

B L O O M S B U R Y



ANNA REID

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Tragedy of a City Under Siege 1941-44

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Under Siege, 1941-44

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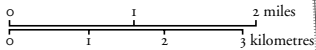
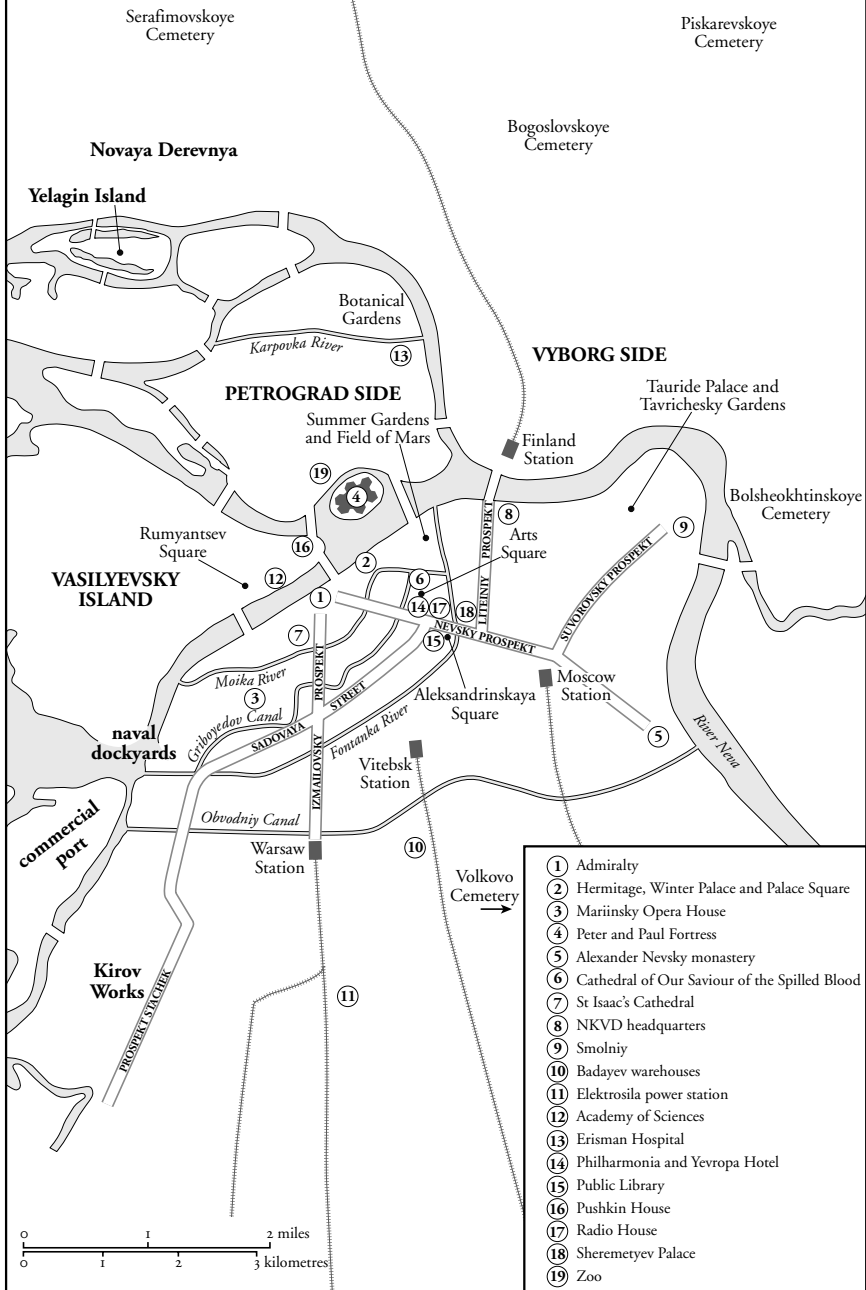
For Edward and Bertie

# The Eastern Front

- ..... Pre-Barbarossa Soviet-German border
- Frontline end-September 1941
- Frontline November 1942



# Leningrad city centre



- ① Admiralty
- ② Hermitage, Winter Palace and Palace Square
- ③ Mariinsky Opera House
- ④ Peter and Paul Fortress
- ⑤ Alexander Nevsky monastery
- ⑥ Cathedral of Our Saviour of the Spilled Blood
- ⑦ St Isaac's Cathedral
- ⑧ NKVD headquarters
- ⑨ Smolny
- ⑩ Badayev warehouses
- ⑪ Elektrosila power station
- ⑫ Academy of Sciences
- ⑬ Erisman Hospital
- ⑭ Philharmonia and Yevropa Hotel
- ⑮ Public Library
- ⑯ Pushkin House
- ⑰ Radio House
- ⑱ Sheremet'yev Palace
- ⑲ Zoo

