

BUILDING THE BLOCKADE: NEW TRUTHS IN SURVIVAL NARRATIVES FROM LENINGRAD

Jennifer Dickinson
University of Michigan

Dori Laub writes that "Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude"(1992:70-1). This is true not only in the sense that testimony implies both a testifier and a witness to that testimony, but also in the sense that testimony depends upon surrounding and connected texts for its meaning. Negotiating a place for witness narratives in the contextual framework of all things historical involves an array of strategies which the narrator must manipulate in order to be believed. The fate of witness testimony about the Blockade demonstrates that the realm of historical fact is a culturally constructed one susceptible to changes which may recalibrate the parameters of truthful witness testimony, and leave some survivors without the discursive tools to assert the reality of their past, lived experience.

The actuality of this hypothetical historical shift is apparent now in the fate of Blockade survivors in St. Petersburg. Once respected and revered as repositories of historical truth, many survivors now find their stories ignored at best, and at worst, rejected as lies of the old regime. This distrust of things Soviet is not only evident in Russia. When I speak about my research collecting life histories of people who lived through the Second World War in the Soviet Union, both Russians and Americans often ask: Well, how do you know that those people were telling you the truth? Lacking a better answer, I usually counter with: But how do I know that they're NOT telling the truth? While I intend for the question to be rhetorical, many people answer with strong opinions about the "lies" of Soviet history, and point out that in their roles as traditional purveyors of history under the old regime, World War Two veterans and Blockade survivors were among those responsible for perpetuating these lies. With such detractors in mind, I must begin by denying that this paper is about truth, or more accurately, about The Truth. Rather, it is about competing truths, and the tactics Blockade survivors use to convince others that their version of history is valid.

In the fall of 1992, I was struggling with these same questions of truth in history in the recently renamed St. Petersburg as I juggled a hectic schedule of meetings with Blockade survivors. The more time I spent drinking tea and listening to their stories, the more I became convinced that these people were not just telling me their pasts, but *retelling* them in ways that spoke to the insecure atmosphere of the present, in which the truthfulness and the importance of their narratives were challenged daily. This paper will consider both the phenomenon of what I call the "privatization" of Soviet history, and the role of personal war narratives, particularly Blockade narratives, in this exploding marketplace of new truths.

One of the socially significant consequences of the breakup of the Soviet Union was the fragmentation of the once unified and unifying voice of Soviet historical narrative. A multitude of often contradictory versions of Soviet-period history, which censorship of many sorts had previously confined to the private sphere, asserted themselves in the public realm. These new histories staked their claims to historical fact in an outpouring of revelations about and reinterpretations of the past, sometimes accepting, but most often rejecting, official histories. One of the key focal points in these discussions was the history of the Second World War, formerly a linchpin in the narrative which defined the Soviet people as a mighty, unified, and triumphant force in the battle against all enemies on the path to socialism. With this proliferation of proffered "new truths," each seeking to oust the old truth, came a sense of an unstable past, reflecting for many the uncertainties of the future.

To understand how Blockade survivors addressed the problems raised by the privatization of history, it is necessary to consider the role which eye-witness testimony played in Soviet constructions of war history. Witness accounts were widely utilized to affirm official truths about the Second World war. In

classrooms, in press interviews, and in books about the war, survivors of the frontlines and of the homefront told their own stories of the triumph of the Soviet people over the "bloodthirsty Hitlerite horde," as the German army was frequently termed. The younger people with whom I spoke about their own grade school experiences with these narratives had varied opinions of them. Many remembered the pride or sympathy they felt for the speakers, others focused with distaste on the stiff, rote delivery of speeches heavy with rhetoric by much-decorated veterans. Overall, they were puzzled by my fascination with war narratives, which had long since become old hat to them, and politely fidgeted while I sat, glued to the screen watching an old war movie as the broadcast time of their favorite Mexican soap opera approached.

Their alienation from the presentation of history associated with what Nina Tumarkin (1994) has called "the cult of World War II" led many of the young people with whom I spoke to dismiss the relevance of Soviet experiences to post-Soviet life. They were eager to cite examples of new truths which claim to unveil the deceptions of Soviet history and reject it as fabrication.

One of the survivors I interviewed typified youthful reaction to Blockade narratives as "Enough already! We're sick of it. The war wasn't your sacrifice, it was your just desserts, the result of your mistakes." She then added: "There are certain people today who are demanding that we destroy the memory of all the good, as well as the bad parts of our history." Another woman told me how wounded and shocked she felt when her own grandson told her that Leningrad should have surrendered to the Germans. "We would all be a lot better off now," he said. Survivors also mentioned the existence of an extreme position, which contended that the Blockade was a hoax invented by the Soviet propaganda machine.

