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## German Occupation of Soviet Union During World War II: The Significance of the Liberation of Leningrad

James Olusegun Adeyeri, Ph.D And Akinola Femi  
Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeri

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**Citation:** James Olusegun Adeyeri and Akinola Femi (2022) German Occupation of Soviet Union During World War II: The Significance of the Liberation of Leningrad, *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*, Vol.10, No.1, pp.35-44,

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines the fate of prisoners of war and displaced persons during the 900- day German siege on Leningrad vis-à-vis the significance of the Soviet liberation of the town in terms of the effect on Leningrad people's social condition, as well as the impact of the liberation on Soviet Union's military campaign to expel German forces completely from Soviet territory. The paper argues that the liberation of Leningrad was significant in that it halted the annihilating death toll of over 600,000 Russians in the town alone together with the vastly deteriorating humanitarian conditions, and also marked the successive collapse of Nazi occupation in other Soviet towns and entire Eastern front. The study adopts the historical method.*

**KEYWORDS:** German occupation, Soviet Union, world war II, liberation of Leningrad

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### INTRODUCTION

World War II record of the worst humanitarian disaster in modern international relations is undoubtable. The focus of this paper is the Eastern (Soviet) front, where Germany launched its deliberate policy of genocide against Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) following the German invasion and subsequent occupation of large areas of the defunct Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1941. In part, the work provides an explanation of the ideological and strategic considerations behind Germany's decision to occupy the USSR and the manner in which the policy was implemented. More specifically, it seeks to appraise the impact of the German siege on Leningrad on the welfare and general living condition of the POWs and other persons trapped in the town. It further examines the significance of the eventual Soviet liberation of the town in terms of the effect on Leningrad people's social conditions, and the impact of the liberation on USSR military campaign to rid Soviet territory of all German forces. The study adopts the historical approach as the framework of analysis.

### Strategic and Ideological Basis of German Occupation of the USSR

On 22 June 1941, Germany invaded the USSR via Operation "Barbarossa", the biggest German military operation of the Second World War, and subsequently occupied large

territories of the sprawling Soviet federation<sup>1</sup>. The justification for this invasion, at least from Germany's perspective, was a mix of military, economic, demographic, geopolitical and racial considerations.

Military operation wise, it made sense for Germany to attack the USSR while it was weak and not prepared for full - scale war with a formidable power. Adolf Hitler, the German dictator, understood quite well that German advances on the Western front constantly made Josef Stalin, the Soviet leader, worried about the rising power of Germany<sup>2</sup>. Given the fact of British naval supremacy and formidable obstacle presented by the English Channel, Hitler sought an alternative to a precarious amphibious operation against Britain. Hitler and his war cabinet were also convinced that the best chance for Germany to achieve victory in World War II was for her to wrap up the European front quickly. Moreover, the Germans calculated that within two years (end of 1942) Britain, United States of America (USA), and even USSR would be ready for war. Thus, Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 in order to eliminate the biggest threat from the Eastern front, rather than having to fight the three powers simultaneously later<sup>3</sup>.

From the economic perspective, Germany's military high command had as early as July 1940 opined that the country's economic and demographic needs were present in the USSR. In the words of Rear Admiral Kurt Fricke, the Chief of the Operations Department in the Naval War staff:

The securing of our homeland requires for the future..., the consolidation of the spatial impregnability, i.e. an extension which prevents an unhindered surprise entry of vital areas of German soil, a deep piece of interspersed open country, so to speak..., which simultaneously obtains for the German people the necessary Lebensraum for the future it further demands the most autarkic economy possibly, especially with regard to those goods which are vital in wartime e.g. oil, foodstuffs<sup>4</sup>.

Lebensraum (living space), a basic principle of Nazi ideology and foreign policy, advocated that Eastern Europe had to be conquered to facilitate a huge German empire through the acquisition of additional physical space, a greater population and new territory to provide supply of food and raw materials in order to ensure Germany's national

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<sup>1</sup> US Holocaust Memorial Museum (2014). "Invasion of the Soviet Union, June 1941", p. 1. Available at: [www.ushwu.org/wia/en/article](http://www.ushwu.org/wia/en/article) (Accessed 15-10-2014).

<sup>2</sup> Stack Exchange Inc (2015). "20th Century — Why Did Hitler Attack the Soviet Union When He was still Busy Fighting the United Kingdom, Available at: [www.liststackexchange.com/questions/71/why-did-hitler-attack-the-soviet-union....](http://www.liststackexchange.com/questions/71/why-did-hitler-attack-the-soviet-union....) (Accessed 21-8- 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Rees, L. (1999). War of the Century: When Hitler Fought Stalin. London: BBC Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Kay, A.J (2006). Exploitation, Resettlement, Mass Murder: Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1940-1941. Great Britain: Berghahn Books. P. 32.

development and survival<sup>5</sup>. In this context, prime lands of the USSR were to serve as source of vital goods, especially oil and foodstuffs, which would enable Germany feed its supplies during periods of war and also make her politically and economically self - sufficient in the long run. Although German authorities realized that the geo-political potentials of the Soviet Union as a vital source of raw materials and a market for finished goods could be harnessed through peaceful relations for the benefit of both states, Lebensraum to the detriment of the latter would secure Germany's future<sup>6</sup>.

Germany's race - driven ideological war fed into the country's geostrategic and economic considerations. Hitler's racist beliefs played a central role in German's conduct of the war in Eastern Europe both in terms of the military campaign and occupation of conquered territories. Post-cold war access by historians to writings of Hitler, senior Nazi officials and military officers as well as other documents hitherto unavailable shows that an understanding of the Nazi ideological basis and underlying cultural prejudice against Eastern Europeans and Jews is requisite for a proper understanding of Hitler's prosecution of the war, particularly in the East. Because the underlying basis of the war was racial and ideological, economic and geopolitical considerations were emphasized in conjunction with the notion of the German "Master Race". According to this thought system, race and Lebensraum was the goal of the German state, which would devote all its energy to marking out a way of life for German people through the allocation of Lebensraum for the next 100 years from the era of world war II. This quest was considered to be the highest national and ethnic requirement. In addition, Hitler believed that Germany had the right to more land because the country was the "mother of life" not just some "little nigger nation or another"<sup>7</sup>. In sum, German racist ideology and reckless survival instinct promoted and supervised by Hitler formed the basis of Germany's genocidal invasion and exploitation of the Soviet Union of which Leningrad was an outstanding case.

### **German Siege of Leningrad and Socio - Humanitarian Conditions of the Inhabitants**

The conquest of Leningrad (modern-day St. Petersburg) was one of the strategic objectives of Operation Barbarossa and the prime undertaking of Army Group North, Germany's high profile strategic formation. This strategy was motivated by a number of political, military and economic considerations. First, Leningrad was attractive on account of its political status as the former capital of Russia and symbolic capital of the Russian Revolution. Second, Leningrad was of military importance as a main base of the Soviet Baltic fleet. The city was also Base of many arms factories and in fact the fulcrum of Soviet industrial

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<sup>5</sup> University of South Florida (2013). "Definition of Lebensraum" Available at: <https://fcit.usf.edu/ho1ocaust/.Jlebensrahtan> (Accessed 22 August 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Kay, A.J (2006). *Exploitation, Resettlement, Mass Murder: Political and Economic Planning for German Occupation Policy in the Soviet Union, 1940-1941*. Great Britain: Berghahn Books. P. 32. ; Rich, N. (1973). *Hitler's War Aims: Ideology, the Nazi State and the Course of Expansion-Vol. I*. New York: W.W. Norton.

<sup>7</sup> Steve, P (2009). "The Ideological War: How Hitler's Racial Theories Influenced German Operations in Poland and Russia", Available at: [www.Padresteve.com/2009/09/141/the-ideological-war-how-hitlers....](http://www.Padresteve.com/2009/09/141/the-ideological-war-how-hitlers....) (Accessed 22 August 2015).

power. Indeed by 1939 the town provided 11 percent of Soviet industrial products. Thus, following Germany's invasion of the USSR in June 1941, German and Finish armed forces launched multiple attacks on Leningrad. By early September, German troops approached the city from the West and South, while Finish forces charged from the north. In response, the entire able-bodied population of Leningrad was mobilized to put up anti-tank defense to compliment the 200,000 strong Red Army defenders against the invasion forces. In spite of the staunch defense system, by early November the city had been surrounded completely by the German and Finish forces except for a sliver of land that gave access to nearby lake Ladoga. Through the small corridor of land (popularly called Road of Life), trapped inhabitants of Leningrad managed to obtain limited food and medical supplies via trucks that had to cross the frozen lake. In the course of such very risky journeys, many trucks were hit by German shelling or sank in the ice. Nonetheless, the supplies enabled the people of the city to survive the brutally length blockade<sup>8</sup>.

