

Leningrad: Tragedy of a City Under Siege, 1941-44
by Anna Reid.
Bloomsbury 2011.

Amid the horrific scale of murder and destruction that characterised the Second World War few of the theatres of war, if any, came close to the clash of the Nazi and Soviet armies following operation Barbarossa. The Nazis viewed the Russians as sub-humans to be murdered with impunity and for the Soviet Union's citizens it was their misfortune to be ruled by a dictator every bit as psychotic and murderous as Hitler.

Operation Barbarossa was initially successful, the Wehrmacht positively scything through a significant part of the 'European' area of Russia. Many towns and cities fell to the invaders, but a few held out. The best known of these latter is the city of Stalingrad, fought over by the enemies with a loss of life close to two million. But the fate of Leningrad, now renamed St Petersburg, was if anything even more terrible, and although the loss of life was not on the same scale as in Stalingrad, nevertheless the effect on its citizens of the German siege was absolutely horrific.

In Leningrad, Anna Reid points out how slight, relatively speaking, has been the attention paid by Western historians to Leningrad and its terrible fate, and her book goes a long way to redressing this strange circumstance.

The book is divided into five parts: Invasion: June-September 1941; The Siege Begins: September-December 1941; Mass Death: Winter 1941-2; Waiting for Liberation: January 1942-January 1944; Aftermath with two appendices, the first of which assesses the likely death toll, in the light of the latest research. It is a grim postscript to a distressing but compelling book, meticulously researched and well written, and utilising to great advantage the personal testimonies of those who survived.

It is hard not to read Leningrad, particularly the most harrowing sections in Part 3, without pondering on who bears the greatest responsibility for the fate of Leningrad's citizens, Hitler or Stalin? Having read the book it is impossible not to conclude that though the greater burden rests on the Nazi leadership who viewed the death of Slav *untermenschen* with utter disdain, it would have been possible for Stalin and those at his command to do much more, both before the siege was fully set and even immediately afterwards had they so wished, so there remains a high degree of culpability there too.

Leningrad serves as a reminder not just of the horrors of war, or of the suffering of the innocent in time of conflict, but as a record of the immense pain, privation and misery that dictatorship brings to its people, suffering that is often a means to an end, and for which no forgiveness is possible.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh