Crime during the Siege

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The siege of Leningrad saw outstanding manifestations of bravery and self-sacrifice. The undefeated city provided a convincing example of survival under the most extreme conditions. When the food crisis was at its worst, the city continued fighting, working and living. Leningraders did everything possible for victory. But not all its inhabitants were equal to the challenge, and it is with them that this chapter deals.

All legal norms are flouted under exceptional wartime circumstances. The status of the individual is abruptly changed to that of an unprotected subject wholly dependent on the military, and subject to the harsh requirements of a state of emergency. The established pattern of life, including food supply, is sharply disrupted, and there are serious restrictions which divide society into those who adapt to the new requirements and those who look for ways of getting round them.

Conditions for Leningrad and its large population became highly unfavourable from the very beginning of the war. The troops of the Leningrad Military District (LMD) were responsible in peacetime for a zone extending from the Barents Sea to the Baltic. The strategic plan of 15 May 1941 for deployment of the armed forces of the USSR in the event of war with Germany and its allies provided for a Northern Front for the defense of Leningrad, the port of Murmansk, the Kirov railway and, in conjunction with the Baltic Fleet, for complete control of the Gulf of Finland. For this purpose defense of the northern and north-western shores of the Estonian SSR was to be transferred to the Northern Front from the Baltic MD.1

But war changed the strategic plans. On 29 June 1941 the 8th and 11th armies of the North-Western Front (NWF), unable to withstand the first German onslaught, crossed the Western Dvina. The 27th Army of...
the NWF was also unable to hold the Riga–Daugavpils–Kraslava line. By 2 July the operational formation of the Soviet forces had been heavily breached. The Pskov–Luga–Leningrad and Ostrov–Porkhov roads were practically open and there was a real threat of an assault on Leningrad by enemy armoured columns from the south-west and south.2

The crisis over food supplies that was to last for nearly 900 days of the siege began in July 1941. From time immemorial Leningrad had relied on food being brought from outside. Normally it had stocks for several months. These were rapidly depleted by the influx of refugees from the Baltic republics and the Leningrad region,3 by the evacuation of people from Leningrad (1,063,479 between June 1941 and December 19424), and by the enemy’s destruction of existing food stocks. The Badaevskie stores (at 1 Kievskaya Street) were attacked from the air on 8–10 September 1941. On 8 September alone 280 incendiary bombs were dropped on them, and 480 more in a further air attack on 10 September, with the result that 38 food stores were destroyed by fire.5 Shops bombed included No. 63 (3/4 Blokhin Street), No. 38 (5 Dobrolubov Prospekt), No. 34 (Sovetskii Prospekt), No. 1 Base (9 Telezhnaya Street), No. 2 Vegetable Base (19/20 Novo-Rybinskaya Street), and a packing and pickling plant (5 Degtyarnyi Lane).

The indecisive actions of the military and local authorities also adversely affected food stocks. When a state of war was declared by the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet on 22 June 1941, the Military Soviets were empowered under clause (e) ‘to regulate trade and the operation of trading organizations (markets, shops, stores, public catering establishments) and services (baths, laundries, hairdressers etc.) and to ration supplies of food and manufactured goods’.6 This and other statutes defined the legal powers of the Military Soviets as emergency wartime bodies. All power was concentrated in the hands of the military authorities, whose decisions were binding on all public bodies, local government authorities, individuals and organizations.

Unfortunately the first ten days of the war were not a time for economic management questions for the Military Soviet of the Northern Front and the Leningrad Soviet and Party bodies, but a time for agitation and propaganda. The authorities were not yet aware of the growing threat to the city. Only on 2 July did the Leningrad City Executive Committee (gorispolkom), following a directive from the City Committee of the Communist Party (gorkom), decide to establish a commission to handle day-to-day economic questions under wartime conditions, and even then it did not treat food supply arrangements as a priority. Military matters were the main priorities (in particular, the creation of a