Although the Germans ultimately could not capture Leningrad largely due to the heroic resistance of its inhabitants, the 872-day siege turned out to be one of the longest and clearly the deadliest in history. Mainly because of acute famine, caused by the disruption of food supply and other social services such as water and energy, the siege killed about 750,000 civilians (almost one-third of the prewar population) and about the same number of soldiers. Within a few months, the daily individual ration plunged to 125 grams or less of bread (often augmented with sawdust or wall paper paste). Whole families were wiped out, while animals including livestock suffered a similar fate. There was widespread cannibalism, initially of the dead and later the living. Why was the Leningrad blockade /famine casualty so outstandingly high and lethal? Compared to others in history, the underlying race - based ideology of Nazi-Germany's war was the main cause. In line with the pre-invasion plan, the Nazis never offered Leningraders terms for surrender in the face of the prolonged infantry siege and relentless aerial bombardment. Because the Germans saw no justification for taking responsibility of feeding up to 2.5 million people of 'inconsequential' race, they decided to deliberately starve Leningrad into surrender<sup>9</sup>. Although the Stalin — led Soviet government is culpable for not preparing for the impending invasion, failure to evacuate Leningrad early enough and negligence in not stockpiling food, the greatest responsibility for the massacre belongs to Germany in view of Nazi genocidal war objectives and operations.

Children suffered indirect effects of the blockade. According to the records of the Department for the New born of the Leningrad State Pediatric Institute, in 1942 there were

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<sup>8</sup> Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (2015) "Siege of Leningrad-Soviet History", Available at: [www.Britania.com/event/siege-of-Leningrad](http://www.Britania.com/event/siege-of-Leningrad) (Accessed 23-08-20 15), Spark Notes (2014). "World War 11(1939 — 1945): The German Retreat from Russia", Available at: <http://www.sparknotes.com/history/enropean/ww2/section12.wtnl> (Accessed 15-10-2014) and Encyclopedia Britannica (2011). "Saint Petersburg-The Soviet Period"

<sup>9</sup> Reid, A. (2011). Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II, 1941 - 1944. New York: Walker & Co.; Barber, J. & Dzeniskevich, A. (2004). Life and Death in Besieged Leningrad, 1941 - 1944. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

468 live births, out of which 166 (35.5 percent) were premature. There were 25 still-births, 22 (7.3 percent) neonatal deaths, while 39 percent of the infants born prematurely died. Further analysis indicated that during the first half of that year, there were 414 births as against a mere 79 in the second. This fall in the birthrate could possibly have resulted from maternal malnutrition-related amenorrhea and infertility among Leningrad women under the increasing food and medicare restrictions imposed by the siege and military bombardment. In addition, many children born during the siege suffered weight loss in the perinatal period which lasted 6 days instead of the usual 3 days. The infants were also said to be lethargic, sucking poorly, and having unstable temperature. The weight loss and its accompanying conditions have been attributed to the decrease in the quality of breast milk, decreased period of lactation, inadequate heat in the pediatric institute, and the general atmosphere of stress created by the blockade. Other health conditions suffered by Leningrad children, sometimes leading to death, during the siege were scleroderma, pneumonia, intracranial hemorrhage, prematurity, congenital debility and diphtheria. To cite one quick example, the older brother of Russia's incumbent President Vladimir Putin died of diphtheria, a disease linked to unclean living conditions<sup>10</sup>.

For the living, the blockade of Leningrad brought about the collapse of normal society and life. The people suffered from severe starvation, cold and psychological and physical trauma. Many schools, hospital; industries and other socio-economic infrastructure were destroyed by land and aerial bombardments. In addition, German troops looted and destroyed most of the palaces of the Russian Tsars, including those of Catherine, Peterhof, Ropsha, Strelnaetc, as well as some other historic Soviet landmarks. There is need to emphasize that this was a part of the larger Nazi war policy of annihilation in Eastern Europe. There is evidence to show that in Western Europe and the Czech Protectorate, Germany emphasized production for German war needs, which kept the economies of the conquered territories functioning. However, in Eastern Europe, including Leningrad, widespread plundering and destruction led to partisan activity, collapse of normal society and economy, including a substantial proportion of the labour force<sup>11</sup>.

