

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 406

### “The Siege of Leningrad I”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*Mom tells me that now is not the time to keep a diary. But I will keep one. I won't have to reread it; someone else will reread it, find out what kind of person Yuri Ryabinkin was, [and] laugh at this person...or maybe the boy never existed...the popular riddle asks, what is the shortest thing in the world? And the answer is: human life.*

Excerpt from the diary of Yuri Ryabinkin.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 406. The Siege of Leningrad I.

I've devoted many episodes to discussion of the events on the Eastern Front, beginning with Operation Barbarossa and continuing through to the Battle of Kursk in mid-1943. While all this was going on, the city of Leningrad, at the northern end of the German front line, was under a continuing siege. Today, we're going to look at what happened to Leningrad.

In the days when it was called St. Petersburg, the city served as the capital of the Russian Empire for just over 200 years, from 1712 to 1918. Shortly after the First World War began, the city was renamed Petrograd. In 1917, Petrograd served as the cradle of both the February Revolution and the October Revolution.

The government of the new Soviet Union moved its capital to Moscow in early 1918, because the German Army was advancing into Russia. Lenin directed the government be moved to a safer location.

There was always a certain rivalry between St. Petersburg and Moscow during the period when the former was the Russian capital. In St. Petersburg, citizens took as a given that their city was better educated, cleaner, more modern, and more cultured. It was the home of beautiful palaces, of arts and music, and of schools and universities.

The move of the capital to Moscow was something of a blow to citizens' pride in what by then was called Petrograd, but Petrograd had bigger problems. The Russian Civil War destroyed much of the nation's economy and led to widespread food shortages and famine. There wasn't much to do in Petrograd, besides starve, and about half the population of the city left, leaving only about 600,000 by 1924.

By that time, the Civil War was over. Lenin was dead, and Petrograd was renamed Leningrad in his honor. The years between 1924 and 1941 were kinder to the city. The Soviet economy bounced back and grew rapidly during the Thirties, when most of the world was languishing in the Great Depression. Stalin's Five-Year Plans put a heavy emphasis on industrialization, and Leningrad was a major industrial city. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in June, 1941, the population of Leningrad and its suburbs was around three million.

One of those three million was Yuri Ivanovich Ryabinkin, who was born on September 2, 1925, in what was by then already Leningrad. His mother, 22-year-old Antonina Mikhailovna Ryabinkina, came from an educated family. She was educated herself, well read, and spoke four languages. Both of Yuri's parents were members of the Communist Party.

On April 30, 1933, Antonina gave birth to her second child, Yuri's little sister Irina. At about this same time, their father, Ivan, divorced Antonina and left Leningrad. He moved to somewhere in Karelia and remarried. In 1937, Ivan got caught up in the Purges and was exiled to Ufa, in Siberia, 1,500 kilometers from Leningrad. There is no further record of him; it is likely that he died there within a few years.

I can't tell you why Ivan left his family or what eleven-year-old Yuri made of his departure or his father subsequently getting purged. I can tell you that these events shook neither Yuri's faith in the Communist Party nor his mother's. I imagine Antonina telling Yuri that his father was purged because the Communist Party discovered what his family already knew: that Ivan was faithless and undependable.

In the summer of 1941, Yuri was 15 years old. Alas, he was a sickly boy. He suffered from pleurisy, an infection of the membranes surrounding the lungs. It is an unpleasant affliction that leads to shortness of breath and can make the very act of breathing painful, and antibiotics were not yet generally available, so Yuri simply had to live with it. His eyesight was also poor, and these two conditions meant he could not run or engage in sports or athletics. Like many young people with such afflictions, he exercised his mind instead, by becoming a voracious reader. He also enjoyed chess and played it competitively.

His mother supported Yuri's interest in reading. It helped that his mother worked at the library, and she owned a sizeable personal collection of books at the flat the family shared, mostly literary works of Russian and foreign authors. Antonina, her children, and her sister, who was a physician, lived at 34 Sadovaya Street, in Leningrad. This is a four-story art deco building of gray granite with shops on the first floor and apartments above, and it's still there in our time.