# Introduction

This is the story of the siege of Leningrad, the deadliest blockade of a city in human history. Leningrad sits at the north-eastern corner of the Baltic, at the head of the long, shallow gulf that divides the southern shores of Finland from those of northern Russia. Before the Russian Revolution it was the capital of the Russian Empire, and called St Petersburg after its founder, the tsar Peter the Great. With the fall of Communism twenty years ago it regained its old name, but for its older inhabitants it is Leningrad still, not so much for Lenin as in honour of the approximately three-quarters of a million civilians who starved to death during the almost nine hundred days – from September 1941 to January 1944 – during which the city was besieged by Nazi Germany. Other modern sieges – those of Madrid and Sarajevo – lasted longer, but none killed even a tenth as many people. Around thirty-five times more civilians died in Leningrad than in London's Blitz; four times more than in the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima put together.

On 22 June 1941, the midsummer morning on which Germany attacked the Soviet Union, Leningrad looked much the same as it had done before the Revolution. A seagull circling over the gilded needle of the Admiralty spire would have seen the same view as twenty-four years previously: below the choppy grey River Neva, lined by parks

and palaces; to the west, where the Neva opens into the sea, the cranes of the naval dockyards; to the north, the zigzag bastions of the Peter and Paul Fortress and grid-like streets of Vasilyevsky Island; to the south, four concentric waterways – the pretty Moika, coolly classical Griboyedov, broad, grand Fontanka and workaday Obvodniy – and two great boulevards, the Izmailovsky and the Nevsky Prospekt, radiating in perfect symmetry past the Warsaw and Moscow railway stations to the factory chimneys of the industrial districts beyond.

Appearances, though, were deceptive. Outwardly, Leningrad was not much altered; inwardly, it was profoundly changed and traumatised. It is conventional to give the story of the blockade a filmic happy-sad-happy progression: the peace of a midsummer morning shattered by news of invasion, the call to arms, the enemy halted at the gates, descent into cold and starvation, springtime recovery, victory fireworks. In reality it was not like that. Any Leningrader aged thirty or over at the start of the siege had already lived through three wars (the First World War, the Civil War between Bolsheviks and Whites that followed it, and the Winter War with Finland of 1939–40), two famines (the first during the Civil War, the second the collectivisation famine of 1932–3, caused by Stalin's violent seizure of peasant farms) and two major waves of political terror. Hardly a household, particularly among the city's ethnic minorities and old middle classes, had not been touched by death, prison or exile as well as impoverishment. For someone like the poet Olga Berggolts, daughter of a Jewish doctor, it was not unduly melodramatic to state that 'we measured time by the intervals between one suicide and the next'.<sup>1</sup> The siege, though unique in the size of its death toll, was less a tragic interlude than one dark passage among many.

The tragedy arose from the combined hubris of Hitler and Stalin. In August 1939 they had astonished the world by putting ideology aside to form a non-aggression pact, under which they divided Poland between them. When Hitler turned on France the

following spring Stalin stood aside, continuing to supply his ally with grain, metals, rubber and other vital commodities. Though it is clear from what we now know of Stalin's conversations with his Politburo that he expected to be forced into war with Germany sooner or later, the timing of the Nazi attack – code-named Barbarossa or 'Redbeard' after a crusading Holy Roman Emperor – came as a devastating shock. The new, poorly defended border through Poland was overrun almost immediately, and within weeks the panic-stricken Red Army found itself defending the major cities of Russia herself.

Chief victim of this unpreparedness was Leningrad. Immediately pre-war, the city had a population of just over three million. In the twelve weeks to mid-September 1941, when the German and Finnish armies cut it off from the rest of the Soviet Union, about half a million Leningraders were drafted or evacuated, leaving just over 2.5 million civilians, at least 400,000 of them children, trapped within the city. Hunger set in almost immediately, and in October police began to report the appearance of emaciated corpses on the streets. Deaths quadrupled in December, peaking in January and February at 100,000 per month. By the end of what was even by Russian standards a savage winter – on some days temperatures dropped to  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$  or below – cold and hunger had taken somewhere around half a million lives. It is on these months of mass death – what Russian historians call the 'heroic period' of the siege – that this book concentrates. The following two siege winters were less deadly, thanks to there being fewer mouths left to feed, and to food deliveries across Lake Ladoga, the inland sea to Leningrad's east whose south-eastern shores the Red Army continued to hold. In January 1943 fighting also cleared a fragile land corridor out of the city, through which the Soviets were able to build a railway line. Mortality nonetheless remained high, taking the total death toll to somewhere between 700,000 and 800,000 – one in every three or four of the immediate pre-siege population



– by January 1944, when the Wehrmacht finally began its long retreat to Berlin.

