"Son of the Regiment":
Family Structures and Community During the Siege of Leningrad

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HIST 468: History of Stalinism
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Family is most often regarded as the strongest bond a person has. The winter of 1941-42, the deadliest few months in the siege, put those bonds to the test. The Leningrad famine showed how the Soviet system endured under extreme stress. While the Nazi army never actually went through with a ground invasion, air raids destroyed much of the infrastructure of the city. Most victims of the siege were killed during one of the deadliest famines in world history. Because of the death all around them, Leningraders were forced to rely on themselves. Starvation not only created understandable wedges between families, but also created new ones and strengthened biological relationships. In this essay, I will argue that the black and white view of "families broke apart" during the famine is too simplistic of an analysis, and that all familial groups in Leningrad had different responses to the famine during the winter of 1941-42.

Before the siege, the Soviet government put out a series of codes in an attempt to encourage family building. The Family Code of 1926 was the first, which had a series of laws that made filing for divorce and marriage easier and had a system for sending orphans out of overcrowded state-funded orphanages and into peasant families.[1] This code backfired in several ways, most notably the "serial relationships" men began to have. Under the new laws, remarriages were made much easier, especially for men, as only one person in the marriage had to consent to a divorce and marriages done only through the church were considered legally viable.[2] Divorces all over the Soviet Union doubled, even tripling in Leningrad.[3] Because divorce was made easier, men would go from woman to woman and having children with many of them. Men were required to pay alimony, meaning that women with several past marriages

[1] Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 306.

[2] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 305.

[3] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 305.

and her new lover would just live off those checks.[4] Regarding orphans, the 1926 laws created programs for peasant families to foster and adopt *bespirzornost*, or children without parents.[5] These families were given financial aid, informational posters, and more to encourage them to keep the children out of state institutions.[6] The unintended consequences of the 1926 Family Codes resulted in a new wave of more conservative family values in Soviet society. Campaigns against abortion, male irresponsibility, and in support of peasant mothers resulted in the new, harsher codes of 1936.

The 1936 Family Codes reflected the poor reaction against the loosened laws introduced in 1926. The most restriction was placed on divorces and abortion, upholding the idea of a "Soviet nuclear family." A legal divorce required both parties to be present and consenting and an increase in cost for each divorce had.[7] This encouraged stronger, or at least obligatory, relationships between spouses. Harsher punishments for missing alimony and child support also dissuaded men from having children with multiple women.[8] Both of these restrictions forced men to take more responsibility for their families and forcefully created a closer bond between men and their families. Women were also heavily encouraged to have more biological children through a series of reforms. Pregnant women and new mothers were given stipends, doubled payment, four months of family leave, reduced workload, and state protection in their careers.[9] Women with over seven children were also given stipends of several thousand rubles.[10] The state also funded more childcare, especially within workplaces, so women could keep their jobs and

[4] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 305.
[5] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 306.
[6] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 307.
[7] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 330.
[8] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 331.
[9] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 333.
[10] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 333.

have as many children as possible.[11] These policies created an emphasis on family life as well as both state and community pressure to have strong family ties. Immense amounts of propaganda, especially targeting mothers, created a culture that idolized motherhood and pushed the idea that family bonds were not only the most important bonds someone could have, but also the strongest. This idea of the unbreakable family would be put to the test during the 1940s.

The Siege of Leningrad began in 1941 when Nazi Germany surrounded the city. While the Germans never actually did a ground invasion, air raids destroyed much of the city.[12] During the twenty-eight-month siege, millions of people were killed, a majority of which being civilians.[13] While air raids did kill several people, the main cause of death during the siege was starvation– particularly during the winter of 1941 to 1942. Deliveries to the city were all but stopped after the lake connecting Leningrad to the rest of the Soviet Union froze over.[14] Rations were divided into three tiers, all three of which nearly impossible to survive on. Category one consisted of workers doing manual labor, two including all other workers, and three being dependents– usually children, students, and prisoners.[15] The distinctions created a rift between members of the community, especially since so many lost their jobs. Starvation ate people alive from the inside out, resulting in tensions between family members who may have previously been close to each other.

Alexis Peri's *The War Within* is an excellent analysis of the derealization and struggles induced by starvation. Her categories of families in the siege are a great way of organizing the general experiences of families in Leningrad: biological families all within the city, biological

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[11] Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution,* 332.
[12] Leon Gouré, *The Siege of Leningrad* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 140.
[13] Goure, *Siege of Leningrad,* 139.
[14] Goure, *Siege of Leningrad,* 153.
[15] Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 132.

families split in and out of the city, and non-biological communities.[16] Her conclusion regarding the general reaction of families was that one's split up generally fared better than ones inside the city together.[17] This was due to a number of reasons, the strongest one being not having to fight for rations. Peri argued that the strain of having to share food with others during a famine is stronger than the strain of distance.[18] Derealization and depersonalization led to people losing themselves and their morals to survive, resulting in crimes between family members– usually stealing food. Peri cites journals in which family members would hide rations, take them to work instead of leaving them at home, and stealing from each other.[19] Instances of cannibalism, while rare, most often occurred when a mother fed her children human meat or ate her own children.[20] The letters she cites show the desperation of people when starved. While her examples show her conclusion regarding families to be reasonable, the reality of families in Leningrad are not so black and white as it appears. The three documents analyzed were written by women during the siege complicate her analysis of family dynamics using the three categories she outlines.

