When the British journalist and native of Petersburg Alexander Werth visited Leningrad when it was blockaded in late 1943, his childhood neighbourhood adjacent to the Summer Garden «was the nearest I saw in Leningrad to a blitzed area». He informed his hosts at the Writers’ Union that the city seemed to him remarkably well preserved. The author Vsevolod Vishnevskii, who participated in the defence of Leningrad in 1941 and 1942, sought to disabuse Werth of this notion: «That’s a first impression. If you look closely, you will see hidden destruction that does not immediately catch the eye.» Having just returned from the Volga, Werth remained unconvinced, noting, «All the same, it’s not Stalingrad.» A report prepared for the US State Department in September 1944 concurred: «All tales of the destruction of Leningrad during its siege of over two years are extraordinarily exaggerated.»

1. The Subjective Dimension of Comparison: The City and the City of Memory

The inability of visitors to perceive Leningrad as destroyed – to see the «hidden destruction» that inhabitants saw – suggests the difficulties of comparing post-catastrophic cities. In any comparison, Leningrad appears to be an outlier that offers little insight into more «typical» cases. Blockaded for almost nine hundred days, subject to air raids, artillery attacks and the ravages of famine, Leningrad, as Werth observed, sustained less damage to its physical plant than the destroyed iconic cities of World War II: Rotterdam, Coventry, Warsaw, Dresden, and Hiroshima. Within the Soviet Union, the truly «wrecked» cities were those such as

2. «Kak mog vystoiat’ Leningrad», in: *Podvig Leningrada: Dokumental’no-khudozhestvennyi sbornik*, Moscow 1960, 529. For Werth’s account of the meeting at the Writers’ Union, which does not mention this exchange, see Werth, *Leningrad*, 119–134.
Smolensk, Pskov, Novgorod and Orel, which suffered German occupation. In May 1944, Sevastopol emerged from nearly two years of German occupation with only 3,000 inhabitants left of its pre-war population of 110,000, and only seven «seriously damaged buildings» standing in its city centre. Official figures counted only 16 per cent of the city’s residential buildings as habitable. In Rostov-on-Don, which the Germans held for about one week in 1941 and for seven months beginning in late July 1942, approximately three-quarters of the housing stock was destroyed or severely damaged. Arriving in Stalingrad in August 1942, in the early stages of the battle that turned the city into a war zone, Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman found the city «burned down. Stalingrad is in ashes. It is dead.» The USSR Information Bulletin reported that by the time the battle ended in January 1943, «not one building remained standing in the centre and the factory settlements.»

Certainly the fabric of the city was badly damaged in Leningrad. German bombs and artillery destroyed 16 per cent of the city’s housing stock along with much of the city’s infrastructure of streets, sewer lines and water lines. Nearly half of the city’s school buildings and 78 per cent of its hospitals were knocked out of commission. In May 1944, Pravda reported that, of 240 buildings deemed to have particular historic-artistic value, not a single one had escaped some level of injury. Such losses were particularly visible and painful for those who knew the city well and thus were likely to be sensitive to traces of war that an American visitor dismissed as «small gashes in the plaster of many buildings from fragments of bursting shells and bombs.» Nonetheless, Leningrad hardly compared to the gutted city centres of Coventry and Portsmouth, or the ruins of London’s East End and Stalingrad that constituted Werth’s frames of reference.

