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# VISIT TO LENINGRAD

## "A Strange And Moving Experience"

It is for me one of the strangest and most moving experiences to be in Leningrad to-day, to be sending this despatch to you from Leningrad. The last time I was here I was a school boy, and the place was still called Petrograd. As I went for a walk this morning along the Neva embankment, the most beautiful and most majestic waterfront in the world, everything seemed much the same as in those distant days. In a square facing the Neva stands the statue of Suvorov, clad according to the sculptural fashion of the time in Roman armour. I asked somebody why it hadn't been sandbagged like Peter's famous equestrian statue and most of the other valuable statues. I was told that soldiers of the Leningrad front liked to come into the city and see their national hero.

Yesterday, shells were bursting occasionally and whining overhead. A little boy in the street remarked to me, "If they're whining it's all right. It means they're high up. When they start sizzling you've got to be careful."

I'd like to tell you something of this Leningrad of to-day. Never mind about old St. Petersburg. The buildings are there, but it's gone for ever. The calm, clear, classical austerity of those 18th century and early 19th century buildings have acquired a new significance. They're like a part of that strength of character, that spiritual greatness of Leningrad's people, a greatness which has perhaps no parallel in the whole of human history. For Leningrad to-day isn't what it was two years ago, or even one year ago. Yesterday, the Germans fired 1500 shells into Leningrad. But everybody's attitude was, "This is our last remaining hardship, and it's small compared with what we've gone through. We're sitting pretty now. They can do all the shelling they want: it won't get them anywhere."

### Casualties Every Day

Yes, there are killed and wounded in Leningrad every day, but not as many as you might expect. People have learned to dodge the shells, strange as

From a recent BBC talk by  
**ALEXANDER WERTH**



One of the oldest of Russia's volunteer homeguardsmen

it seems. The first quite unexpected shells are the most dangerous. Sometimes the first shell hits a tram-car full of people, and that's horrible. But generally, people have a rough idea which way the shells are coming after the first two or three have landed. Even so, this shelling is a great ordeal.

I have spent several days here now, and I could talk to you for hours about what Leningrad's people have gone through since the end of August, 1941, when like a tidal wave, Hitler's triumphant armies were sweeping on towards Russia's old capital. When the Mayor of Leningrad and Marshal Voroshilov issued their grave warning to Leningrad's people that the city was in danger, thousands and thousands of workers abandoned their factories and went into what we might call Home Guard Divisions. For weeks these divisions fought one of the greatest rearguard actions in history, while behind them 400,000 men, women and children dug hundreds of miles of trenches, anti-tank ditches and fortifications. For weeks they built them, and when the enemy reached the gates of Leningrad, he was out of breath, and when on his last lap, he stormed the city, he failed. Thanks to these super-human efforts, Leningrad was saved in the nick of time.

### What the Blockade Meant

Then came the grim second phase, when Hitler announced that the city would be starved into surrender. For four months Leningrad lived through something no city its size had ever lived through. Most of the food reserves had been destroyed by bombs. There was no fuel, no water supply, no light. Food was limited to half a pound of bread for those doing hard work, and a quarter of a pound for everybody else. And it

wasn't real bread at that. From 30 to 40 per cent was substitute, with little or no food value. People died daily, but they died calmly, without fuss. Across the snow-drifts, loaves of this inferior bread were dragged by sledges drawn by hand to the distributing centres. There wasn't a single case of these bread sledges being attacked by the starving people. Such was the discipline. The manager of a factory I visited told me of a typical scene of those days. An elderly workman staggered into his room one morning and said "I'm not very strong. I know I'm going to die to-morrow. My wife is in a poor way, and she wouldn't have the strength to bury me. You've been a friend for many years. Would you send her a coffin so that she hasn't the extra bother?"

### Their Faith Never Faltered

Even then, people never believed that Leningrad would fall; something would happen. The German rout outside Moscow convinced them that a solution to a seemingly insoluble problem would be found; but people continued to die. Yesterday I went to a school in the most shelled area of Leningrad. It had had four direct hits, but it had never ceased functioning. Only recently, a shell killed one of the women teachers in the yard outside. The children to-day are well fed, cheerful, and superbly tough. But several times I asked "Where's your father?" and many times I received the reply "He died during the famine." Since then, I have stopped asking that question.

But it will be years before the full story of all that Leningrad lived through during these four months will be told. The Mayor of Leningrad, when I asked him whether the famous Leningrad documentary film wasn't an understatement of the city's ordeal, said "Yes, I suppose so. Our cameramen started filming Leningrad systematically only after the worst was over." No doubt under the influence of hunger, many people began to fall to pieces, but the authorities did everything to keep up their morale. Operetta played by hungry singers to hungry audiences, never ceased to function. Writers and painters who began to brood and despair, were given jobs to do. "It will make you feel better," said the Mayor.

### City Becomes a Fortress

And so the city survived, and meanwhile, the army and volunteers continued to build a ring of fortifications round Leningrad, better and stronger fortifications every day. The soldiers weren't well clad either. They received less than a pound of bread a day in that grim winter, and many tried to share it with the population, though this wasn't encouraged. No sector of the Russian front has such concentration of firing-power per mile. I've seen hundreds of powerful block houses and gun emplacements everywhere. The ground floor of every house is a fortress. As somebody remarked, Hitler will sooner get into Paradise than into Leningrad. Yet there are places where the Germans

(continued on next page)