Today, one of the first-floor businesses is a computer repair shop. Yuri and his family lived in Apartment Number Two.

On the morning of Sunday, June 22, 1941, fifteen-year-old Yuri set out to play in a youth chess competition. Yuri was a slender boy, with sandy brown hair that fell across his forehead in ragged bangs that looked as if his mother had cut them, because she had. But his most striking features were his big, dark, puppy-dog eyes. He carried a box of chess pieces under his left arm.

The competition was held at what was once known as Anichkov Palace, one of the many Romanov imperial palaces. The last emperor, Nikolai II, grew up here. After the October Revolution, the palace became the people's property, and in 1941, it was known as the Young Pioneers Palace; it hosted more than a hundred after-school clubs for Leningrad's children and youth, including a chess club, of course. This is Russia we're talking about.

It was a beautiful early summer morning, perfect for some outdoor chess. Yuri arrived at the Palace grounds and began setting up his pieces on one of the tables, when he noticed a younger boy some distance away, who was talking loudly and excitedly about something. A crowd was gathering. Yuri went over to see what the fuss was about.

The boy was saying that at dawn that morning, German bombers had attacked a number of cities in the western Soviet Union, including Kiev, Sevastopol, and Zhitomir. Foreign commissar Vyacheslav Molotov had just finished giving an address over the radio, announcing—more in surprise than in anger—that the Soviet Union was at war with Germany. He concluded his address with a pledge that the Red Army would crush the invaders.

Yuri received the news with horror. His head spun. It was hard to think about anything besides this shocking news. He played three chess matches anyway, and no one was more surprised than Yuri himself that he won all three of them. I suppose his opponents were just as preoccupied as he was.

After dinner that evening, Yuri went out in search of a newspaper, hoping to learn more about the war. He stood in a queue for more than two hours, waiting for the delivery of the evening papers before it was announced to those in the queue there would be no newspaper that evening. An official announcement would come tomorrow. Yuri went home, and that night he began writing a diary, which is how I know everything I just told you. He concluded that first entry with a flourish of adolescent romantic bombast: "A serious battle is beginning, a clash between two antagonistic forces—socialism and fascism! The well-being of mankind depends on the outcome of this historic struggle."

Overwhelmingly, the first reaction of Russians across the country was outrage at the unprovoked attack and determination to chase the Wehrmacht all the way back to Berlin. Underneath that was some amount of resentment that the Soviet government had hitherto been so cordial toward the fascists. The USSR had been sending regularly scheduled shipments of grain, coal, and

timber to Germany right up to the moment of the invasion. Now the fascists were biting the hand that fed them. But it was dangerous to say such things out loud. A few held in their hearts an even more dangerous sentiment: that though war with Germany was terrible to contemplate, it offered the only realistic prospect of an end to Stalin's tyranny.

The next day, Monday, a hundred thousand Leningraders volunteered to join the Red Army. Thousands more applied for Party memberships. In the weeks that followed, the Party called for voluntary donations for the war effort. The Kirov Works was one of Leningrad's biggest factories. Long-time listeners already know this factory as the Putilov Works, or the Putilov Works, as I pronounced it back then. Strikes and protests at this factory were key triggers of the Revolution of 1905, the February Revolution, and the October Revolution. After the assassination of Sergei Kirov, head of the Leningrad branch of the Party in 1934, the plant was renamed in his memory.

Now, Kirov workers volunteered to form a militia. When the Party came to the plant to solicit donations, they were overwhelmed by the flood of cash, bonds, jewelry, silverware, and pledges to work one or more days without pay, so much that they gave up trying to collect it themselves and instructed donors to deliver their contributions directly to one of the city's banks.

Soon came compulsory labor for men aged 16-50 and women 16-45, apart from those with young children. Many were sent into the countryside to dig antitank trenches. Yuri Ryabinkin tells us he was called up as one of a team of boys assigned to dig a bomb shelter. He describes how he and his friends took some time off from their labors to mold a pile of sand into an effigy of Adolf Hitler's head, then took turns whacking at it with their shovels. Boys will be boys. When he wasn't working, he was playing chess or pool at the Young Pioneers Palace or at home reading *David Copperfield*.

