

## Aleksei Pavlovskii

**Polina Barskova. *Besieged Leningrad: Aesthetic Responses to Urban Disaster*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2017. 232 pp. ISBN 978-0-87580-772-0.**

**Tatiana Voronina. *Pomnit' po-nashemu: Sotsrealisticheskii istorizm i blokada Leningrada*. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018. 280 pp. ISBN 978-5-4448-0913-6.**

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Lasting 872 days and leaving more than one million men, women, and children dead, the Nazi Siege of Leningrad (1941–1944) is considered one of the most important events of the Second World War. Despite its significance to the collective and cultural memory of the inhabitants of postwar Leningrad, later Saint Petersburg, the siege and its consequences have only recently become the object of examination from the perspective of memory studies. Starting with the pioneering works of the 2000s that were mostly concerned with the mutual interaction of victims' individual memories and state-oriented mythmaking and using as their primary sources oral history and discussion of official sites of commemoration (Kirschenbaum 2006; Loskutova 2006), in recent years this field has been enriched by a set of works offering new approaches more focused on narrative dimensions of siege texts (diaries, memoirs, fiction, poetry, medical books, etc.) (Barskova and Nicolosi 2017; Sandomirskaiia 2013), as well as the shaping of cultural and individual trauma in the “after siege” period (Barskova 2019). These works also cover visual representation and visual control of the siege, for example, in Soviet films or in depictions of ruins (Barskova 2015; Schönle 2011); reconstruction of the severely damaged city in the postwar years (Maddox 2014); and even late-Soviet imaginaries of the siege among non-Leningraders that shaped not only Leningrad's but the entire Soviet space's shared grief, compassion, and sympathy (Kaspe 2018). In this context, both of the reviewed books—Polina Barskova's *Besieged Leningrad* and *Pomnit' po-nashemu* by Tatiana Voronina—make significant contributions to understanding the Soviet and contemporary Russian “cultural archive” of the Siege of Leningrad, demonstrating the narrative schemes, symbols, and spatial metaphors which, unfortunately, are often forgotten or unpopular, or, alternatively, “hypernormalized” and taken for granted.

In her book *Besieged Leningrad: Aesthetic Responses to Urban Disaster*, Barskova, a well-known Russian poet and associate professor of Russian literature at Hampshire College in the United States, addresses literary representations of spatiality in besieged Leningrad. Sharing the same interest in the topics of subjectivity, corporeality, and the history of the senses as Alexis Peri in her *War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (2017), Barskova combines trauma studies and urban studies as

her two main theoretical frameworks. She argues that “historical trauma [of the siege] leads not only to silence—unrepresentability—but also to a creative quest for a changed discourse and the emergence of a new poetics” (p. 5) when different siege writers, artists, and other witnesses used aesthetics as a way to anesthetize the real experience of the siege catastrophe (p. 8). The author draws on a vast visual archive—postcards, documentary films—and rich literary corpus of fictional and autobiographical texts such as Ol’ga Berggol’ts’s poems, Lidiia Ginzburg’s memoirs, the film script for *The City in the Circle* by Grigorii Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, and the novel *Blockade* by Anatolii Darov. Methodologically, Barskova performs not only a literary analysis of these texts but asks who produced the spatial representations of the siege as “the space of military, political, and social crisis” (pp. 17–18) and how. In the first three chapters Barskova demonstrates how the citizens of Leningrad textualized their experiences of movement, corporeality, and vision in the terrible conditions of decay and absence of light and heat in the ruined besieged city. Offering the concept of the Siege Sublime, that is, “a combination of devices that substitute an aesthetic ‘cover-up’ for the direct experience of trauma” (p. 12), which Barskova compares to the Holocaust Sublime and the Archipelago Gulag Sublime, in chapter 4, in the following two chapters the author explores literary models for depicting the siege space and mechanisms of its appropriation, particularly turning to phenomena of the siege book and siege reading. It should be noted that most of Barskova’s sources were, more or less, forgotten and unused during the postwar Soviet Union, and, to some extent, this book not only analyzes but also actualized this part of the siege’s “cultural archive,” trying to mesh it with contemporary spatial metaphors of the siege such as the “impenetrable room of horror in the memoryscape, the direct observation of the ever-morphing ruin ... and the ideal virtual archive of the Siege texts” (p. 5), although the number of contemporary siege metaphors is not limited to these three and demand separate study. The main insight of this book, in comparison to other studies of “siege narratives,” is that it recognizes that the cultural production of space shapes our perception, understanding, and imagination of the historical trauma of the siege equally or even more so than purely narrative models, whether state-produced or alternative. Future researchers of visual representation of the siege and/or its ekphrasis (whether in [post-]Soviet literature, art, films, or architecture) will be unable to ignore Barskova’s argument and fruitful approach.