The first of the three categories, families stayed together, is exampled by Evgeniia Shavrova and her mother's letter to her father. Evgeniia's parents were divorced long before the siege, on account of them finding out that they were cousins, though she opted to keep his name on account of her German lineage.[21] Zhenia's father moved to Moscow before the war as an aircraft engineer, therefore not technically counting as a family member evacuated out of the city during the siege in relation to Peri's organization of family experiences.[22] The two stayed

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[16] Peri, *The War Within*, 89.
[17] Peri, *The War Within*, 90.
[18] Peri, *The War Within*, 91.
[19] Peri, *The War Within*, 103.
[20] Peri, *The War Within*, 104.
[21] Shavrova, Evgeniia. "Letter to Vadim Shavrov, Leningrad, 1942-44" in *Writing the Siege of Leningrad: Women's Diaries, Memoirs, and Documentary Prose*, trans. Cynthia Simmons, ed. Cynthia Simmons and Nina Perlina (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2002), 39.
[22] Shavrova, "Letter to Vadim Shavrov" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege,* 39.

together in Leningrad during the famine, both suffering immensely from starvation. They were supposed to evacuate with the rest of their neighbors, but Zhenia was so sick they were forced to stay.[23] She stayed in the hospital to have periodic feedings, while her mother walked miles to work every day and sold their belongings for more food.[24] Zhenia's mother requests to send her to Moscow to "fatten up" before coming back to Leningrad, while she works at a new job in a bakery.[25] From the letter, neither appear to resent each other the way that Peri notes many families stuck together did. Rather, it reads like the two got even closer due to their hardships. This could be because their family is only two people, so ration sharing would have been on a smaller scale than larger families. Both were also capable of caring for themselves, which was less common in larger families that housed multiple generations. Though Zhenia was hospitalized due to starvation, she went back to school after only a month.[26] Her mother, being younger, was also capable of working despite public transportation being gone. In families with older people or young children, resentment often built due to the elderly and kids being unable to go to work.[27] Zhenia and her mother showed how family bonds within the city did not always fracture and sometimes strengthened– the narrative often pushed by the Soviets during and after the siege.

Post-war writing about Leningrad before the archival revolution most often pushed a triumphalist narrative that the people survived by being good Soviet citizens with strong Soviet nuclear families. In Zhenia and her mother's case, their relationship did keep them strong during times of hardship. Though their family did not represent the "nuclear" family of two parents and

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[23] Shavrova, "Letter to Vadim Shavrov" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege,* 42.
[24] Shavrova, "Letter to Vadim Shavrov" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege,* 42.
[25] Shavrova, "Letter to Vadim Shavrov" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege,* 42.
[26] Shavrova, "Letter to Vadim Shavrov" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege,* 42.
[27] Peri, *The War Wtihin,* 91; Vladimir L. Piankevich, "The Family Under Siege: Leningrad: 1941-44," trans. Elizabeth Burkum, *The Russian* Review 75, no. 1 (2016): 128.

several children, they did support the idealized savior of a mother the Soviets pushed, particularly after the 1936 Family Codes. Postwar studies showed that children who had mother figures dealt much better with trauma and had fonder memories of their lives during Leningrad.[28] Though children tended to end up the most resented, most of them studied during the postwar period have only fond memories of parents. Zhenia's relationship with her mother shows that there is some truth to the triumphalist narrative of Leningrad regarding familial relationships, specifically regarding mothers. Peri and other historians' conclusion of split families faring better also is also complicated by some of the letters from Leningraders during the winter.

El'za Greinert's letter to her children was written during the height of famine-related deaths in January of 1942. Greinert was an elderly woman living in Leningrad with her husband and sick granddaughter, while the rest of her family was either on the front or evacuated to the Urals.[29] The father of her sick granddaughter was a soldier in the war who never sent any confirmation of his service, meaning that neither Greinert nor the granddaughter could be evacuated at the time and would not receive the rations a military family usually would.[30] Greinert writes to tell her children that her husband passed due to illness, his last wish being that all of their family could live together one day.[31] Greinert and her husband were quite close despite presumably having to share food, especially since he was so ill, as evidenced by her description of her love for him and his affectionate language.[32] As an elderly woman with little

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[28] Lisa Kirschenbaum, "The Meaning of Resilience: Soviet Children in World War II" in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 47, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 529.

[29] El'za Greinert, "Letter to her Children, Leningrad, January 23, 1942" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 33.

[30] Greinert, "Letter to her Children, Leningrad, January 23, 1942" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 33.

[31] Greinert, "Letter to her Children, Leningrad, January 23, 1942" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 34.

