



The Politicisation of Memory: The Siege of Leningrad in Narratives, Practices and Research

In Soviet and Russian state discourses, the siege of Leningrad has always played a special role. Although in world historiography the blockade has usually been broached as a personal and rather peripheral subject (Ganzenmüller 2011), in the USSR discussions of the siege of Leningrad were usually at the cutting edge of cultural and political change. From the war years onwards, the siege of Leningrad was firmly incorporated into Soviet ideology and interpretations of it reverberated through many core elements of society. These included understandings of World War II's impact on the USSR, of the regional identities of the Soviet elite (Brandenbergheg 2016, Kelly 2011, Free 2022), and of the foundations and legitimacy of power in the USSR and Russia (Koposov 2011). In short, the blockade was and remains a 'litmus test' of the political changes (Dzeniskevich 1998; Malinova 2023, Gruszka 2024).

For Soviet state leaders, the Leningrad blockade was an inexhaustible font of political meanings. The 'Leningrad affair' initiated by the Soviet authorities in the late 1940s halted research on this event for almost a decade, making the blockade an untouchable and politically dangerous topic through the death of Stalin in 1953 (Zemskov-Zuge 2012; Kirschenbaum 2006). In the 1960s, the siege became the first humanitarian catastrophe that it was officially permissible to mention and study in Soviet historiography. For this reason, the blockade stimulated the emergence of a new Soviet view of the war as a tragedy of civilians — essentially the Soviet analogue of the Holocaust (Voronina, Barskova 2019). *Book of the Blockade* by Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin epitomised this new humanistic direction in Soviet literature about the war, and it paved the way for 'lieutenant prose' (Voronina 2018). During the tense years of the Cold War, studies of the siege figured into charged political manifestos on both sides of the 'Iron Curtain'. (Dzeniskevich, Ganzenmüller 2011). The tradition of referring to the blockade heritage and memory of it during times of political crises became a mainstay of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian politics. When the Soviet Union collapsed, there was a clear 'democratisation' of blockade memory in that the number of siege voices, memory actors, commemoration projects, and blockade study centres multiplied. Among these were the

‘communities of memory’ that took the shape of blockade survivors’ societies during the 1990s and 2000s. These groups were the first in Russia to achieve recognition of their status as war-affected civilians, symbolised new trends in Russian politics (Voronina 2018, Wachter 2022, Pavlovsky 2022). ‘The Law on Veterans’, which equated some categories of blockade survivors with war veterans, made former *blokadniki* (or people of the blockade) a politically and socially significant force, which influenced state projects of remembering the siege.

Recently, in Russia there has been surge of interest in the Leningrad blockade because of a series of trials that unfolded between 2020 and 2024. The purpose of these trials was for the Russian judiciary to recognize acts of ‘genocide against the Soviet people’. In October 2022, the St. Petersburg City Court recognised the Siege of Leningrad as an act of genocide against the Soviet people and transformed it from a textbook event in the history of Soviet heroism into an archetypal example of Soviet sacrifice. At the same time, various Russian and Belorussian state bodies passed laws recognising the siege as an act of genocide perpetrated against Soviet citizens. All these legal measures indicate a major shift in the official interpretation of the war and blockade, as well as a paradigm shift in attitudes towards that event. (Machotina 2023).

What was the reason for this decision? What were Soviet and then Russian authorities’ interests in spotlighting the blockade so intensely? Why has the blockade remained at the cutting edge of memory politics in Russia? Was this a reaction to the Ukrainian authorities’ decision to pass laws recognising themselves as victims of Russian genocide, or was it due to an objective need to revise the meaning of the Soviet past? Why is the memory of the blockade in such demand by the Russian authorities? What is the potential political utility of this topic? Finally, are the political usages of the blockade at present a holdover from the Soviet era, or is what is taking place in the Russian Federation a completely new set of practices based on other mechanisms and phenomena?

The return of the blockade theme to Russian state discourse, and as an example of genocide against the Soviet people speaks not only to the emergence of new approaches to the study of this complex and tragic past, but also to the changes that have taken place in Russian memory policies and in the Russian Federation more broadly.

The simplest explanation for this is usually provided by journalists who believe that the changes in cultural memory stem from Russia’s response to international sanctions and the war with Ukraine. However, the ideological basis for this concept of siege as genocide – the project ‘Without Statute of Limitations’ – was created back in 2019. And the Nazis’ responsibility for exterminating civilian population of the largest Soviet metropolis has been a central topic of discussion among the international community of historians for several decades. Moreover, in recent years, researchers have discovered many new sources about life during the blockade: diaries, literary works, and archives that create a new image of the events that took place. Furthermore, in the past few decades, the composition of blockade survivors’ societies has changed qualitatively. They went from being the most consistent proponents of a heroic interpretation of the blockade to organizations — spearheaded by a next generation of people who were children during the siege — who demand that they be recognized themselves as victims of Nazi genocide. New spaces of remembrance for the siege, new museums and exhibitions have emerged in St Petersburg. The Russian Orthodox Church became interested in the blockade. All this began before the 2022.

The politically promoted narrative of the blockade is constructed by different actors and it delineates the boundaries of what should, can, and cannot be said, written or shown about the blockade. Through social institutions and agents, this narrative exerts influence on individual and collective representations. It exercises a kind of control, a visible or invisible censorship, through a combination of prohibitions and incentives (Bourdieu 1984 and 1996, Durand 2006).

In light of these changes to the siege narrative in 21st-century Russia, there is a pressing and objective need to change our scholarly approach to comprehending the blockade. This conference will chart the political transformation that is taking place and which actors, discourses and mechanisms the rethinking are driving these shifts in the siege narrative.

Thus, we will focus on the relationship between the blockade and politics in different periods of the country's existence. Questions at the heart of our conference include: how did the policy of the Soviet state influence the way this event has been studied? How did the political leadership instrumentalize the blockade? What role did different memory actors – institutes of history, unions of writers, literary specialists, memoirists, museum workers — play? What political, ideological and cultural changes shaped discourse on the blockade during the post-war years, the Cold War, perestroika, and the current geopolitical situation? What were interactions like between those who experienced the blockade and those who witnessed the blockade but had not lived through it? What has been permissible to say, show, or write about the blockade, and at what points in time? What has remained outside the socially and politically approved representation?

In sum, the conference will explore the impact of memory politics in the USSR and Russia on the development and changing norms of representation of the blockade. Thematically, it will be organised around the most significant political shifts in the history of the USSR and Russia, which impacted various discourses and practices about the siege. We are interested in how historiography, literature, film, and political discourse have been influenced by events like the Leningrad Affair, Khrushchev's thaw, the Cold War, perestroika and, finally, the war in Ukraine. At the conference, we will discuss the motives for and consequences of the state's interest in the development of the official blockade narrative, in delineating what is or is not allowed in representations of the blockade, and in leveraging the blockade when constructing contemporary narratives about the past.

Submissions (title, 300 words + biographical note [100 words]) are expected by 2 April 2025 to colloque-siege-leningrad-2025@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr. Response by 2 May 2025.

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