulin's diary, although the latter does reveal the self of the author more than Grishkevich does. Finally, Tomilin's "diary" is less an account of thoughts and self, than an "objective" account of food: rations, amounts the schoolboy ate, and the like. Reflection and reflexivity are nonexistent; instead, we are left with basic facts of one teenager's Blockade diet. This is not the only example of this kind of "diary," but Tomilin's drives home that leaving an account of the Blockade could take many forms.

These are rich accounts, and my quick overview cannot do them justice. This said, one question is why the editors chose these particular diaries: such a choice

frames the essence of the Blockade for the reader. What was the overall picture the editors wanted to create? Was this a random sample? The perspectives differ (as noted above), although we also lack a closer sense of class-based and gender-based variation in the Blockade experience. Still, one comes away with some sense of what was shared (similarities) and some facets of difference (variation); everyone suffered, but that suffering could take different forms. We should hope there will be more such publications that expand the pool of available diaries, and of commentaries to help readers find their own insights from this material.

The volume includes important commentaries to provide context: the diaries themselves, how they were collected, and the Prozhito archive where they are now stored. N. Lomagin and M. Melnychenko introduce the volume with an overview of diaries as an historical source. They rightly note the massive efforts to unearth diaries and similar documents that attest to Blockade realities, but also that such efforts have usually been individual rather than organized. For over twenty years, European University at St. Petersburg has engaged in collecting, organizing, and systematizing accounts of the Blockade, from oral histories to collecting documents (including housing Prozhito). They point out that personal accounts peak in the war years of 1941–1945, not only because the war was a period of interest and so people preserved such accounts (including the Communist Party, which created a diary archive in TsGAIPD SPb), but also because more people kept diaries or left accounts afterwards to make meaning out of the meaningless and to anchor themselves in some kind of order.

But what is this “Blockade diary”? The typical diary provides structures of time and place: what happened when and where, from air raids and explosions, to meetings, to observed tragedies (death and corpses, bread lines, changes in ration levels, and so on) — although there is variation across diaries in content, themes, style of prose, social background or position of the writer, and so on. This said, Polina Barskova believes there are commonalities worth pondering, and her essay gives the reader important points to ponder as they work through these diaries. Barskova believes the Blockade diary is an entity in and of itself, a genre *sui generis*. While admitting variation (which she really does not explore), Barskova claims Blockade diaries exhibit several shared characteristics or functions. One is reducing anxiety and disorder. This is a plausible claim; fixing something on paper becomes a way to create some degree of order that certainly goes missing in the first year of the Blockade. Barskova also notes that “time” becomes less structured in the Blockade diary: while the day is the usual unit of diary structure, the recognition that one might die at any moment means that the writer cannot count on a continuously structured diary. If today’s entry might be my last, I need to put as much information as I can into this entry. This leads to entries that can seem unstructured, with observations, criticisms, and despair, linked to small details of one’s immediate moment and to the bigger picture of war and geopolitics. Of course, this would be natural in the first months of war and Blockade: these were new experiences involving many things happening at once.

Barskova raises an important question in her essay: For whom did Leningraders write these diaries? Posterity — some future reader — is one obvious answer, although this does not resolve who this other is, concretely. The audience, then, is

shadowy². This leads to another issue: the combination of authenticity and historicity. How Leningraders framed their stories depends, in part at least, on who they felt their audience was. Can we trust diaries? How are they linked to history? Barskova cites Berggolts to suggest that diaries could be relatively honest accounts of perceptions and feelings, even within some limits — although this does not exhaust the question of “authenticity”, not only of accounts, but of the Blockade experience³. As to historicity and a sense of being linked to history, Barskova cites Alexis Peri to claim that Blockade diaries and diarists are almost overwhelmed by the feeling of being set adrift in the middle of an historically significant event. In this sense the Blockade diary was also an attempt to make sense of rapidly unfolding history and of one’s position in that history.

