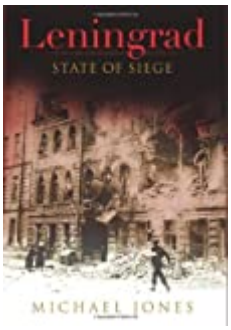
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael Jones. *Leningrad: State of Siege.* New York: Basic Books, 2008. 352 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-01153-7.

Reviewed by Lee Baker (Department of History, University of Cincinnati, Raymond Walters College)

Published on H-German (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Understanding Human Misery through Human Experiences

In this book, Michael Jones uses memoirs, interviews, and museum resources to reconstruct a picture of Leningrad during one of the most brutal sieges of warfare, a siege designed not to capture the city but to kill its inhabitants through starvation, disease, bombardment, and neglect. It reflects not traditional military history–an odd type of human study because it tends to ignore the people involved, instead recounting unit movements, strategies and tactics, equipment, and the role of leadership at the highest levels of commandâbut newer scholarship, which focuses more on the people involved in epic struggles between nations. This new approach includes not only the experiences of soldiers, as they have always played a large role in military history, but of civilians and noncombatants as well. The experiences of civilians who experience wars as armies approach their cities, attack, and pass through offer much material of interest to military historians and general readers as well. Military personnel have never been the only people affected by war, and civilians have in fact borne the brunt of the violence in most past wars, especially during the premodern period. The absence of their experiences except as mere chronicle has thus loomed as a large hole in the usefulness of military history. In this book, which belongs to the new genre, civilians figure prominently. The testimony of children, grandmothers, and elderly men adds a poignancy to the dreadful story about the siege of Leningrad that other histories generally miss. In essence, the siege was a gigantic murder operation rather than a military operation, and Jones creates a vivid picture of what this gruesome experience was like. This work is an excellent place to begin the study of the siege of Leningrad, but readers will have to look elsewhere for an explication and analysis of battles for Leningrad and its eventual relief.

As the Germans rapidly approached the city during the summer of 1941 and the impending disaster neared, Jones believes that two men deserve the lion's share of blame for the dire circumstances facing the inhabitants: Joseph Stalin and Kliment Voroshilov (for whom the much-vaunted super-heavy KV tanks were named), the marshal long responsible for the city's de-

fense. Voroshilov was an old Bolshevik ally of Stalin's, all the way back to the Russian Revolution and Civil War. According to Jones, neither man had any appreciation of military affairs and both shared low opinions of military experts. For Leningrad, such attitudes presaged disaster. The city was simply unprepared for war at even the most elementary level. The one man who could have made a difference–Mikhail Tukachevsky, who had been responsible for Leningrad becoming a major center of arms production before the war–had fallen victim to the machinations of Voroshilov and Leningrad Communist Party boss Andrei Zhadanov. He was denounced as an enemy of the people and executed during the purges of the 1930s. Jones makes much of the supposed resulting weakness of the Red Army and attributes a large part of the blame for its poor performance in 1941 to the decimation of experienced officers, especially because this practice created a vacuum of able leadership among field divisional officers. Recent scholarship has tended to de-emphasize the effects of the purge, but Jones is nonetheless right to argue that the purges had some effect, even if upon morale rather than upon combat readiness. This portion of the book, however, makes a larger and more interesting point: it was not the generals who won the battle of Leningrad, but rather the people of that great city. Their victory came despite the incompetence of their political and military leadership.

The indomitable spirit of the population of Leningrad was eventually supported by Georgi Zhukov, whom Stalin dispatched as overall commander of the city's defenses in place of Voroshilov and his cohort. This change in leadership did not mean, however, that matters changed overnight, and the botched evacuation of children is an example of this continuing failure. According to witnesses cited by Jones, this episode turned many of the city's inhabitants against their city government. Zhukov may have been one of the best commanders of the war, but Jones does not exempt him from severe criticism for his direction of the defense of Leningrad, calling his assumption of command a "poisoned chalice" (p. 124) because of Zhukov's insistence on defending and attacking from the Nevsky bridgehead, which became a charnel house for the Red Army. Even after Zhukov was recalled to help defend Moscow, Zhadanov continued to press the defense of the bridgehead and thus continued to lose thousands of men who could have been utilized better elsewhere.

Jones spends much of his time relating the utter incompetence of city authorities and the disillusionment this incapacity caused among city residents. He cites instances where corrupt officials, such as hospital directors and their wives, illegally hoarded food and held splendid feasts during the famine. Communist Party officials were no different, and he carefully chronicles how they feathered their own nests with food intended for hospitals, soldiers, and the starving, even fleeing the city when they could. Cannibalism is a major theme of the hunger stories related in the book and despite its relative rarity, Jones devotes considerable space to this macabre crime, carefully reporting both specific instances and punishments meted out for such desperate barbarism. He chronicles, as part of this desperation, the failures of city authorities to distribute adequately not only food, but even ration cards, and at one point marvels that bread rations were increased at just the moment when the failure of electrical plants shut down the city's water network and thus the bakeries. These episodes, he believes, were symptomatic of the city's utter failure to do its job. Indeed the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) spent its time not ensuring that the city did its job, but rather hunting down "counterrevolutionaries" and thus wasted both its efforts and the lives of Leningrad residents. Even the fabled "Ice Road," the supply line across Lake Ladoga that has loomed so large in the myth of the siege, is decried as the "Road of Death" due to botched evacuations and the incompetence that accompanied its construction and use. The only bright spot in this dark landscape of bungled and lost opportunities was the performance of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony during August 1942, which revitalized the city's spirit in unimaginable ways and convinced many people that Leningrad would again be free.

General readers will find this book fascinating and hard to put down; specialists should find it an excellent model for the writing of more effective popular histories.