[32] Greinert, "Letter to her Children, Leningrad, January 23, 1942" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 34.

money and without her son's proof of military service, she could no longer take care of herself or her granddaughter and begs him to write back.[33] Their relationship appears more strained than the one between Greinert and the rest of her children, though she has not heard from any of them and appears upset by it.[34] Her letter displays that not all families split faired better than those within, though they did not have to share rations. Greinert does not appear to have a strained relationship with her granddaughter, though she is not mentioned much. Her bond with her son is most affected by their distance, since his not responding has put both her and her granddaughter at risk of death.

Greinert's letter also shows that the categories used to organize people's situations in Leningrad are flawed, since Greinert had a biological family split apart, living with her, and was part of a community that could be considered a family unit. After her husband's death, Greinert leaned on her neighbors for support. They helped her get a death certificate, bring his body to the cemetery, petition for a burial, and even built a coffin for him out of her furniture.[35] While the three categories generally encompass what families were like in Leningrad, most experiences overlapped all three. While Zhenia's primary familial relationship was with her mother, the two also heavily relied on their neighbors for support during the winter.[36] Both letters show how even with strong biological ties, people still relied on their communities for support– creating "found families." This again supports the Soviet socialist ideas of community, though the famine itself still demonstrated how the system failed under pressure.[37] Communal apartments resulted in

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[33] Greinert, "Letter to her Children, Leningrad, January 23, 1942" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 36.

[34] Greinert, "Letter to her Children, Leningrad, January 23, 1942" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 36.

[35] Greinert, "Letter to her Children, Leningrad, January 23, 1942" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 35.

[36] Shavrova, "Letter to Vadim Shavrov" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege,* 42.

[37] Gouré, *Siege of Leningrad,* 15

people working together to survive and relying on their neighbors. Though not necessarily due to their devotion to socialism, the community and found families created by the famine supported the triumphalist narrative pushed by the Postwar Soviet Union. It also contrasted the triumphalist narrative's emphasis on parental and biological family, showing the complexity of what happened between the perspectives of Leningraders and the writing about it before the archival revolution. The triumphalist narrative is not necessarily wrong, but it does not show the entire picture of familial relationships in Leningrad. Community, while important to being a good Soviet citizen, was not as stressed as the importance of biological family– a reaction to the wave of conservative family values after 1936. Non-biological families, as evidenced by Zhenia and Greinert, were just as important to survival.

Lidiia Razumovskaia's "To the People" from her autobiography of her experiences in Leningrad shows how communities replaced the traditional biological family. The excerpt describes her time working in a military hospital in Leningrad, though she had no formal training in medicine.[38] The story revolves around a young boy named Alesha who was found near-dead outside of the hospital. Alesha was a "dystrophy patient," a general term for anyone starving to death, as is referenced several times by Peri. The nurses first question Alesha to see if he has any neighbors to go to, but everyone in his life passed, evacuated, or were on the frontlines.[39] Alesha soon became the "son of the regiment," becoming a constant in their lives. [40] One nurse, Kira, grew particularly attached to Alesha and intended to adopt him with her husband when he returned from war. When Alesha was officially discharged, he stayed at the hospital and had his

[38] Lidiia Razumovskaia, "To the People" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 184.

[39] Razumovskaia, "To the People" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 185.

[40] Razumovskaia, "To the People" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 185.

own doctor's coat and a spot on the rotation roster.[41] Alesha's parents were killed on the front and Kira officially adopted him with her husband, the three living together for decades.[42]

Alesha and the hospital show how communities coped together and became Peri's third category: non-biological families. The hospital fared better and suffered little resentment because they had a cafeteria with a steady intake of food. There was no fight for rations between the doctors and nurses. Because they had steady jobs with enough food to survive, the hospital held no bitterness towards Alesha for not working a job and even leaned into it by giving him toy doctor's tools, while other children were forced to hold workhouse jobs to help their family survive.[43] Alesha, like the other children studied in the Postwar period, likely only had fond memories of his new mother rather than the pain of nearly starving to death. Children's need for a parental figure made teachers, neighbors, and nurses become mothers– leaning into the role of a mother as a "savior" in Soviet ideology.[44] Though Alesha still had hope his biological parents were alive, he still called Kira "mama" and referred to the rest of the regiment as his family.[45] Kira saved him, and perhaps because the role of a mother was so mythological in ways, Alesha latched to her as his new mother. His adoption into the community family of the hospital shows how non-biological groups filled the connection people needed during the winter famine, whether they had a living biological family or not.

Though historians have studied the development of "family" as a unit during Leningrad, the literature of how families changed over the winter is often a black-and-white issue, particularly before the archival revolution. People's situations shifted and changed throughout

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[41] Razumovskaia, "To the People" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 186.
[42] Razumovskaia, "To the People" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 187.
[43] Peri, *The War Within,* 97.
[44] Kirschenbaum, "The Meaning of Resilience" in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 47, 530.
[45] Razumovskaia, "To the People" in Simmons and Perlina, *Writing the Siege of Leningrad,* 186.

the winter and often both supported and contradicted the strong “Soviet” family idea that was pushed after 1936. The categories usually used to sort families is generally useful to organize the different types of family units, but most fit into two or all of the different groups. The development of family units in Leningrad was a complicated process that every individual experienced differently.

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