Remarkably, the siege of Leningrad has been paid rather little attention in the West. The best-known narrative history, written by Harrison Salisbury, a Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*, was published in 1969. Military historians have concentrated on the battles for Stalingrad and Moscow, despite the fact that Leningrad was the first city in all Europe that Hitler failed to take, and that its fall would have given him the Soviet Union's biggest arms manufacturing, shipyards and steelworks, linked his armies with Finland's, and allowed him to cut the railway lines carrying Allied aid from the Arctic ports of Archangel and Murmansk. More generally, the siege remains lost in the gloomy vastness of the Eastern Front – an empty, snow-swept plain, in the public imagination, across which waves of Red Army conscripts stumble, greatcoats flapping, towards massed German machine guns. Worryingly often, during the writing of this book, friends turned out to think that Leningrad (on the Baltic, now called St Petersburg) and Stalingrad (a third of the size, near the present-day border with Kazakhstan, now called Volgograd) were actually the same place.

A slightly different form of vagueness afflicts Germans, for whom the Eastern Front was regarded until recently as a scene of military suffering rather than atrocity. Millions of Germans have to live with the fact that a parent or grandparent was a member of the Nazi Party; millions more have a father or grandfather who fought in Russia. It is easier to remember that they were frostbitten and frightened, or starved and put to forced labour in prisoner-of-war camps (almost four in ten of the 3.2 million Axis soldiers taken prisoner by the Soviets died in captivity<sup>2</sup>), than that they burned villages, stripped peasants of winter clothing and food, and helped round up and shoot Jews. More broadly, Leningrad cedes in the guilt stakes to the Holocaust: 'To be cynical', says one German

historian, 'we have so many problematic aspects to our history that you have to choose.'<sup>3</sup> Strolling around the lovely medieval city of Freiburg, home to Germany's military archives, one comes across small brass plaques, engraved with names and dates, set into the pavement. They mark the houses from which local Jewish families were deported to the concentration camps. Leningrad's women and children, murdered by the same regime with equal deliberation, suffered out of sight and to this day largely out of mind.

The other reason the siege has been little written about, of course, is that the Soviets made it impossible to do so truthfully. During the war, censorship was all-pervading. Russians outside the siege ring, let alone Westerners, had only the vaguest idea of conditions inside the city. Soviet news broadcasts admitted 'hardship' and 'shortage' but never starvation, and Muscovites were amazed and horrified at the accounts privately given them by friends who made it out across Lake Ladoga. British and American media parroted the Soviet news bureaux. As the initial battles for Leningrad drew to stalemate the BBC's reports tailed off, and a year later London's *Times* reported the establishment of a land corridor out of the city with massive, unconscious understatement. Leningraders, readers were told, had suffered 'fearful privations' during the first siege winter, but with the coming of spring conditions had 'at once improved'.<sup>4</sup> Allied officialdom was equally in the dark. A member of Britain's wartime Military Mission to Moscow, a young naval lieutenant at the time, recounts how his only source of information was an actress friend, who got food to her besieged parents by begging a seat on a general's aeroplane.<sup>5</sup>

After the war, the Soviet government admitted mass starvation, citing a spuriously precise death toll of 632,253 at the Nuremberg war crime trials. Honest public description of its horrors, however, remained off-limits, as did all debate over why the German armies had been allowed to get so far, and why food supplies had not been

laid in, nor more civilians evacuated, before the siege ring closed. The boundaries narrowed even further with the onset of the Cold War and with Stalin's launch, in 1949, of two new purges. The first, carried out in secret, swept up Leningrad's war leadership and Party organisation; the second, against 'cosmopolitanism' – codeword for Jewishness or any sort of perceived Western leaning – hundreds of its academics and professionals. The same year one of Stalin's cronies, Georgi Malenkov, visited the popular Museum of the Defence of Leningrad, which housed home-made lamps and a mock-up of a wartime ration station (complete with two thin slices of adulterated bread) as well as quantities of trophy ordnance. Striding furiously through the halls, he is said to have brandished a guidebook and shouted: 'This pretends that Leningrad suffered a special "blockade" fate! It minimizes the role of the great Stalin!', before ordering the museum's closure. Its director was accused of 'amassing ammunition in preparation for terrorist acts' and sentenced to twenty-five years in the Gulag.<sup>6</sup>

With Stalin's death in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev's rise to power, it finally became possible to focus on aspects of the war other than the Great Leader's military genius. As well as Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' denouncing Stalin's Party purges, and the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the 'Thaw' saw the opening, in 1960, of the first memorial complex to Leningrad's civilian war dead. The site chosen was the Piskarevskoye cemetery in the city's north-eastern suburbs, site of the largest wartime mass graves. Khrushchev's successor Leonid Brezhnev went further, making the siege one of the centrepieces of a new cult of the Great Patriotic War, designed to distract from lagging living standards and political stagnation. Leningraders, in this version, turned from victims of wartime disaster to actors in a heroic national epic. They starved to death, true, but did so quietly and tidily, willing sacrifices in the defence of the cradle of the Revolution. Nobody grumbled, shirked work, fiddled the rationing system, took bribes

or got dysentery. And certainly nobody, except for a few fascist spies, hoped the Germans might win.