The Leningrad population that survived the siege also faced immediate and long-term health challenges. One of the immediate health effects of starvation was a lowering of blood pressure. A study conducted by an international research team between 1975 and 2005 has revealed serious long-term health consequences associated with severe starvation and war trauma. The blockade ultimately had long- term effects on blood pressure in many

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<sup>10</sup> Goldson, E. (1996). "The Effect of War on Children", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 30 No. 9; Barber, J. & Dzeniskevich, A. (2004). *Life and Death in Besieged Leningrad, 1941 - 1944*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Euronews (2014). "Remembering the Liberation of Leningrad 70 years On", Available at: [www.euronews.com/2014/01/27/remembering-the-liberation-ofleningrad-70-years-out](http://www.euronews.com/2014/01/27/remembering-the-liberation-ofleningrad-70-years-out) (Accessed 27-08-2015).

<sup>11</sup> Klemann, H.A. & Kudryashov, S (2012). *Occupied Economies; An Economic History of Nazi Occupied Europe, 1939-1945*. Oxford: Berg.; Nicholas, L.H. (1995). *The Rage of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*. New York: Vintage Books.

men and women, particularly those who experienced the siege in puberty. Circulatory diseases risk among men increased. In addition, girls who experienced the siege around puberty became prone to an elevated risk of dying from breast cancer later in life.<sup>12</sup> In all, while the brutally protracted siege of Leningrad caused inhabitants physical and psychological injuries in the short-run, both the physiological and psychological health consequences outlived World War II.

### **Significance of the Liberation of Leningrad**

In the end, the dogged and patriotic resistance of the Red Army and Leningraders prevented the Germans from capturing Leningrad, as they had earlier set out to achieve. The entire able-bodied population of the town rose to its defense. The city's economy was converted to military production to compliment the resistance/war efforts. Consequently, on 27 January 1944 the siege was finally broken, after nearly two and half years. The liberation of Leningrad is significant for the Soviet people and entire humanity in many respects, symbolically and in real terms.

From the point of strategy, it is noteworthy that Leningrad was the first city that Nazi Germany failed to capture during World War II. The fall of the city would have given Germany access to the biggest arms factories, shipyards and steelworks of the USSR. It would also have enabled German armies to link up with their Finnish allies, and also break the rail supply routes for allied humanitarian aid materials from the Archangel and Murmansk ports<sup>13</sup>.

The siege, battle and liberation of Leningrad aided the eventual defeat of Germany on the Eastern front. The failure of Germany to take Leningrad seriously hampered its war efforts on that front. The dogged resistance of Leningrad compelled the German army command to reinforce Army Group North with additional forces and armament from Army group Centre, thereby undermining the German charge against the Soviet capital, Moscow, and Stalingrad. Thus, Army Group Centre was subsequently defeated in 1944 after Army Group North had been defeated at Leningrad<sup>14</sup>. The fall of Germany at Leningrad prevented the planned total destruction of the city by the German army. For the avoidance of doubt, Hitler's plan from the outset of Operation Barbarossa was for German forces to encircle, blockade, starve, and finally destroy and level Leningrad<sup>15</sup>. This planned genocide is evident in the decree issued by Hitler on 29 September 1941:

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<sup>12</sup> Vagero, D. *et al.*, (2013). "Long-Term Health Consequences following the Siege of Leningrad" in L. Lumey & A. Vaisernian (eds). *Early Life Nutrition and Adult Health and Development*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

<sup>13</sup> Reid, A. (2011). *Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II, 1941 - 1944*. New York: Walker & Co.

<sup>14</sup> Scott, M.H. (2012). "The Siege and Battle of Leningrad: Effects and Impact for the War on the Eastern Front, Post-1943", Available at: [www.diaries.com/2012/11/24/388](http://www.diaries.com/2012/11/24/388) (Accessed 28-08-2015).

<sup>15</sup> Bidlack, R & Lomagin, N. (2012). *Chronology to the Leningrad Blockade, 1941 - 1944: A New Documentary History from the Soviet Archives*. New Haven: Yale University Press.



The Fuehrer has decided to have St. Petersburg (Leningrad) wiped off the face of the earth. The further existence of this large city is of no interest once Soviet Russia is overthrown... The intention is to close in on the city and raze it to the ground by artillery and by continuous air attack... Requests that the city be taken over will be turned down, for the problem of the survival of the population and of supplying it with food is one which cannot and should not be solved by us. In this war for existence we have no interest in keeping even part of this great city's population<sup>16</sup>.

The breaking of the German siege and subsequent liberation of Leningrad averted the total annihilation of the town's population and reversed the vastly deteriorating humanitarian conditions there.