This being the Soviet Union, one of the most predictable developments triggered by the war was deportations to Siberia. It began with ethnic Germans, of whom there were many in Leningrad. Virtually all of them had lived in Russia for generations and were indistinguishable from other Russians apart from their German-sounding surnames, but that was all it took. Some tried to evade deportation by claiming to be Jewish. There's a switch. Some 50,000 ethnic Germans and Finns were deported from Leningrad. Over 70,000 others were deported for being dissidents or churchgoers or former bourgeoisie or a member of an ethnic minority or people known to have foreign connections. The Soviet Union's first execution for "spreading defeatist rumors" took place less than two weeks into the war, in Leningrad.

On July 3, eleven days into the invasion, Comrade Stalin spoke on the radio for the first time. Stalin was audibly nervous and his delivery was uneven, but that only made it feel more authentic. The speech moved the Soviet public in a way similar to Churchill's "finest hour" speech.

But Stalin was not frank about the dire situation. The Red Army had been caught unprepared, and so had the government, though if anyone had said that aloud in the streets of Leningrad, they would have been executed for spreading defeatist rumors. In fact, military and civilian leaders in Moscow were themselves not yet fully aware of the magnitude of the disaster. Red Army units were getting overrun and destroyed before they had opportunity to report that they'd been attacked. Telephone calls from the front were cut off in mid-sentence. When orders from Moscow reached the front, they made no sense, for instance, demanding that the Red Army defend to the death positions that were already well behind German lines.

As you know, the German invasion force, the largest army ever assembled, was organized into three army groups: Army Group North, Army Group Center, and Army Group South. So far I've mostly talked about the latter two; today I am going to make up for it by focusing on Army Group North. Their assignment was to advance through the Baltic States and capture Leningrad.

Three days into the war, Army Group North had already occupied Lithuania. On the fourth day, the first units crossed the River Dvina in Latvia, where, in the last war, the Imperial Russian Army had held back the Germans for two years.

In Lithuania and Latvia, women greeted German soldiers with flowers and rejoiced at the expulsion of the hated Russians. Baltic partisans began attacking Red Army and Communist Party positions before the Germans arrived. Later they would assist the Germans in rounding up and murdering their Jewish neighbors.

Five days later, the Germans reached Riga, the capital of Latvia. Five days after that, the Red Army was retreating into Estonia after blowing up the bridge across the Daugava River, unfortunately leaving thousands of Red Army soldiers trapped on the German side. Andrei Zhdanov, Kirov's successor as the Communist Party chief in Leningrad, ordered the Army to make their stand at the River Navesti in Estonia. But the Germans were already across the Navesti. And it wouldn't have mattered anyway, since other units of Army Group North had swept around the southern shore of Lake Peipus and captured the Russian city of Pskov, outflanking Estonia.

In Leningrad, as elsewhere in the USSR, civilians knew little of what was going on, not for lack of interest but for wartime censorship. The Soviet Information Bureau, or Sovinform, was created three days into the war and its twice daily bulletins were the only source of news. Sovinform was vague, often reporting only that there was heavy fighting near such-and-such city, with no further details. Only days after a Soviet city fell did Sovinform release the news, while choosing to highlight highly improbable stories of heroism by individual soldiers. Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman, whom I've quoted a few times before, scornfully dismissed these reports as "Ivan-killed-five-Germans-with-a-spoon stories." Cynical Leningraders quipped, "We're winning, but the Germans are advancing."

In the second week of July, Army Group North entered Estonia. By July 14, they had occupied all of Estonia and were at the Russian border, which put them less than 200 kilometers from Leningrad. But the Red Army, aided by civilian labor, had been able to put up a defensive line along the River Luga. A Red Army general related a story in which he observed a group of women furiously digging a trench. He called to them, “You are digging well, girls!” One of the group, an older woman who probably resented being called a “girl,” called back, “We are digging well, but you boys are fighting badly.”

That was about to change, at least for a couple of weeks. A German map showing the deployments of some of their panzer units had fallen into Red Army hands. On July 14, the Soviets began a counteroffensive that quickly surrounded the German 8<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division. The Germans were forced to pull back and spend two weeks of tough combat rescuing their threatened comrades.

On July 18, food rationing was introduced in Soviet cities, including Leningrad. The initial rations were 800 grams of bread per day for a manual laborer, 600 grams for a white-collar worker, and 400 grams for each dependent, along with monthly rations of meat, butter, and sugar, also scaled by category. This wasn’t so bad. It helped that there were still shops that sold food off ration and some restaurants that were still open. The prices in these places were stiff, making them too expensive for most people, but the mere fact they existed was reassuring.

It wasn’t until August 8 that Army Group North was ready to resume their offensive. The Red Army line along the Luga held, but the Germans flanked them, forcing the defenders to withdraw to avoid encirclement. The final advance on Leningrad began.

On August 17, the historic city of Novgorod, founded in the ninth century, before the Christianization of Russia, fell to the Germans. Not that you’d know it from Sovinform.

In the early days of the war, large numbers of children had been evacuated from Leningrad. As in London, this was meant to protect them from bombings. Most of these children were sent to summer camps south and east of the city. But Leningrad had not been bombed—not yet—and one of the consequences of Sovinform’s reluctance to acknowledge enemy advances was that these children had been sent right into the path of Army Group North. Some frantic families traveled on their own into the countryside to recover their children and return them to Leningrad. Some among them had the occasional terrifying encounter with advancing German soldiers.

A few days later, before the fall of Novgorod had been acknowledged, the Germans reached the town of Chudovo, which lay on the rail line between Moscow and Leningrad.

On August 26, Stalin finally agreed to requests to evacuate Red Army soldiers and civilians trapped in the port city of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, and ship them to Leningrad. A Soviet flotilla of over 200 warships and civilian vessels, led by the cruiser *Kirov*, loaded with 23,000

soldiers and civilians and 60,000 tons of munitions, left Tallinn on the 28<sup>th</sup>, in an evacuation that has been called the Soviet Dunkirk.

Unlike the British Dunkirk, however, the Soviets had no air cover, and the German and Finnish navies had mined the waters. Luftwaffe bombers pounded the evacuation fleet without mercy, forcing ships to break formation and take their chances in the minefields. Sixty-five of the ships were sunk and some 12,000 people died. It was the worst disaster in Russian naval history, easily surpassing the defeat at the Battle of the Tsushima Strait in 1905.

Because Leningrad itself had not been bombed, and with information on the war hard to come by, not many people left the city, as the threat seemed remote. It appears some of the local authorities in the city encouraged people to stay as a show of patriotism and dedication to the city. Leningrad civilians sticking it out to defend their homes makes a stirring story, so stirring it is easy to forget that a good half the population of the city consisted of children, older people, sick people, or disabled people. These citizens had little to offer toward a defense of the city, but they ate just as much food as anyone else.

More than half a million people were evacuated from Leningrad in the summer of 1941, but many of these people were refugees from farther west, from the Baltic States and Belarus, fleeing the German advance. For them, Leningrad was just a layover on the way to destinations farther east. Barely half of the evacuees were native Leningraders.

Little thought had been given to stockpiling food in Leningrad. As the Red Army evacuated the Baltic States, railway cars full of wheat, rye, and oats were rolling eastward, spiriting them away so the Germans couldn't make use of them. But those cars rolled right past Leningrad and on to cities farther east. It wasn't until the Germans were already beginning to cut Leningrad's lines of communication to the rest of the Soviet Union that city officials began to make appeals to Moscow for food shipments.

The failure of the Soviet government to order larger-scale evacuations of the city or to stockpile food in the city, or ideally take both of those steps, has to count as the second most catastrophic mistake Stalin and his government made during the war. The first was getting caught off guard by the German invasion in the first place.

Yuri Ryabinkin spent August digging trenches in the countryside southwest of Leningrad, alongside his mother. He noted in his diary the fall of Novgorod and observed that Leningrad was in danger of being cut off from the rest of the USSR. He began reading books on military strategy to help himself understand what was going on.

