

British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 1, March 2024

Review of *To Besiege a City: Leningrad 1941–42* by Prit Buttar

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ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 22 March 2024

Citation: Phil Curme, 'Review of *To Besiege a City: Leningrad 1941–42* by Prit Buttar', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.1 (2024), pp. 223-226.

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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

REVIEWS

to tentatively push back against the regime, but on trivial matters such as the awarding of military decorations. To the last, the Nazi regime remained hostile to the Churches and the Party-controlled *Volkssturm* did not have any chaplains attached to it.

One of the great strengths of Bergen's work is her multi-layered approach to analysing chaplains. She identifies their multiple reporting structures – the religious hierarchy, the military, the state, their own units – while also clearly and lucidly explaining how historical experiences of the German military chaplaincy as a whole and the brutality of the war itself further informed their attitudes and actions. The chaplains themselves are examined from multiple vectors too – as witnesses, perpetrators or facilitators – and the result is a coherent and compelling narrative. Her writing style is easy and authoritative, and she is willing to acknowledge when sources are lacking, as she admits for the 1944-45 period. The amount of detail provided on the selection, administration and deployment of chaplains means that scholars of the military are likely to find much that is of use, while her ability to connect the content to current affairs shows that it is relevant to a general audience as well.

Above all, Bergen deftly unpicks the various post-war memoirs written by chaplains, which – as discussed above – tended to depict them as decent men caught in a difficult situation. By contrast, she clearly shows that some had been selectively rewritten or edited to create a more acceptable or even rehabilitative narrative. Chaplains were as alert as any other group to their public image and many grasped the opportunities offered to them by the Cold War to refashion their wartime service as a positive. By contrast, what Bergen has shown in this work is that while chaplains may not have participated directly in genocide, their inaction meant that they – and the religious authorities that worked so closely with the state to select, train and support them – were complicit in the monumental crimes carried out by the Nazi regime.

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DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1790](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1790)

Prit Buttar, *To Besiege a City: Leningrad 1941-42*. Oxford: Osprey, 2023. 429 pp, 11 maps, 28 photographs. ISBN 978-1472856555 (hardback) Price £21.90.

On 1 May 1945, just a few days before the end of the Second World War in Europe, Joseph Stalin issued a directive to his commanders that a twenty-salvo artillery salute

should be fired in the capitals of the Soviet Union Republics and in four 'hero-cities' - Leningrad (now St Petersburg), Stalingrad (now Volgograd), Sevastopol and Odessa. The epithet 'hero-city' was not applied lightly, and in the case of Leningrad it could not have been more appropriate. Faced with an existential threat, the population of the city endured a siege lasting almost nine hundred days – a siege which claimed the lives of over six hundred thousand inhabitants through starvation, exposure, disease and enemy action. The privations suffered by the people of Leningrad from September 1941 to January 1944 are almost beyond comprehension and it is entirely appropriate that the survivors, albeit diminishing in numbers with the passage of time, are still venerated in the city today.

The background to *Barbarossa* (the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941) is relatively well known, indeed Hitler's ambition to expropriate land in Eastern Europe and his contempt for the mainly Slavic population was writ large in Nazi ideology. The storm broke on 22 June when, eschewing the cynically derived peace agreement documented in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the German *Wehrmacht* attacked the Soviet Union along three axes - *Heeresgruppe Süd* targeted at the rich agricultural lands of Ukraine, *Heeresgruppe Mitte* tasked with destroying Red Army formations in the Smolensk region before moving on to Moscow and *Heeresgruppe Nord* which would sweep through the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) before capturing Leningrad (which was destined for obliteration!). It is the latter stages of Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb's *Heeresgruppe Nord* campaign which forms the subject matter for this new book by Prit Buttar, an author who has established himself as an acknowledged expert on the Eastern Front having received critical acclaim for his books 'The Assault on the Germany's Eastern Front 1944-45' (Bloomsbury, 2012), 'Between Giants: The Battle for the Baltics in World War II (Bloomsbury, 2015)' and 'Meat Grinder: The Battles for the Rzhev Salient, 1942-43 (Osprey, 2002)'.

The Siege of Leningrad is a familiar subject to many, and much has been written about it. The New York Times journalist Harrison E. Salisbury's account '900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad' was a well-rounded narrative (Macmillan, 1971). More recently David M. Glantz's 'The Battle of Leningrad 1941-44' drew heavily on Russian and German sources to provide a comprehensive operational analysis of the military aspects (University Press of Kansas, 2002). Perhaps the most heart rendering account of the siege is Anna Reid's 'Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II, 1941-44' which focuses on the impact of the siege on non-combatants (Bloomsbury, 2011). Additionally, there are a number of first-hand accounts – for example 'At Leningrad's Gates' by William Lubbeck, a veteran of the German 58 Infantry Division (Pen and Sword, 2007) and 'Tigers in the Mud' by German *Panzer* commander Otto Carius (Catchpole, 2003).