This leads to other related facets of Blockade diaries, according to Barskova, one of which is that writing a diary becomes a means for diarists to inspect *themselves*. The Blockade diary is a mirror through which Leningraders could assess themselves (e. g. succumbing to or holding up under starvation) and a means for observing and reflecting on one’s own behavior and that of close others (e. g. within families). This idea of the diary as a form of reflexivity has some affinity with Hellbeck’s analysis of 1930s diaries⁴, albeit (mercifully) without the latter’s problematic quasi-Foucauldian framework. While I am not convinced that this was all that common a trait (whether deliberate or accidental), Barskova does raise one important aspect of this function of diaries: Leningraders could use diaries to record information from formal sources and from shadow talk (rumors and personal conversations) and work out which seemed more plausible and helpful. This important point speaks to challenges to Bolshevik discursive power that demand further exploration⁵. Finally, Barskova suggests that the diary was sometimes an attempt to find a language, or at least metaphors and other literary devices, for making sense of the senseless. Leningraders did something similar with the landscapes before them: again, making some sense of the senseless destruction around them.

Barskova’s points are well taken and provide the reader with ideas to use while navigating these diaries. This said, I have some quibbles⁶. First, I am hesitant to treat Blockade diaries as a “genre” except as a generic category marking a particular kind of construction, without invoking any specific and static logic. Here I follow Pierre Bourdieu: cultural production is shaped (but not entirely determined) by positions in social fields. The “genre” is a particular category of social production linked to fields of artistic or cultural production: the genre has rules of authenticity, and actors both follow and challenge those rules to position themselves inside fields of cultural production. For this to work, the “genre” has to be a *public* set of rules (even if not formally codified), otherwise there is no “genre” to produce for. One could argue that Leningrad’s civilians were in similar social positions, although this risks eliding variation. Thus, to argue that the Blockade diary is a “genre” could suggest that Leningraders were consciously orienting their diaries to a particular style⁷. Yet Blockade diaries, like many diaries, are more intimate and personal than conforming to a public genre. We can call the Blockade diary a “genre” as a way of saying that this was a particular cultural production, but an analysis of this “genre” should have a conscious focus on social forces shaping content and on variation.

Second, Barskova's discussion opens the door to important issues that, to be fair, she could not cover given constraints of space. Take the diary as source of order (Barskova's first point). This function (if we can call it that) actually introduces a paradox: if the practice of keeping a diary is an attempt to impose some order on a disorderly event (much as men might shave during moments of duress to create some semblance of order), those same diaries also *reproduce disorder* as writers list the various disorderly and unpredictable things going on around them. How can keeping a diary reduce anxiety when doing so means revisiting that very disorder and even trauma? Leningraders did not want to mention cannibalism when rumors and signs began to emerge, but eventually they confronted cannibalism in diaries—revisiting it and reliving the horror in hopes of making some sense of it and possibly reducing its traumatic effect (although for some diarists talking about cannibalism meant accepting that this was a sign that humans were uncivilized beasts at heart). Only through theodicies — stepping outside the particularities to a broader and more abstract general that might be sitting atop the entire tragedy — is creating some order possible.

There is also the issue of variation, which I have raised and now need to discuss further, because variation is crucial for making sense not only of diaries, but especially of the Blockade and experiences of those who suffered it. One form of variation is across time. Barskova notes, correctly, that Leningraders did put much information into diaries as they confronted dramatic disorder and the possibility they could soon die. By summer 1942, however, Blockade life was becoming normalized, and the drama either disappears from some diaries or shifts to other kinds of drama, such as personal lives. The food situation has stabilized, evacuations and mass death meant a smaller population more easily fed and mobilized, and the regime had learned how to be more pragmatic when devising policies supporting survival and producing for the war effort. And diaries reflect this “new normal”: as a rule, the drama of the war and Blockade becomes replaced with dramas of one's everyday personal lives. This does not mean the drama of war entirely disappears; however, as the threat of starvation receded (along with such dramatic outcomes as mass death and cannibalism), the pictures are more a distorted normality than the world turned upside down. This is an important story of the Blockade: *its normalization*, which is a sign of the process of resilience at work. Further, another dimension of variation in content of diaries — observations, detail, styles, reflexivity — is *social class*. The *intelligentsia* were more likely to leave detailed and introspective entries, whereas other Leningraders left impressions and questions. Gender variation is also at work but less significant than class: women were more likely to be introspective and empathetic, whereas men were more likely to list observations of the day⁸.