The first day of September should have been the first day of school for Yuri, but the opening of school was postponed due to the emergency. Yuri made a pact with a friend named Finklestein; they agreed to study the ninth grade curriculum together on their own. If necessary, they would

teach each other for the whole school year. In his diary, he described the mood in the city as “creepy.”

That same day, German panzers captured the town of Mga, southeast of Leningrad, cutting off the last rail line out of the city.

September 2 was Yuri’s sixteenth birthday. “Yeah, my birthday was not marked by anything special,” he told his diary, although his mother did give him five rubles, which he spent on a book about chess. He drew up his own military strategy to defend Leningrad. It involved evacuating all civilians and soldiers from the city, allowing the Germans to occupy it, then the Red Army, hiding in the woods, would surprise the Germans, surround the city, and destroy them. He acknowledged this was a “fantasy.”

On September 6, Yuri heard a rumor from a woman next to him in the bread line that Hitler was going to end the war against the USSR tomorrow, the seventh. Yuri was skeptical. It was not the first time he’d heard such a rumor, and in every other case, the named day came and went with nothing changed.

Southeast of the city, the German 20<sup>th</sup> Motorized Division captured the town of Shlisselburg on the shore of Lake Ladoga, cutting off the last land route in or out of the city.

[music: Tchaikovsky, *Symphony No. 5*.]

After the city was cut off, the authorities in Leningrad surveyed their stocks of food and determined that at the current ration, they had enough for 35 days.

In Moscow, Stalin’s anger at the situation boiled over. The Kirov Works in Leningrad was producing those huge KV tanks. Are you even using them? He chose to send Georgy Zhukov to Leningrad to take over the defense of the city. Zhukov flew to Leningrad. As his plane approached the city from the east, over Lake Ladoga, a German Me-109 fighter began to fire on it. Only when Zhukov’s plane got within range of anti-aircraft guns in the city did the German break off the attack.

When Zhukov walked into the meeting of the Leningrad Military Council, he was appalled to find its members discussing scuttling the Baltic Fleet and the demolition of city facilities to deny them to the Germans. Zhukov ordered that no such measures be taken and that Leningrad would be defended to the bitter end. Over the next three days, Zhukov reorganized the defensive line south of the city, and succeeded in forcing a halt to the German advance.

As you know from episode 346, at this moment, a great argument was in progress between Hitler and his senior commanders. They wanted to put all their efforts into taking Moscow; Hitler thought Leningrad and Kiev were more important. But Kiev was surrounded in early September and in German hands by the end of that month. The unexpectedly rapid victory persuaded Hitler



that Moscow could still be taken before winter. He ordered some units from Army Group North transferred to Army Group Center to assist in the assault on Moscow.

The reduction of force in Army Group North meant that taking Leningrad by storm was no longer feasible. The front stabilized about ten kilometers from the edge of the city. In lieu of capturing the city, Adolf Hitler ordered a siege. Leningrad was to be starved into submission, which the Germans calculated would happen sometime in early 1942. Hitler specifically ordered that any offer of the surrender of Leningrad be refused. If the German Army accepted the surrender of the city, then it would become responsible for feeding the city's inhabitants. Hitler preferred to let them starve. The Army was not to allow civilians from Leningrad to cross its front line; if necessary, approaching civilians should be fired upon. The Wehrmacht would bombard the city and destroy its vital services until Leningrad could no longer resist, at a minimal cost to the Wehrmacht.

I should mention that while Hitler had ordered that no surrender of Leningrad be accepted, in fact no surrender was ever offered. Inside the city, they were unaware of Hitler's order and there were those who proposed surrender and declaring Leningrad an open city, but these voices were overruled. No significant number of the city's residents attempted to leave the city or surrender to the Germans.

A word here about the role of Finland. The Finnish Army had advanced down the Karelian Isthmus roughly as far as where the Finnish-Soviet border had been prior to the Winter War, about 20 kilometers north of Leningrad. The Finns were therefore assisting the German blockade insofar as blocking the shipment of food or supplies into the city from the north. But the Finns would advance no farther. They did not bomb or shell the city, as the Germans were doing, nor would they permit the Wehrmacht to station ground or air units on Finnish territory, to attack Leningrad from the north.