However, the aftermath of the liberation of Leningrad also had grim consequences for the citizens of the city and some other Soviet people. For one, the liberation of the surviving Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) in German camps did not bring an end to the suffering of these unfortunate persons. Recently emerging evidence in fact speak of Stalin's harsh treatment of Soviet prisoners, particular under the aegis of his grim order No. 270 of 16 August, 1941. Whereas International Law states that military captivity is not a crime and that a prisoner of war must be as inviolable as the sovereignty of a people, Order No. 270 declared that:

If instead of organizing resistance to the enemy, some Red Army men prefer to surrender, they shall be destroyed by all possible means, both ground - based and from the air, whereas the families of the Red Army men who have been taken prisoner shall be deprived of the state allowance (that is, rations) and relief.... The commanders and political officers... who surrender to the enemy shall be considered malicious deserters, whose families are liable to be arrested (just) as the families of deserters who have violated the oath and betrayed their Motherland<sup>17</sup>.

Under this order, thousands of children and other dependants of Soviet POWs in Leningrad and other Soviet towns died of hunger and misery.

Harsh Soviet rule continued to claim the lives of Leningrad inhabitants, though in lesser degree than the German siege. The point is that Stalin harbored age - old suspicion of Leningrad and its people. From the Kremlin perspective, the former Russian capital symbolized a dangerous spirit of independence [n view of the city's vast cultural, scientific and economic importance, its status as the cradle of the Bolshevik Revolution, and its pre-

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<sup>16</sup> Scott, M.H. (2012). "The Siege and Battle of Leningrad: Effects and Impact for the War on the Eastern Front, Post-1943", Available at: [www.diaries.com/2012/11/24/388](http://www.diaries.com/2012/11/24/388) (Accessed 28-08-2015).; Shirer, W (1990). The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany. New York: Simon Schuster Paperbacks.

<sup>17</sup> Teployakov, Y (1994). "Stalin's War against His Own Troops: The Tragic Fate of Soviet Prisoners of War in German Captivity", The Journal of Historical Review. Vol.14, No. 4.; Knight, J. (2004). "World War II", Encyclopedia of Espionage, Intelligence and Security. Michigan: Gale Group Inc.

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eminence in the history of the Russian intelligentsia. It was this deep suspicion and perceived threat that pushed Stalin to the policy that purged 2000 Leningraders and made life miserable for the remaining residents<sup>18</sup>.

Nonetheless, the remarkable victory and liberation of Leningrad remains symbolic of the courage and resilience of the city's citizens and indeed all Russians. On account of the heroism and courage demonstrated by the city's population during the siege and battle, Leningrad was awarded the honorary title of the Hero City on 8 May, 1965. Again, since 1998 under the law on "The Military Glory Days of Russia enacted on 13 March 1995, January 27 is set aside in the Russian Federation for the annual celebration of the Day of Leningrad Blockade Reversal<sup>19</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Adolf Hitler's race-based ideology was the underlining factor in Germany's invasion of USSR, the siege of Leningrad inclusive, during World War II. All other considerations be it military, economic, demographic or geo-political, were offshoots of his extreme Nazi racial ideology that viewed the German race to be superior to all other races and thus had the right to subdue or exterminate inferior ones, particularly Jews and peoples of Eastern European descent like Leningrad. This informed the formation of the policy of Lebensraum (Additional Territory) and the brutal and merciless manner it was implemented in Leningrad and some other Soviet and Eastern European cities. Leningrad turned out to be Germany's nemesis on the Eastern front. Reinforcement of Army Group North with war personnel and supplies from other battle sectors, necessitated by the unexpected Leningrad resistance, weakened Germany's campaign in Moscow and elsewhere and contributed immensely to her defeat in Eastern Europe following the defeat at Leningrad in late 1944. The liberation of Leningrad forestalled imminent genocide in the city, Soviet Union and the entire Eastern Europe. The termination of the German blockade of Leningrad through the remarkably patriotic and courageous efforts of the city's citizens and the Red Army halted the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian conditions there, and also marked the successive collapse of Nazi occupation in other Soviet and Eastern European towns. In general terms, Leningrad's liberation symbolizes the importance of local patriotism, loyalty and tenacity in the preservation of group and national identity against imperialist infiltration and destruction.

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<sup>18</sup> Documentary Heaven (2015). "Stalin and the Betrayal of Leningrad", Available at: documentary heaven. Corn/stalin-and-the-betrayal-of-Leningrad (Accessed 29-08-20 15).; Economist (2011). "900 Days of Solitude", Available at: <http://www.economist.com/node...> (Accessed 19-08-2015).

<sup>19</sup> Yelstin Presidential Library (2015). "The Day of Complete Liberation of Leningrad from Enemy Blockade", Available at: (Accessed 29-08-20 15).



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