Communism's collapse twenty years ago made it possible, in the words of one Russian historian, to start 'wiping off the syrup'. Government archives opened, giving access to internal Party memos, security service reports on crime, public opinion and the operations of various government agencies, the case files of political arrestees, political officers' despatches from the front, and transcripts of telephone calls between the Leningrad leadership and the Kremlin. Literary journals began publishing unexpurgated siege memoirs and diaries, and newspapers outspoken interviews with still-angry Red Army veterans and siege survivors. Not least, a great many photographs were published for the first time – not of smiling Komsomolkas with spades over their shoulders, but of stick-legged, pot-bellied children, or messy piles of half-naked corpses.

Though gaps remain – some material is still classified; some was destroyed during the post-war purges – the new material leaves Brezhnev's mawkish fairytale in tatters. Yes, Leningraders displayed extraordinary endurance, selflessness and courage. But they also stole, murdered, abandoned relatives and resorted to eating human meat – as do all societies when the food runs out. Yes, the regime successfully defended the city, devising ingenious food supplements and establishing supply and evacuation routes across Lake Ladoga. But it also delayed, bungled, squandered its soldiers' lives by sending them into battle untrained and unarmed, fed its own senior apparatchiks while all around starved, and made thousands of pointless executions and arrests. The camps of the Soviet Gulag, the historian Anne Applebaum remarks, were apart from, but also microcosms of, life in the wider Soviet Union. They shared 'the same slovenly working practices, the same criminally stupid bureaucracy, the same corruption, and the same sullen disregard for human life'.<sup>7</sup> The same applies to Leningrad during the siege: far from standing apart from

the ordinary Soviet experience, it reproduced it in concentrated miniature. This book will not argue that mass starvation was as much the fault of Stalin as of Hitler. What it does, however, conclude is that under a different sort of government the siege's civilian (and military) death tolls might have been far lower.

For many Russians, this is hard to swallow. There is not much to celebrate in Russia's twentieth-century history, and the victory over Nazi Germany is a justified source of pride and patriotism. When Vladimir Putin, like Brezhnev before him, lays on lavish wartime anniversary celebrations, he finds a receptive audience. An element of tactful self-censorship also comes into play, because as well as flattering the regime the heroicised Brezhnevite version of the siege eased trauma for survivors.<sup>8</sup> It is hard – cruel even – to cast doubt on the doughty old woman kind enough to give an interview when she describes neighbours helping each other out, mothers sacrificing themselves for children, or good care in an evacuation hospital. She is not propagandising or myth-building, but has constructed a version of the past that is possible to live with. Paradoxically, public discussion of the blockade is likely to become franker once the last *blokadniki* have passed away.

The final point of retelling the story of the siege of Leningrad, though, is not to restore to view an overlooked atrocity, strip away Soviet propaganda or adjust the scorecards of the great dictators. It is, like all stories of humanity *in extremis*, to remind ourselves of what it is to be human, of the depths and heights of human behaviour. The siege's most eloquent victims – the diarists whose voices form the core of this book – are easy to relate to. They are not faceless poor-world peasants but educated city-dwelling Europeans – writers, artists, university lecturers, librarians, museum curators, factory managers, bookkeepers, pensioners, housewives, students and schoolchildren; owners of best coats, gramophones, favourite novels, pet dogs – people, in short, much like ourselves. Some did

turn out to be heroes, others to be selfish and callous, most to be a mixture of both. As a memoirist puts it of the Party representatives in her wartime military hospital, 'There were good ones, bad ones, and the usual.' Their own words are their best memorial.

Brockagh  
April 2010

PART I

Invasion: June–September 1941



'We will defend the city of Lenin' (Vladimir Serov, 1941)

One might say that Leningrad is particularly well suited to  
catastrophes . . . That cold river, those menacing sunsets,  
that operatic, terrifying moon

Anna Akhmatova





## 22 June 1941

Drive sixty kilometres south-west of what used to be Leningrad and you come to what Russians call dacha country: a green, untilled landscape of small lakes, soft dirt roads, tall, rusty-barked 'ship pines' and weathered wooden summer houses with sagging verandas and glassed-in porches. On the Sunday morning of 22 June 1941 Dmitri Likhachev, a thirty-five-year-old scholar of medieval Russian literature, was sunbathing with his wife and daughters on the sand martin-busy banks of the River Oredezh:

The bank was steep, with a path leading along the top of it. One day, sitting on our beach, we overheard snatches of a terrifying conversation. Holidaymakers were walking along the path and talking about Kronshtadt being bombed, about some aeroplane or other. At first we thought they were reminiscing about the Finnish campaign of 1939, but their excited voices bothered us. When we returned to the dacha we were told that war had broken out.