The first major bombing raid on Leningrad took place on September 8. Incendiaries set oil storage tanks on fire and, more important, destroyed a number of wooden warehouses next to the Warsaw railway station, destroying Leningrad's largest stockpile of food.

Remarkably, the authorities in Leningrad did not reduce the daily ration, which remember, was the same as it was in cities not under siege, until September 2, Yuri's birthday. You have to understand, though, that at this moment no one was expecting the terrible siege that was to come. The general assumption was that soon either the Germans would be pushed back, or Leningrad would fall.

On September 12, in the aftermath of that bombing, the ration was cut again. Now it was 500 grams for manual workers, 300 for white-collar workers, and 250 for dependents. Clearly, the emphasis was on feeding soldiers and factory workers who supported the war effort.

A new ration category was added, children under 12, who received 300 grams of bread per day. There were also those monthly rations for meat, fats, and sugar which were parceled out in ten-day allotments, but I'll stick to giving you the figures for the daily bread ration; the cuts in the other rations were comparable.

The new category for children sounded merciful, but it led to awkward outcomes. An eleven-year-old eats more than a three-year-old, but they both got the same ration. Even more disturbing, once a child reached their twelfth birthday, their ration was cut. In the Ryabinkin household, mother Antonina got the white-collar worker ration, eight-year-old Irina the next largest, and sixteen-year-old Yuri, sick with pleurisy, got less than his little sister.

Yuri and his friends were on fire watch at their school. Their job was to dump sand over any incendiaries that fell on the roof of the school before they could start a fire. Yuri's diary for September speaks mostly of the bombings and the shellings. He guessed that it was an expression of Hitler's rage at his inability to capture the city, and wondered whether the Germans would resort to poison gas.

Yuri's mother was searching for ways to get Yuri out of the city. When he was younger, Yuri had attended a special school for students interested in joining the Navy. Perhaps he could enlist; as a sailor in the Navy, he'd get more food. Even the Army would be an improvement. But Yuri had his health issues. In his words, "I am sixteen years old, but my health is like that of a sixty-year-old man." With the typical adolescent dread of rejection or humiliation, he asked his mother why he should bother with these applications; they weren't going to take him, not only for his illness, but for his eyesight. A vision test showed he needed glasses. There's no record he ever got them.

Mom pushed Yuri to make these applications, but Yuri was quite correct. Neither the Navy nor the Army would have him.

Yuri and his friends played blackjack and Yuri won over a hundred rubles. Too bad it was imaginary money. "The guys now say that I'm incredibly lucky in cards. Lucky in cards; unlucky in love. Is that how it will be...?"

On October 1, the ration was cut again. Two weeks later, Yuri mentions shortages of food for the first time; unsurprisingly, the subject comes up in the context of him and his sister arguing over who got what. He describes wanting to study his algebra, but all he can think about is bread.

Food was indeed in short supply. Everyone got ration cards, but getting a ration card did not guarantee you'd get your allotment. Since his mother had to work and his sister was too little, Yuri got stuck with the job of waiting in line for hours to collect the family's rations, unsure whether there would be anything left to pick up when he reached the head of the line.

As the situation grew more desperate, cheating was rampant. You hear stories about cannibalism, but in Leningrad, as we've seen before on this topic, there was a lot more talk about cannibalism than there was actual cannibalism. The authorities tried about 1,200 cases, which is not a lot in a community of three million.

A bigger problem was cardholders robbed of their cards, or even killed for their ration card. More commonly, ration fraud consisted of keeping the cards of family members who had died or joined the Army or left the city. The authorities in Leningrad dealt severely with ration card fraud when they uncovered it. They were less zealous about simple corruption. The people who worked in the grocery stores were noticeably more healthy-looking than the average Leningrader, as were the well-connected, such as the new family that moved into the apartment under the Ryabinkin family. In early November, Yuri tells us that his mother berated him because he wasn't bringing home any food. The family downstairs managed to get food; why couldn't Yuri? "I don't have the energy for this. Oh, if only I had boots! But I don't have them. Each line brings me closer to illness...I'm sitting here crying. I'm only sixteen! The bastards who brought this whole war on...."