Underlying many these claims was the desire to establish historical truths that would allow the populace to look towards the future instead of being mired in Soviet-style glorification of the past. However, economic considerations were deeply entwined with these goals of improved morale. Accompanying rejections of Soviet history often

came rejections of the Soviet pension system, and assertions that Blockade survivors should not receive privileges such as free travel on St. Petersburg public transportation. Critics paid special attention to the preferential distribution of scarce foodstuffs to veterans and Blockade survivors.

While a full discussion of the multitude of historical options which were circulating in Russia in late 1992 is beyond the scope of this paper, I do want to emphasize the range and variety of claims to the "real truth" about the war which were then available in the public realm, the result of history's privatization. Many people held to Soviet versions of events; others rejected them wholesale. Most often, however, and most significantly for this paper, new truths negotiated a balance between Soviet history and post-Soviet challenges to it. This process of negotiation is clearly visible in the narratives of people who witnessed history, and who must reconcile their personal experiences both with their own political beliefs and with generalized historical accounts of the war. In retaliation against their social and historical marginalization, many Blockade survivors participated in the construction of their own new truths, offering revelations about their experiences which simultaneously reaffirmed the heroism of Leningrad and undermined the airbrushed Soviet version of the Blockade.

These narrative negotiations sometimes failed, resulting in moral paradoxes which demonstrate the difficulty of the historical choices which face both survivors of the war and younger generations. One of my most memorable St. Petersburg interviews began with a woman in her late sixties ushering me into her two room apartment. On the wall immediately opposite the entrance hung a portrait of Stalin. My hostess drew my attention to it, saying "My husband adores Stalin. What we need now is another leader like Stalin who knows how to run the country." She briefly extolled the virtues of martial law, saying that in those days, people knew not to step out of line, or they would pay the consequences. Less than an hour later, in the course of her interview, she told me the following:

When we returned home after being interned in a German labor camp, the Soviet authorities almost

shot my mother. It was winter and there was nothing to eat, and in our garden the soldiers had buried some potatoes and we dug them up and ate them. They came and wanted to shoot her. Why? Well, it's wrong to steal. But then again, you have to feed your children.

The dilemma between this woman's politics and her experience was more extreme than those which arose in the course of the majority of my interviews with Blockade survivors. Most offered narratives which affirmed some points in Soviet versions of the Blockade while explicitly or implicitly rejecting other points. Yet in this approach too, a dilemma remains: How can you take a narrative form which was key to Soviet history of the war, assert through it that many of the things which Soviet history said about the war were true, and still claim the authority to offer new truths which deny other aspects of that same Soviet history? I identify two common tactics which Blockade survivors employed in asserting their narrative authority to speak of new truths: first, the discussion of formerly taboo topics; second, contextualization and justification of the seemingly mythic patriotic response of the populace to the war, emphasizing the sharp contrasts between the Soviet society of the thirties and forties, and the late and post-soviet society of the eighties and nineties.

The taboo topics discussed by Blockade survivors included wartime KGB activities, black marketeering, mental illness and perhaps most importantly, Blockade cannibalism. Speakers often bracketed comments on these topics with phrases such as "until recently, the truth about this was hidden," "for a long time no one spoke of this" or "before, saying such things was forbidden." Revelations of KGB interrogations, and of speculators making fortunes by exchanging foodstuffs for diamonds were often consistent with the experiences of those who were born after the war and served to humanize the perfect and heroic images of Leningraders which abound in Soviet discussions of the Blockade. Anecdotes which emphasize incidences of human frailty or demonstrate that some people were obsessed with everyday, rather than patriotic concerns are also a common feature of narratives. These revisions strove to render the war experience of Blockade survivors more believable to

a public audience that had lost faith in narratives which painted images of model wartime citizenry on a legendary scale.

I demonstrate the variety of comments which fall into this category with two examples of anecdotes of incidents involving family members:

My mother worked at the bread factory, and one day she came home and shaking and crying, she pulled up her shirt. Stuck to her belly was a small piece of raw dough that she had stolen to keep me alive.

"My father's sister came to the apartment one day and said: "give me your ration cards and I will go get your bread." She came back many days later, without the ration cards and without the bread. She said that she had bought herself a warm pair of boots with them. My mother began screaming "My God! You could have at least had some pity for the child! You murderer!"... We didn't see my aunt again until we were evacuated, and when she saw us she became hysterical and began screaming: "No! You were supposed to have died! You're supposed to be dead!" She had already written to my father at the front and said that we had died and his family had found a new bride for him.

Like these narrative moments, discussion of mental illness and cannibalism served to expand the images of life during the Blockade to include the sordid and the cruel. However, they possess an added narrative shock value, and were usually utilized by survivors in ways which maximized this value. Details of individual encounters with crazy people, or with the evidence of cannibalism, even if reported second-hand, were incorporated into narratives in ways which communicated the shock and fear which the narrator experienced *personally*. For example, two sisters talked about the reaction of their family to the deranged rantings of a neighbor; One sister said:

I remember how you were all swollen from hunger, and some woman kept coming around and saying that she was going to eat you because you were so fat. After that mama even walked [you] to work at the factory because she was afraid of this woman with crazy eyes who would look at you and say "I'm going to eat her up."

Another survivor, who was seven at the start of the war, spoke about the day that she realized that people were being cannibalized:

I tripped on something, you know, fell and when I started to get up, I saw what I had tripped on. It was a corpse of a small child and all the meat was cut off him. You know, the soft parts like the cheeks, buttocks, well those parts, you know, the thighs. When I saw that, and understood what it meant, that it wasn't chewed on by rats or dogs, you know it was so horrible. I had such a shock that I even think I didn't even go get bread that day.

Within the context of Blockade narratives, it is clear that a shock strong enough to prevent someone from going out for their daily bread ration must have been a very strong shock indeed.

In another instance, a woman told me the story of her colleague, who as a boy was lured into an apartment with promises of porridge, only to barely escape alive when he found a room of butchered corpses behind a closed door. In retelling his story, the narrator started with the words: "he said," and then continued the story in the first person, "The man took *me* to an apartment. *I* waited for him to bring the kasha..." She thereby incorporated another's words into her own narrative while maintaining the emotional immediacy and authoritative power of first person discourse.

This strategy of revelation, introducing once forbidden topics into a narrative, distances the narrator from the voice of censored Soviet history. The truthfulness of the more traditional parts of the narratives, which I will discuss next, is supported through the introduction of sensitive material by the speaker.

The second tactic deployed in Blockade narratives involves the ways in which survivors contextualized and justified the wartime actions and reactions of the populace within the frame of their own upbringing and the mood the times. While many people who were born after the war expressed disbelief when tales of wartime patriotism were told, survivors often asserted that popular response to the war has not been exaggerated by Soviet history, and that in fact reactions to the war reflected the mood of the times. One of my favorite interviews was with a woman in

Moscow, who burst into a hearty version of "If Tomorrow There's War," a popular pre-war tune, to illustrate the atmosphere in which her generation was raised. The opening lines of the song are: As one person the entire Soviet nation/ will stand up in defense of its mighty homeland/ On land, in the air, on the seas, our answer will be severe and strong/ So if tomorrow there's war, if tomorrow en marche, then today be ready to march." "So you see," she said, "those were the songs we sang. That was the mood of the times."

Another survivor reflected on her childhood, and described in embarrassed tones how her upbringing determined the favorite game of the children in her building, who spent the first months of the war diligently searching for spies. "That's the way we were raised, to always be on guard against enemies of the Soviet Union. Thank God that we never got anybody arrested." While in retrospect she is disturbed by her actions, she emphasizes that during the war, in the context of those times, they were perfectly reasonable, and even laudable.

The ways in which these two sets of tactics, revelation and contextualization, can work together is also evident in a section of narrative from another survivor, who worked as an army psychologist on the Leningrad front. She countered a humanizing revelation about the fallibility of Red Army soldiers with a comment on the zealous mood of the times. As she put it

Soviet soldiers went crazy too, but I have to say that when they went crazy, they did so very patriotically. One soldier wrote a memo to the command saying that he had invented a powder that made people be sucked into the atmosphere when you sprinkled it on them. And he proposed turning all the factories over to making this powder so that they could sprinkle it on the German army and they would all disappear.

Utilizing the two tactics I have discussed above, this survivor reveals new information that could undermine Soviet versions of history, while simultaneously emphasizing the overwhelmingly patriotic mood of the times.

This patriotism was often presented as the deciding element in the Soviet victory. Survivors openly

discussed disorganization, lack of preparedness, and shortage of both food and weapons as factors which could have led to the loss of the war. Many credited the patriotic, optimistic mood of the people, which enabled extreme personal sacrifices and encouraged tireless work, with their eventual victory in the war.

Despite their revelations about the dark side of Blockade life, most survivors emphasized that, in general, during and after the war people were extremely patriotic and self-sacrificing, and both kind and polite in their interactions with their fellow citizens. They often said with regret that the courteousness and community spirit of those days is completely gone, bemoaning the fact that modern response to hardships falls so far short of their memories of the Blockade.

In discussing the privatization of Soviet history, and the accompanying competition between a variety of claims to the truth about the events of the Second World war and their historical meaning, I have shown how some of the Blockade survivors with whom I spoke asserted their authority in eyewitness accounts of their war experience. Through these narratives, survivors argued that denying the truth of their memories will produce only false histories which serve neither the search for historical truth nor the needs of a new nation rebuilding its past in looking towards the future.

Funding for this research was provided by a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship.

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