At noon the Likhachevs gathered with other holidaymakers around an outdoor loudspeaker to listen to the formal announcement of war. The speaker was not Stalin, but the Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov. 'Men and women, citizens of the Soviet

Union’, he began. ‘At four o’clock this morning, without declaration of war, and without any claims being made on the Soviet Union, German troops attacked our country.’ The text struck a note of baffled injury – ‘This attack has been made despite the existence of a non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Germany, a pact the terms of which were scrupulously observed by the Soviet Union’ – before ending with the more rousing ‘Our cause is good. Our enemy will be smashed. Victory will be ours.’ When the broadcast was over ‘everyone was very gloomy and silent . . . After Hitler’s *Blitzkrieg* in Europe, no one expected anything good.’<sup>1</sup>

All over Leningrad, quiet midsummer weekends were similarly violated. In her apartment in the city centre, near Potemkin’s Tauride Palace, Yelena Skryabina had risen early so as to get some typing done in time for an outing to the countryside. The sunshine, the cool morning air coming in at the windows, the sound of her nanny shushing her five-year-old son Yura outside the door, all combined to give her ‘a wonderful feeling of contentment and joy’. Her older son, fourteen-year-old Dima, had already left with a friend to see the fountains being switched on at the great baroque palace of Peterhof, out on the Finnish Gulf. At 9 a.m. her husband telephoned from his factory with a cryptic, agitated message to stay at home and turn on the radio. At noon, she and her mother listened to Molotov’s broadcast: ‘So this was it – war! Germany was already bombing Soviet cities. Molotov’s speech was halting, as though he were out of breath. His rallying, spirited appeals seemed out of place. And I suddenly realised that something ominous and oppressive loomed over us.’ When it was over she went outdoors, where she found crowds of people milling about the streets and elbowing their way into the shops, ‘buying up everything they could lay hands on’:

Many rushed to the banks to withdraw their savings. I was seized by the same panic, and hurried to withdraw the roubles listed

in my bank book. But I was too late. The bank had run out of money. The payments had stopped. People clamoured, demanded. The June day blazed on unbearably. Someone fainted. Someone else swore vehemently. Not until evening did everything become somehow strangely still.<sup>2</sup>

At eleven o'clock on the same morning Yuri Ryabinkin, a skinny fifteen-year-old with a pudding-bowl fringe above big dark eyes, set off along Sadovaya Street for a children's chess competition in the gardens of the Pioneer (once the Anichkov) Palace next to the Anichkov Bridge. The policemen, he noticed, were carrying gasmasks and wearing red armbands – part, he assumed, of one of the usual civil defence exercises. He was setting out his chess pieces when he noticed a crowd gathering around a small boy standing nearby. 'I listened and froze in horror. "At four o'clock this morning", the boy was saying excitedly, "German bombers raided Kiev, Zhitomir, Sevastopol and somewhere else! Molotov spoke on the radio. Now we're at war with Germany!" . . . My head span. I couldn't think straight. But I played three games, and oddly enough, won all three. Then I drifted off home.' After supper he wandered about the tense, stuffy streets, queuing for two and a half hours for a newspaper – 'interesting talk' and 'sceptical remarks' ran through the line – until it was announced that there wouldn't be any papers, but 'some kind of official bulletin instead'. 'The clock', Ryabinkin wrote with adolescent portentousness in his diary later that evening, 'says half past eleven. A serious battle is beginning, a clash between two antagonistic forces – socialism and fascism! The well-being of mankind depends on the outcome of this historic struggle.'<sup>3</sup>

Leningraders should have been better prepared for the Second World War – the Great Patriotic War as they still call it – than other Soviet citizens, because they had had ringside seats at its prequel. Following

the Nazi–Soviet pact of August 1939, the Soviet Union had occupied not only eastern Poland, but also, in June 1940, the Baltic states to Leningrad’s west, and the lake-fretted southern marches of Finland, directly to its north.

The ‘Winter War’ with Finland in particular provided a foretaste of travails to come. The war was launched on 30 November 1939, three months after the invasion of Poland, and Russians expected it to be very short. ‘[We thought that] all we had to do was raise our voice a little bit’, remembered Khrushchev, ‘and the Finns would obey. If that didn’t work we would fire one shot and they would put up their hands and surrender.’<sup>4</sup> In fact the war proved a humiliation. Despite their tiny numbers – a population of 3.7 million compared to the Soviet Union’s almost 200 million – the Finns put up a dogged defence, forcing the Russians to send in overwhelming numbers of troops. When the Soviet Union finally pushed Finland into surrender on 12 March 1941, annexing its second city of Viipuri (today Russia’s Vyborg) and the whole of the isthmus between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, it was at the cost of 127,000 Red Army fatalities. Via the rumours that leaked out of the military hospitals, Leningraders got their first intimation of the army’s weaknesses in leadership, equipment and training. Soldiers lacked weapons, ammunition, winter clothing and camouflage (‘We couldn’t have been offered a better target’, reminisced a Finnish fighter pilot of a column of troops crossing a frozen lake. ‘The Russians weren’t even wearing white parkas.’) Most of all, they lacked good officers, thanks to Stalin’s paranoid evisceration of the armed forces during the recent Terror. From 1937 to 1939 an extraordinary 40,000 officers had been arrested, and of those about 15,000 shot. Among them were three out of the five Marshals of the Soviet Union, fifteen out of sixteen army commanders, sixty out of sixty-seven corps commanders, 136 out of 169 divisional commanders, and fifteen out of twenty-five admirals. The survivors (44 per cent of whom had no secondary education) were mostly blinkered veterans of the