The only way to get supplies into the city and people out was the water route, across Lake Ladoga. It sounds easier than it was. There simply weren't the boats or the facilities to move large cargoes across the lake, and the boats that were operating were subject to German bombing attacks. Barges bearing grain were sunk by German bombers. Leningrad divers recovered what they could from the bottom of the lake. It was moldy and unfit for human consumption, but it was ground into flour anyway and mixed in to stretch the supply. It made the bread taste terrible, but Leningraders were no longer much concerned about taste.

Supplies of fuel were dwindling. By the end of October, hardly anyone had electricity. There was no coal for heating homes, with a Russian winter coming on. The first snowfall in Leningrad came on October 15. By November, the last of the electric trams stopped running and there was no more public transit.

By then, Lake Ladoga had frozen over and was no longer navigable. The only supplies coming into the city came by air. The cargoes were heavy on foodstuffs like dried meat and chocolate, foods dense in calories for their weight. The return flights took evacuees out of the city, but there wasn't room for very many.

Rations were cut again on November 13, and they reached their lowest point on November 20. In calorie terms, Yuri was allotted 460 calories per day from all sources. His sister was allocated 690, and his mother 580. This is simply not enough to survive on, and even these numbers are only theoretical, since there still wasn't enough to supply everyone.

This is when people in Leningrad began to die of starvation.

Meanwhile, the authorities were watching the ice on the lake. When the ice reached a thickness of two meters, it would be possible to drive trucks over it. (You have to know things like that, if you're a Russian.) On November 20, the day of the ration cut, the ice was 1.8 meters thick. They tried driving a two-ton truck over it; it broke through the ice and fell into the freezing water. The driver drowned. They worked out a system where the trucks pulled sledges that carried some of the cargo; this method spread the weight across more ice.

They called it the Road of Life, but there were still bottlenecks. Supplies had to be driven over a dozens of kilometers of dirt road to get to the lake; on the other side of the lake, they had to be shipped over a rickety railway line from the shore of the lake to Leningrad proper.

In December, 52,000 people in Leningrad died, which in normal times was the death rate for an entire year. People were dropping dead of exhaustion as they trudged through the snowy streets. There was no snow removal; you had to make your way through paths in the snow carved by other pedestrians.

Leningraders had already slaughtered and eaten the horses in the city. Soon family pets began to disappear. Then they turned to mice and rats.

Soup is the best way to stretch your food when you don't have enough, so most people's diets consisted of a bowl of soup every day, made from whatever could be found. Some people pulled down the wallpaper and boiled it in their soup to extract the glue. The consumption of so much water in conditions of starvation, though, can lead to dropsy, a condition which leads to swelling in the stomach or limbs.

Antonina Ryabinkin went from office to office across the city, trying to get evacuation passes for herself and her two children. In his diary, Yuri wrote that he didn't dare to hope she might succeed. He relates how his mother used some of her connections to get hold of an extra ration card to help the family.

On December 15, Yuri tells us, he picked up his family's entire ten-day ration of chocolate for all three of them, then ate it all himself on the way home. He told his mother that another boy had jumped him and stolen the chocolate. When he broke down in tears and gave his word of honor as a Young Pioneer that it was true, she accepted it. But he confesses in his diary: "I have fallen into the abyss called debauchery, complete lack of conscience, dishonor, and shame. I am an unworthy son of my mother and an unworthy brother of my sister. I am an egoist, a man who in a difficult moment forgets all his near and dear ones...I would like two things now: to die myself, and let my mother read this diary. Let her curse me, a dirty, heartless, hypocritical animal. Let her disown me."

On December 25, thanks to the increasing flow of food along the Road of Life the Leningrad ration was increased, although there were still shortages. Leningrad bakeries now had supplies of flour, but couldn't get enough clean water to make it all into bread.

Yuri's mother was told her family would be evacuated on the 28<sup>th</sup>, but then the date was postponed into January. Yuri wrote in his diary his reflections on how happy his life had been before the war, a happiness he hadn't fully understood or appreciated until now: days when he skipped dinner not for lack of food, but because he wanted to play volleyball with his friends. Days when he had books and games and the many activities at the Young Pioneers Palace. He told his diary that he had changed. He was a better person now and vowed not to cheat his family out of food ever again.