REVIEWS

Whilst the painful experience of civilians in the city is far from overlooked in this important new history of the siege, the author devotes much of his attention to the strategic, operational and tactical decisions which shaped the military campaign and underpinned the huge losses experienced by both sides. The book covers the period up until the end of the 1942/43 winter, at which point the author concludes that a 'bitter stalemate' has been reached. Sources are carefully referenced throughout, there is an extensive bibliography, and the text is accompanied by a series of carefully chosen contemporary photographs.

The first few chapters cover the drive through the Baltic states to the shores of Lake Lagoda to the south-east of Leningrad. It is to the authors credit that he takes time to reference the German Army's complicity in the atrocities committed against non-combatants, including Lithuanian Jews. The myth of the 'clean *Wehrmacht*' was propagated assiduously by some German authors and military personnel in the 1950s and 60s and still has some currency, albeit not amongst serious historians. Later chapters cover the key development – inside and outside of the siege lines, including the attempts by the Red Army to break the siege and the German attempts to consolidate it. In respect of the latter, the overly ambitious plan to bolster the encirclement of the city by linking up with the Finns (who were in an informal alliance with the Axis forces) at Tikhvin is thoroughly explored as is the German *Nordlicht* (Northern Lights) plan to capture the city in 1942, following the failure to do so in the preceding year. The latter was thwarted by the Red Army's repeated attempts to break the encirclement in the exposed Sinyavino sector and – towards the end of the year – the burgeoning crisis at Stalingrad, which forced a major change in operational priorities.

The author is adept at drawing in Soviet and German sources in order to build a composite picture. Memoirs, when quoted, are appropriately caveated and the implications of particular decisions are uncovered. For example, the detrimental knock-on impact on *Heeresgruppe Süd* when Erich von Manstein and elements of the 11th Army were transferred to the Leningrad sector following the successful completion of the Crimean campaign. The contrast in military doctrine between the two sides serves to illustrate some of the difficulties which were encountered. The legacy of Stalin's purges was an encumbrance for the Red Army where there was little room for discretion at any level of command thus creating a reluctance on the part of junior leaders to respond quickly and decisively to changing conditions on the ground. For the Axis forces, the lack of mobility and the activities of partisans in rear areas brought new problems to the battlefield. On the latter point, the authors observations about the senior German Command realising that the brutal treatment of rural communities was proving to be counter-productive, does bring nuance to a topic that is often over-simplified.

Aside from exploring military actions at an operational level, the author picks out important detail which serves to enliven the text. This reviewer was particularly pleased to read about the fight for Sukho Island and the importance of the Oreshek Fortress on Lake Ladoga. Similarly, how changing conditions impacted the amount of supplies being transported by the Leningrad authorities through the siege lines via the critically important 'Road of Life' over which convoys of trucks traversed across the ice during the winter months. The spirit of Leningrad's stoic population is exemplified in the performance of Shostakovich's newly written 7th Symphony during the siege. The first three movements were written by the composer before he was evacuated from the city and the piece was performed under dire circumstances in Leningrad on 9 August 1942. The performance was broadcast on loudspeakers throughout the city and the authors description of the sheer will-power and effort expended by the players in order to make this iconic event happen makes for compelling reading.

It is not easy to blend genuine academic insight with popular history but in this instance, the author has done just that. A scan through the extensive bibliography and appropriately referenced notes reveals phenomenal width and depth to the range of Russian, German and Anglo-American sources used. This comprehensive body of research has enabled the author to produce a holistic account of the siege which brings together elements that have often been treated separately in the historiography. The scale of the subject matter is such that the end of the story requires a second volume, hence the much anticipated publication of 'Hero City: Leningrad 1943-44' later this year. For the same reason it is perhaps not surprising that the role of the Finns, and in particular their hugely impressive leader Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, is not covered in more detail. Mannerheim's passive approach did not align with German assumptions – something which the author obliquely references but which would benefit from further elucidation. In summary, this is an important work which brings together key elements of the story in a way which illuminates understanding. In this reviewers' opinion it does much to amplify the authors growing reputation as an authority on the monumental clash of arms which Russian commentators like to refer to as the 'Great Patriotic War'.

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DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1791](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i1.1791)