Civil War or overpromoted juniors too afraid of tribunal and execution squad to take the initiative or to adapt their orders to changing circumstances.<sup>5</sup> The mistakes of the Winter War were repeated so exactly during the first months of the German invasion that with hindsight it resembles a warm-up for the main event. It certainly seemed that way to Finns, who still call the Second World War – during which they helped to besiege Leningrad but refused directly to attack it – the ‘Continuation War’.

In practice, though, for Leningraders as for most ordinary Russians, the first twenty-two months of the Second World War had seemed rather distant. ‘Somewhere in Europe a war was on’, one Leningrader remembered, ‘for a couple of years now – so what? . . . It wasn’t considered appropriate to worry about international events, to exhibit, as they used to call it, “unhealthy moods”.’<sup>6</sup> Though the Finns had fought doggedly, the campaigns in Poland and the Baltics had been quick and easy. Hitler’s rampage across France and the Low Countries in the spring of 1940 had moved Western-read intellectuals such as the poet Anna Akhmatova, who wrote unpublished verses mourning the fall of Paris and London’s Blitz. But most believed the street-corner loudspeakers, the notice board ‘wall newspapers’ and the agitators at the endless workplace meetings, who told them that the capitalists were tearing each other apart, leaving the Soviet Union ready to snap up the leftovers. Though the treaty with Hitler was only temporary, any war with him would be fought on German soil and be over almost before it had begun, brought to a halt by popular revolution inside Germany itself. Hearing of the Nazi attack, workers at the Leningrad Metal Factory exclaimed, ‘Our forces will thrash them; it’ll be over in a week. No, not in a week – we’ve got to get to Berlin. That’ll take three or four weeks.’<sup>7</sup> Even sophisticated observers, able correctly to interpret Hitler’s April invasion of Yugoslavia (in defiance of a Soviet–Yugoslav friendship pact) and Churchill’s warning speeches, were shocked when what they had feared actually came

to pass. For Olga Fridenberg, a classicist and first cousin to Boris Pasternak, ‘It wasn’t the invasion that was incredible, for who had not expected it? . . . It was the upheaval in our lives, their sudden cleaving into past and present on this quiet summer Sunday with all the windows wide open.’<sup>8</sup>

Famously, the Soviet leadership was caught by surprise as well. ‘Stalin and his people remain completely inactive’, Goebbels confided to his diary a month before the invasion, ‘like a rabbit confronted with a snake.’<sup>9</sup> Though historians still debate the rationale behind Stalin’s pre-war foreign policy, it is clear that Stalin both expected war with Germany and convinced himself that with appeasement it could be delayed at least until the following year. Reports from the Soviet ambassador to Berlin were ignored, as was military intelligence of troop concentrations west of the new German–Soviet border. British warnings were dismissed as disinformation, designed to turn the Red Army into ‘England’s soldiers’. Notoriously, the trade commissariat continued to send grain, petroleum, rubber and copper to Germany right up to the very night of the invasion.

Stalin’s plenipotentiary in Leningrad at the outbreak of war was Andrei Zhdanov, a plump, sallow-faced, chain-smoking son of a schoolteacher who had risen to be Party Secretary of Gorky (formerly and now again Nizhni Novgorod), thence to the Central Committee, and after the murder of Leningrad Party boss Sergei Kirov (probably at Stalin’s hands) in 1934, to leadership of the Leningrad Party organisation and full membership of the Politburo. Devotedly loyal, and like Stalin a workaholic autodidact, he was one of the few people Stalin addressed with the familiar *ty* – equivalent to the French *tu* – rather than the formal *Vy*. Today he is best remembered for leading Leningrad’s defence and for a tragic-comic post-war stint as cultural commissar, during which he denounced Akhmatova as ‘half-nun, half-whore’, and tinkled politically correct tunes to Shostakovich on the piano. In truth, he was a mass murderer: as well as overseeing the Leningrad purges of 1937–9, he had, like other Politburo members,

toured them to the provinces – in his case, to the Urals and Middle Volga. His signature, together with Stalin's and Molotov's, is to be found at the bottom of dozens of death lists.