On January 3, Yuri describes being too exhausted to move off the sofa. He is covered with lice and his body swollen. He speculated that this might be the last entry in his diary. He won't finish it, he writes. Someone else will come along and write "death" on the last page.

On January 4, 1942, Yuri's mind was on God. "Only God, if there is such, can give us deliverance." He vows that if God saves the three of them, he will never again lie to his mother. He will begin an honest life and get a job. "I will give my mother a happy, golden, old age."

Yuri's family received permission to evacuate Leningrad on January 8. But when it was time to go, Antonina could not get Yuri off the sofa. She yelled at him, tugged at him, even struck him, but he was too weak to move, and she herself was in no condition to lift him. In the end, she had no choice but the most awful one: to take Irina to safety and leave Yuri, her firstborn, alone in the flat, his fate uncertain.

Yuri's final entry in his diary was written two days earlier. He describes his own exhaustion and inability to move. He marvels that his mother is able to keep going. For Yuri, there is nothing but lying on the couch as the minutes slowly tick away. His last words: "And time drags on, drags on, and long, long! Oh, God, what is happening to me? And now, I...I...I..."

[long pause]

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank David for his kind donation, and thank you to Sam for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like David and Sam help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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In July, I plan to be at both Readercon in Boston and then Confluence in Pittsburgh, so if any of you happen to be attending either of those conventions, look me up and say hi.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of the Siege of Leningrad. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Antonina and Irina evacuated Leningrad on January 8. The first leg of the journey was by train, from the city to the shore of Lake Ladoga. The trip was just 40 kilometers or so, but sometimes took days. Irina recalled her mother waiting in the station for the train and expressing her fears about what would happen to Yuri.

Next came the trip across the lake. Evacuees were piled into the back of a truck and driven 25 kilometers across the ice and then by road. The ride was a bumpy one; the trucks ran as fast as their drivers could manage, to make the vehicle a more difficult target for the Luftwaffe. The exhausted passengers, close to death, often did not have the strength to hold on. Some, especially children, were bounced out of the truck and left to die on the ice.

When they reached a train station, evacuees boarded a train for the three-day ride to the city of Vologda. At first, they gave evacuees parcels containing three days' worth of bread and sausage to sustain them for the journey, but too many starving Leningraders ate the entire parcel immediately, and then died. Officials learned to portion out the food gradually over the three days.

Antonina and Irina arrived in Vologda on January 26, 1942. Antonina died just hours later. Irina was placed in an orphanage. After the war, she moved back in with her aunt.

Sometime later, another evacuee from Leningrad arrived in Vologda. This man was a teacher, suffering from tuberculosis and starvation. He was taken to a hospital. He was too ill to speak, but he showed a notebook to one of the nurses, a woman named Rebekah Trifonova. He died a few days later, never able to explain how or where he got the notebook. It was Yuri Ryabinkin's diary.

As an adult, Irina kept searching for her brother, hoping against hope he was somehow still alive. Why had he not made any attempt to contact her? Perhaps he was angry and resentful at having been left behind by his family and wanted nothing more to do with them. I think they call this survivor guilt.

In 1970, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war, *Smena*, a literary magazine published by Komsomol, the Young Communists League, put out a call for diaries and journals for a special issue on the Siege of Leningrad. A young woman, Rebekah's niece, showed them Yuri's diary, which the magazine published in full.

The publication came to the attention of Irina, who hadn't known Yuri kept a diary. She traveled to Vologda and reclaimed it.

Irina never gave up hope that Yuri was still alive, but in 2021, a search of the city archives of what is now again St. Petersburg turned up an entry, dated March 2, 1942, recording the death of Yuri Ivanovich Ryabinkin. The precise date of his death is not given.

Of course, I'm just speculating here, but I'd like to think that the teacher who turned up in Vologda was one of Yuri's teachers, that he somehow learned that Yuri had been left behind, went to the flat to check on him, discovered his body, collected the diary, and took it with him when he left Leningrad in order to preserve it, and Yuri's memory.

[music: Closing War Theme]