In comparison with Polina Barskova, who deals mostly with the “rediscovered” part of the siege’s “cultural archive,” Tatiana Voronina, a Russian-Swiss historian and participant in two oral history projects at the European University at Saint Petersburg about the Siege of Leningrad, proposes an extensive and systemic interpretation of the officially allowable and popularized siege and postsiege Soviet narratives. In her book *Pomnit’ po-nashemu (Remembering, the Russian Way: Socialist-Realist Historicism and the Siege of Leningrad)* Voronina focuses on the numerous published poems, novels, historical monographs, and memoirs devoted to the Siege of Leningrad in the postwar period, arguing that many authors of these texts were “prisoners” of such narrative schema as socialist-realist historicism, whose narrative logic still influences cultural memory of the siege to this day. Proceeding from the meth-

odology of American literature scholar Katerina Clark, Voronina reveals a widespread narrative structure that tells the story of a *protagonist* (Leningrader, adult or child) who under the guidance of a *mentor* (a Communist Party member, a "conscientious" workers, etc.) carries out their *social mission* (to protect Leningrad with their life) and struggles with the "chaotic" *enemy* (Nazis, extreme nature, internal antagonists) for *victory* and a *happy ending*. This narrative structure was the key tool of official myths and storytelling about the siege, which certainly limited alternative interpretations (for instance, that besieged Leningraders were victims of circumstances or, moreover, prisoners of a double siege—the Nazi blockade and the Stalinist biopolitical disciplinary regime) and promoted a vision of the Siege of Leningrad as an event without negative consequences, ignoring the stories of disabled or mentally injured citizens or war veterans with posttraumatic illness.

An ambitious attempt to examine a variety of writings about the siege through the prism of one concept (with a lot of future potential), *Pomnit' po-nashemu* is divided into three interconnected parts. In the first part Voronina provides an overview of various socialist-realist literary works about the siege from the "Leningrad theme" of 1941–1953 and the "Thaw" period until perestroika and the mid-2000s, ending this part with a discussion of the deheroization of the siege and its limits in the post-Soviet period. The second part is devoted to how the scheme of socialist-realist historicism was manifested in historical studies of the siege; a separate chapter also concerns the debate about the number of siege deaths. The third part, the most interesting to those who study the memory of the siege in the post-Soviet period, describes the emergence and institutionalization of the movement of *blokadniki* (participants of the siege, survivors) and the ways in which they used argumentation, tied to socialist-realist historicism, in their discussion about the heroes and victims of the siege. The main contribution of *Pomnit' po-nashemu* is that it offers researchers of the memory of the Siege of Leningrad and the Great Patriotic War an overarching working hypothesis about narrative dimensions of this officially acceptable Soviet memory, and this is simultaneously an advantage, challenge, and pitfall of this work. While the book analyzes Soviet and post-Soviet films about the siege, I am slightly skeptical that all of them can be incorporated into a strict socialist-realist scheme. Voronina, however, did not aim to analyze this medium of memory—thus, the question remains open. Totally focused on the problem of narrative, *Pomnit' po-nashemu* also leaves open the question of how these narratives were produced and perceived/consumed (that is, if the siege narratives had been socialist realist, to what extent were their readers and viewers—witnesses and nonwitnesses of the siege—"socialist realist" too?), leaving room for further systematic research. Nevertheless, it seems obvious that the concept of socialist-realist historicism, so profoundly elaborated by Voronina, could be used as an ideal type and a litmus test for comparison of different stories by survivors and nonwitnesses, and this makes *Pomnit' po-nashemu* invaluable to future researchers.

To conclude, books like Barskova's *Besieged Leningrad* and Voronina's *Pomnit' po-nashemu* are important because they not only generate new knowledge about the memory of the siege, but also reveal areas where we know little. How were the "spac-

es" of the siege created in Soviet and post-Soviet literature, cinema, theater, fine arts, architecture, and museums over the past almost 80 years? Metaphorically, what was the "complete production circle" of the (post)siege socialist realism and (post-) Soviet alternative narratives in all kinds of art, from literature to cinema? How were they produced (in terms of their actors, institutions, networks, motivations, censorship, financial flows, etc.)? How were they perceived by their readers or viewers, who created their own versions of the read, seen, felt? What can we say about not only those mediations of the past that are visible but also the unrealized versions, whether it be the extensive "paper architecture" of siege memorials, scripts of movies that were never filmed, or rigidly censored fiction? Finally, how were all these narratives, symbols, metaphors, and the entire content of the "cultural archive" of the siege transformed in the post-Soviet period and how do they continue to be renewed or radically changed today? And how are they perceived today, in the era of the siege postmemory, when the main actors of historical politics are no longer *blokadniki*, but discussion of the siege continues to be emotionally charged and sometimes semiscandalous, provoking new regimes of truth about this event and its consequences for Russian society? Answering these questions is a task too ambitious for one researcher and it would require an extensive collective effort to reopen, analyze, and use this "cultural archive," many parts of which are forgotten, unclaimed, and/or difficult to examine. However, these books by Barskova and Voronina are an invaluable step in this direction of siege memory studies and, I hope, will become the foundation for subsequent texts that will complement, develop, and debate the main findings, concepts, and approaches of these authors.

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