Like Stalin, Zhdanov was so confident that talk of an imminent German attack was premature that on 19 June he left Moscow for a six-week break at the Black Sea resort of Sochi. 'The Germans have already missed their best moment', Stalin reassured him. 'It looks as though they will attack in 1942. Go on holiday.' Through the afternoon of Saturday 21 June, as Zhdanov settled in at the seaside, the border guards' usual trickle of unsettling reports turned into a torrent: of yet more incursions into Soviet airspace, of covert movements of tanks and artillery, of pontoon bridges being built and barbed-wire entanglements cleared away. Shortly after nine in the evening, three deserters – a Lithuanian and two German Communists – crossed the River Bug to Soviet lines, and told interrogators of the orders that had just been read out to their units. The attack would begin at 0400, said the Lithuanian, and 'they plan to finish you off pretty quickly'.<sup>10</sup>

In the Kremlin, apprehension still vied with denial. The German Foreign Ministry, the Berlin embassy reported, was refusing to take its half-hourly calls. Sometime in the late evening the commissar for defence, General Semen Timoshenko, rang Stalin with the news from the German deserters, at which Stalin ordered him to assemble an emergency meeting of Politburo members and senior generals. On their arrival he paused in his pacing and asked, 'Well, what now?' Timoshenko and the chief of staff, General Georgi Zhukov, insisted that all frontier troops should be put on full battle alert. Stalin disagreed: 'It would be premature to issue that order now. It might still be possible to settle the situation by peaceful means . . . The border units must not allow themselves to be provoked into anything that might cause difficulties.' At half past midnight he finally allowed the order to go through – prefaced by a warning that the attacks might only be provocations, and calling for a 'disguised' response.

The meeting broke up at 3 a.m. An hour later Stalin had just gone to bed when he received a call from Zhukov. The major cities of the western Soviet Union – Kiev, Minsk, Vilnius, Sevastopol – were being bombed. ‘Did you understand what I said, Comrade Stalin?’ asked Zhukov. He had to repeat himself before he got a reply. War, even Stalin had to acknowledge, had begun.<sup>11</sup>

The first rule of foreign policy, the dinner-party truism has it, is never to invade Russia. Why did Hitler, very conscious of the disaster that befell Napoleon there, decide to attack the Soviet Union?

His aims, from the campaign’s inception in 1940, were not those of conventional geopolitics. He did not want just to annexe useful territory and create a new balance of power, but to wipe out a culture and an ideology, if necessary a race. His vision for the newly conquered territories, as expounded over meals at his various wartime headquarters, was of a thousand-mile-wide Reich stretching from Berlin to Archangel on the White Sea and Astrakhan on the Caspian. ‘The whole area’, he harangued his architect Albert Speer,

must cease to be Asiatic steppe, it must be Europeanized! The Reich peasants will live on handsome, spacious farms; the German authorities in marvellous buildings, the governors in palaces. Around each town there will be a belt of delightful villages, 30–40km deep, connected by the best roads. What exists beyond that will be another world, in which we mean to let the Russians live as they like.<sup>12</sup>

Existing cities were to be stripped of their valuables and destroyed (Moscow was to be replaced with an artificial lake), and the delightful new villages populated with Aryan settlers imported from Scandinavia and America. Within twenty years, Hitler dreamed, they would number twenty million. Russians – lowest of the Slavs – were to be deported to Siberia, reduced to serfdom, or simply



exterminated, like the native tribes of America. Putting down any lingering Russian resistance would serve merely as sporting exercise. 'Every few years', Speer remembered, 'Hitler planned to lead a small campaign beyond the Urals, so as to demonstrate the authority of the Reich and keep the military preparedness of the German army at a high level.' As a later SS planning document put it, the Reich's ever-mobile eastern marches, like the British Raj's North-West Frontier, would 'keep Germany young'.

So surreal is this vision, so risible in its bar-room sweep and shallowness, that it is tempting not to take it seriously. What was the sense in occupying a country so as to destroy it? Where was the money for the new roads and cities to come from? The millions of willing settlers? The troops to hold half a continent in permanent slavery? For the Nazi leadership, though, it was no daydream. In July 1940, weeks after the fall of France, Hitler ordered the commander-in-chief of the army, Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, and his military chief of staff, General Franz Halder, to start planning the conquest of the Soviet Union. Britain, Hitler argued, could not be invaded for the present, and the only way to persuade her to see reason and make peace was to eliminate the last continental power inherently hostile to the Reich. Brauchitsch and Halder were unconvinced (though less so than Halder claimed post-war), preferring to see Britain knocked out of the war first. ('Barbarossa', Halder wrote in his diary on 28 January 1941. 'Purpose not clear. We don't hit the British that way . . . Risk in the west must not be underestimated. It's possible that Italy collapses following the loss of her colonies, and we get a southern front in Spain, Italy and Greece. If we are then tied up in Russia, a bad situation will be made worse.'<sup>13</sup>) Equally doubtful was Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, who regarded the pact with Molotov as his greatest achievement, and pointed out that the USSR was still punctiliously honouring its promises to supply grain and other commodities. Hermann Goering, head of economic planning and the second most powerful man in the Reich, worried

about shortages of food and labour. But Hitler was at the height of his popularity and prestige, and used to browbeating subordinates: the waverers swallowed their doubts and accepted the inevitable. The only member of the leadership to take decisive action over the issue was the unstable Rudolf Hess, who made his bizarre flight to Scotland just six weeks before the invasion, apparently in hope of preventing a two-front war by negotiating peace with Britain.

