

# SIEGE OF LENINGRAD



ВЫПОЛНИЛИ: ИВАН СЕДОВ,  
ИВАН ЧЕСАЛИН, ВИТАЛИЙ  
ФЕДОСЕЕВ

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- ▶ *The siege of Leningrad was a prolonged military blockade undertaken from the south by the Army Group North of Nazi Germany against the Soviet city of Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) on the Eastern Front in World War II. The Finnish army invaded from the north, co-operating with the Germans until Finland had recaptured territory lost in the recent Winter War, but refused to make further approaches to the city.*



The siege started on 8 September 1941, when the Wehrmacht severed the last road to the city. Although Soviet forces managed to open a narrow land corridor to the city on 18 January 1943, the Red Army did not lift the siege until 27 January 1944, 872 days after it began. The blockade became one of the longest and most destructive sieges in history, and possibly the costliest in casualties suffered.

Some historians classify it as genocide.



# Background

Leningrad's capture was one of three strategic goals in the German Operation Barbarossa and the main target of Army Group North. The strategy was motivated by Leningrad's political status as the former capital of Russia and the symbolic capital of the Russian Revolution, its military importance as a main base of the Soviet Baltic Fleet, and its industrial strength, housing numerous arms factories. By 1939, the city was responsible for 11% of all Soviet industrial output.



# Preparations

Army Group North under Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb advanced to Leningrad, its primary objective. Von Leeb's plan called for capturing the city on the move, but due to Hitler's recall of 4th *Panzer* Group (persuaded by his Chief of General Staff, Franz Halder, to transfer this south to participate in Fedor von Bock's push for Moscow), von Leeb had to lay the city under siege indefinitely after reaching the shores of Lake Ladoga, while trying to complete the encirclement and reaching the Finnish Army under Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim waiting at the Svir River, east of Leningrad.



# Establishment

- ▶ The 4th Panzer Group from East Prussia took Pskov following a swift advance and managed to reach Novgorod by 16 August. The Soviet defenders fought to the death, despite the German discovery of the Soviet defence plans on an officer's corpse. After the capture of Novgorod, General Hoepner's 4th Panzer Group continued its progress towards Leningrad. However, the 18th Army – despite some 350,000 men lagging behind – forced its way to Ostrov and Pskov after the Soviet troops of the Northwestern Front retreated towards Leningrad.



# Encirclement of Leningrad

Finnish intelligence had broken some of the Soviet military codes and read their low-level communications. This was particularly helpful for Hitler, who constantly requested intelligence information about Leningrad. Finland's role in Operation Barbarossa was laid out in Hitler's Directive 21, "The mass of the Finnish army will have the task, in accordance with the advance made by the northern wing of the German armies, of tying up maximum Russian (sic – Soviet) strength by attacking to the west, or on both sides, of Lake Ladoga". The last rail connection to Leningrad was severed on 30 August, when the Germans reached the Neva River. On 8 September, the road to the besieged city was severed when the Germans reached Lake Ladoga at Shlisselburg, leaving just a corridor of land between Lake Ladoga and Leningrad which remained unoccupied by Axis forces. Bombing on 8 September caused 178 fires. On 21 September, German High Command considered how to destroy Leningrad



# Defensive operations

The Leningrad Front (initially the Leningrad Military District) was commanded by Marshal Kliment Voroshilov. It included the 23rd Army in the northern sector between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga, and the 48th Army in the western sector between the Gulf of Finland and the Slutsk–Mga position. The Leningrad Fortified Region, the Leningrad garrison, the Baltic Fleet forces, and Koporye, Pulkovo, and Slutsk–Kolpino operational groups were also present.



# Bombardment

The first success of the Leningrad air defense took place on the night of June 23. The Ju-88A bomber from the 1st air corps KGr.806 was damaged by the AA guns fire of the 15th battery of the 192nd anti-aircraft artillery regiment, and made an emergency landing. All crew members, including commander, Lieutenant Hans Turmeyer, were captured on the ground. The commander of the 15th battery, lieutenant, Alexey Pimchenkov was awarded the Order of the Red Banner. By Monday, 8 September, German forces had largely surrounded the city, cutting off all supply routes to Leningrad and its suburbs. Unable to press home their offensive, and facing defences of the city organised by Marshal Zhukov, the Axis armies laid siege to the city for "900 days and nights".



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