If Barskova's essay leads off the volume, Aleksei Pavlovskii and Anastasia Pavlovskaiia provide a concluding essay on the use of diaries for “cultural memory,” whether as Soviet propaganda or as a tool for scholarship and cultural output⁹. They begin with a fascinating history of how the Party set out to collect diaries and interviews with survivors as part of a formal project to institutionalize the Blockade symbolically; this began *during* the Blockade, when the outcome was not perfectly certain (although by 1943 it was clear the Blockade *would* end). The Leningrad Affair

placed the use of diaries into suspended animation, but Daniil Granin's *Blokadnaia kniga* project in the 1970s brought them back to life; the collapse of communism lifted real restrictions on their use¹⁰. Before the 1970s some diaries were used to canonize the Blockade, with Tanya Savicheva's diary a parallel (of sorts) to Anne Frank's.

Pavlovskii and Pavlovskaiia note that the Prozhito project is both archive and canonization simultaneously. I would advise caution on creating a canon, as this means attributing different degrees of significance and can lead non-experts (and many experts as well) away from potential insights from less significant parts of the collection¹¹. (Pavlovskii and Pavlovskaiia do seem to imply that the "canon" is now everything in Prozhito, which is a good sign.) The public response to Prozhito is to bring greater attention to diaries, although here I also advise caution: diaries only tell part of the story, that part of the Blockade outside fields of power. For a view of the latter, from inside the Bolshevik machine, we need documents from state and Party organizations to complement diaries (and Pavlovskii and Pavlovskaiia do admit this). What NKVD operatives and those in Smolny perceived and thought it no less important (but no more important) than what civilians observed, felt, and left in their accounts.

Pavlovskii and Pavlovskaiia also note the place of diaries in historiography. First, diaries are a source of data and an object of study in their own right. Second, historians are one gatekeeper between archive and canon, contributing to which contents of the former pass into the latter. This is a good reflective beginning for thinking about diaries and the Prozhito archive, and a warning as well that historians should reflect on their places and practices in wider fields of academic and cultural discourse¹². Historians and historical studies are not the only field in which diaries have a place: the media, Russian schools, and museums are also fields where actors have used Blockade diaries as part of constructing narratives — and where even more caution is required, lest those narratives become too simplistic or serve any other master but constructive and critical dialog. There is more work to be done on the use of the Blockade for various purposes. One hopes this volume is only the beginning of such a wider project.

I would add two more issues that Pavlovskii and Pavlovskaiia could have addressed, and hopefully will in the future. The first concerns the social sciences. Pavlovskii and Pavlovskaiia mention the use of Blockade diaries by historians and artists in other media (film, schools, etc.) — what we could call "humanities". Blockade diaries could be of use in historically informed social sciences; Leningraders who left their observations were doing what an ethnographer would do¹³. If the humanities are concerned with interpretations, representations, and empathy — admittedly, and oversimplification of what humanities scholars do — the social sciences seek to explain variation and causation. First-hand accounts can go some ways towards such explanations (although they are no panacea for methodological and theoretical rigor). The second future issue concerns embedding the Blockade in wider issues of war and survival. The Blockade is one case of war, duress, and survival: one siege, in one city, in one country, in one war. We can learn a lot from one case, but we can gain even more by comparing those stories to stories elsewhere: the Soviet experience of World War II in Tula, Saratov, and Minsk; the experience of World War II in rural France, China, and Iowa; and experiences of war more generally. We can also

add duress to this list: how can stories of the Irish famine or the siege of Sarajevo in the 1990s alert us to facets of Blockade stories we might have missed?¹⁴

In sum, this volume opens the door a bit on Prozhito, on the Blockade, and on issues of representation, experiences of survival, and the politics of suffering. It is a good step forward; I hope it is far from the last.

¹ For examples of English-language scholarship, see: Hass J. K. *Wartime Suffering and Survival: The Human Condition under Siege in the Blockade of Leningrad* (New York, 2021); Peri A. *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge, 2017); Barskova P. *Besieged Leningrad: Aesthetic Responses to Urban Disaster* (DeKalb, IL, 2017); Bidlack R., Lomagin N. *The Leningrad Blockade, 1941–1944: A New Documentary History from the Soviet Archives* (New Haven, 2012); Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose* (Pittsburgh, 2002). Russian-language scholarship drawing on diaries is vast but of uneven quality. Some good examples include Nikita Lomagin, *Neizvestnaia blokada*, two volumes (St. Petersburg, 2002); Iarov S. *Blokadnaia etika: Predstavleniia o morali v Leningrade v 1941–1942 gg.* (St. Petersburg, 2011); Piankevich V. *Liudi zhili slukhami. Neformal'noe kommunikativnoe prostranstvo blokadnogo Leningrada* (St. Petersburg, 2014). This is in addition to diaries that have already been published.

² I suggest that we are also seeing the staple of Symbolic Interactionism of sociological theory: the diary is a conversation with oneself. In this theory, we are always interacting with some other, including ourselves. The Blockade diary is one manifestation of this internal conversation as a way of working out what is a dramatic and historical (and terrifying) event. That the majority of Blockade diaries begin with the war or soon after is further evidence that the diary has a cathartic purpose (as Barskova suggests, in so many words) and is aimed at an audience that, more than any other, is the writer).

³ See: Hass, *Wartime Suffering and Survival*, chapter 7.

⁴ Hellbeck J. *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁵ If the diary was supposed to fashion a Bolshevik subjectivity because the diary would reflect the actor's attempts to incorporate Bolshevik ideology and corrections of failures to do so — this is Hellbeck's point — then Barskova suggests that incorporating formal and shadow discourses into the diary fixed them with some significance. That is, fixing shadow talk into diaries gave them equal weight with formal discourses and challenged the Bolshevik monopoly on thought. To play on Stephen Kotkin's famous phrase, were Leningraders in this case really thinking Bolshevik? Nikita Lomagin and I currently exploring this issue in a manuscript-in-progress.

⁶ Barskova treats diaries as a *literary* entity, whereas I treat them as a *social* entity. The reader of this review should keep this in mind. Also, in invoking Ginzburg and Shvartz in her discussion, Barskova gives weight to “professional” writers as setting some informal norm against which to assess diaries and the Blockade experience. (At least, this is what I take away from this exercise.) This risks shaping *our* view of the Blockade. I would not elevate Ginzburg over, say, Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva or Olga Epshtein, who left multi-volume diaries.

⁷ Here, too, one could argue that the Bolshevik diary was a genre, in that the Bolsheviks offered particular rules for writing a diary (as Jochen Hellbeck, among others, has argued). This might be the case for *some* diaries, but it is far from clear that the entire sample of available diaries followed the Bolshevik lead. If anything, the logic of the stereotypical Bolshevik diary — which Hellbeck claims was part of the 1930s project of creating a Bolshevik soul — is more visible in interviews with Party functionaries (the contents of which are in archive collection TsGAIPD SPb f. 4000, op. 10).

⁸ See: Hass, *Wartime Suffering and Survival*, chapters 4 and 5.

⁹ Pavlovskii and Pavlovskaiia also provide useful introductions to each diary, placing them in social context.

¹⁰ Granin also collected interviews in the late 1970s to augment diaries.

¹¹ For too long W. E. B. DuBois was not in the canon of sociological theory, depriving the field of DuBois' insights on race (and more).

¹² This is not to say that historians do not do this. However, this can also be overblown, as when the occasional individual historian becomes a public intellectual.

¹³ The main difference is that the ethnographer is trained to be aware of biases, sampling, and other methodological concerns, as well as consciously seeking observations that inform theoretical debates.

¹⁴ For example, such comparisons drew my attention to how gender operates under duress (*Wartime Suffering and Survival*, chapter 4), a topic of supreme importance in the Blockade that demands closer scrutiny.

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Abstract: The book under review, *la znayu, chto tak pisat' nel'zia*, brings together some diaries from Prozhito archive, along with analyses and useful descriptions of each diary. The diaries are the core of this volume, by Aleksandr Bardovskii, Anisim Nikulin, Sofia Gutshabash, Nina Obukhova-Dukhovskaya, Berta Zlotnikova, Alexander Grishkevich, and Vladimir Tomilin. These diaries offer valuable insights similar to those gathered through ethnographic research. They can aid in historically informed social sciences and contribute to interpretations, representations, and empathy. However, it is important to note that first-hand accounts have limitations and should not substitute for rigorous methodologies and theoretical frameworks. Author also points the necessity of embedding the Blockade within broader contexts of war and survival. The Blockade in Leningrad is just one case among many others worldwide. By comparing these stories to experiences from different regions and wars, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the Blockade's significance. Exploring the Soviet experience of World War II in various cities, as well as experiences of war in different countries, can provide additional perspectives. Furthermore, examining instances of duress, such as the Irish famine or the siege of Sarajevo, can shed light on aspects of Blockade stories that might have been overlooked. This volume opens the door a bit on Prozhito, on the Blockade, and on issues of representation, experiences of survival, and the politics of suffering.

Keywords: Blockade, Leningrad, diaries, archive, memories.

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