The plan for Barbarossa was completed in December 1940, and a launch date set of 15 May 1941. Both date and design soon changed (Italy's calls for help in Greece and Libya forced a delay, and a two-pronged attack turned into a three-pronged one), but from its conception, the campaign was to be conducted with unprecedented harshness, a policy to which the army put up shamefully little objection. 'This war', wrote Halder after a two-and-a-half-hour address by the Führer to his assembled generals on 30 March, 'will be very different from the war in the west . . . Commanders must make the sacrifice of overcoming their personal scruples.' In June High Command itself instigated the notorious 'Commissar Order', under which captured political officers were to be shot out of hand. Further orders authorised 'collective measures' against civilians 'who participate or want to participate in hostile acts', and removed military courts' right to try crimes – including rape and murder – committed by German soldiers against Soviet civilians. Individual officers were effectively freed to treat the Russians they came across as they saw fit. Also assumed from the outset was ruthless food requisitioning. The occupying troops were to live off what they could commandeer locally, even if it meant that civilians starved. 'The Russian has stood poverty for centuries!' joked Herbert Backe, state secretary in the Ministry for Food and Agriculture. 'His stomach is flexible, hence no false pity!' Goebbels quipped that the Russians would have to 'eat their Cossack saddles'; Goering predicted 'the biggest mass death in Europe since the Thirty Years War'.<sup>14</sup>

Most of all, the Bolsheviks were to be beaten quickly. This was to

be a *Blitzkrieg*, or 'lightning war', of swift onward movement led by tanks and motorised infantry. The army should not wait to capture every centre of resistance on its race east, and above all it should not get bogged down in the sort of static, attritional fighting that had lost it the war of 1914–18. In all, the campaign was to take no more than three months; the first few weeks in major battles destroying the Red Army, the rest in mopping-up operations. Once conquered, the whole of European Russia would swiftly be transferred to civilian rule under four new Reichskommissariats, allowing most troops to come home.

Things didn't work out that way not only because Hitler was a fantasist, but because he radically misunderstood Soviet society. He vastly overestimated the power of Russian anti-Semitism, and underestimated patriotism and national feeling. He failed – in common with mainstream British and American opinion of the time – to see that most Russians, despite having been terrorised and impoverished over the preceding two decades by their own leadership, would tenaciously resist foreign invasion. 'Smash in the door!' he famously declared, 'and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down!' The crass slurs – 'the Slavs are a mass of born slaves'; 'their bottomless stupidity'; 'those stupid masses of the East' – endlessly repeated in his mealtime diatribes were a measure not only of his racism, but of intellectual laziness, of complacency in the face of a vast, fast-changing and secretive country of which he and his advisers knew very little. His misconceptions, ironically, mirrored Soviet ones about Germany: 'Too high hopes', one of Hitler's generals recalled later, 'were built on the belief that Stalin would be overthrown by his own people if he suffered political defeats. The belief was fostered by the Führer's political advisors, and we, as soldiers, didn't know enough about the political side to dispute it.'<sup>15</sup>

As the war progressed, rivalry increasingly broke out not only between the multiple, overlapping agencies responsible for the occupied Soviet Union, but between ideologues, intent on their Führer's

grand vision of extermination, and pragmatists (many of them Baltic German by background), who advised something closer to the traditional colonial policy of co-opting ethnic minorities – in particular the Ukrainians – and reversing unpopular Communist measures, such as the closure of churches and collectivisation of land. But even if Hitler had understood the Soviet Union better, it is likely that he would have ignored the pragmatists' advice. The attack on the Soviet Union had rational justifications: it was to bring Germany agricultural land and oil wells, and eliminate an inimical regime. But it was also about race: a *Vernichtungskrieg*, a war of extermination. Bolsheviks, Jews, Slavs – they were vermin, brutes, cankers, poison; their very existence anathema to the National Socialist dream. Liquidating or enslaving them was not just a means to territorial domination, but part of its purpose.

#### A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Borderland: A Journey Through the History of Ukraine*  
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First published in Great Britain 2011

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
49–51 Bedford Square  
London WC1B 3DP

[www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New York and Berlin

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7475 9952 4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh  
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