The relatively intact cityscape of post-catastrophic Leningrad barely hinted at the vast human losses that also defy comparison. The most assiduously covered
up – if not the most hidden – aspect of Leningrad’s destruction was the number of people who starved to death in the city. Official post-war estimates submitted to the authorities at Nuremberg pretended to statistical exactness, setting the number of dead at 632,253. Given the problems and omissions of the available records, an exact accounting remains impossible, but the Leningrad Funeral Trust’s competing figure of 1.2 million (of a pre-war population of approximately 3.2 million) appears more likely, if somewhat overstated. Yet even if we accept the low official figure, Leningrad’s losses are still staggering. The civilian death toll for all of Germany’s bombed cities was approximately 600,000; for all of Japan’s, approximately 900,000. Roughly 20,000 Londoners died in the Blitz.14 Regarding the percentage of the population, Hiroshima’s losses were greater than Leningrad’s: approximately 180,000 of the estimated 350,000 people in the city died in the atomic blast or in its extended aftermath. Of course in Hiroshima, the physical city was also obliterated.15 By contrast, the chief cause of death in Leningrad was starvation – a prolonged, quiet trauma. Rumours circulating among Leningraders during the winter of 1941–42 that put the number of dead as high as 3.5 million – an estimate larger than the city’s pre-war population – suggest their perception of extermination. As the classicist Ol’ga Freidenberg noted in reminiscences written in the spring of 1942, «Whole families, whole apartments with collectives of families disappeared.»16 Leningrad’s spaces were, in comparison to other destroyed cities, uncannily intact but incomparably empty.

How is it then possible to put the blockade in a comparative perspective? I propose a comparative analysis structured around examining the key questions – what was destroyed, what was rebuilt, how was the story told – from the perspective of people who lived in the city before, during, and after the catastrophe. Such an approach privileges sources that illuminate locals’ interactions with the cityscape.


In the case of Leningrad, a rich fund of memoirs and oral histories provides insight into how city dwellers understood their city, its history, and their place in it. I also draw on the archival record of a series of public competitions, exhibitions and debates held in the mid-1960s – a local outcome of the «thaw» presided over by Nikita Khrushchev – that invited Leningraders, especially survivors of the blockade and veterans, to suggest and critique proposed sites and designs for a new monument to the city during the war.

If we follow Leningrad’s lead and measure the damage not only, or primarily, to the physical city but also to the city of memory – the imagined city that all city dwellers carry in their minds – then Leningrad ceases to be an unprecedented or incomparable case. Vishnevskii could see beyond superficial comparisons to Stalingrad because his reference point was his own city of memory that linked the pre-war city, the famine winter and the post-catastrophe cityscape. Similarly, Werth’s city of memory made it possible for him to see the only «blitzed» area that he recalled: he visited the area around the Summer Garden because it was his remembered childhood home. Long after the war ended, locals relied on their remembered cities – the former site of the local bakery, a bomb crater or a dead friend’s apartment – to navigate the repaired city. The nature of the catastrophe in Leningrad may have been unique, but other cities had «hidden» damage, too, even if the overt destruction tended to deflect attention away from it. Wherever the war invaded familiar neighbourhoods, shops, workplaces and apartments, it left its traces on both the city and the city of memory. The case of Leningrad underscores the importance of attending not only to visible destruction, but also to the losses marked on city dwellers’ mental maps.

2. Reconstruction from the Perspective of the Locals

An analysis structured around local perspectives is concerned with the notion that architects, planners and especially «totalitarian systems» exercised more or less «absolute control over the production of meanings» in the built environment, and places the complex relationships between urban spaces and the people who inhabit them at the centre of a comparative analysis of rebuilding and remembering. Particularly in the Soviet Union, the state’s desire to control meaning as well as its


very real ability to direct the course of reconstruction are beyond question. Nonetheless, Leningrad was not a passive abstraction manipulated by powerful actors, but rather a living space where the efforts to fix either memory or forgetting in the cityscape often produced unintended consequences.

The reputation of late Stalinism as a period of «stultifying centralisation» notwithstanding, it turns out that local concerns and preferences often shaped post-war reconstruction in the Soviet Union.\(^\text{20}\) In his study of the reconstruction of Sevastopol, Karl Qualls concludes that «local officials [...] hijacked Moscow’s rebuilding plans» as they tried both to meet the immediate needs of the population and to turn rebuilding into an «urban identification project».\(^\text{21}\) Of course such local control operated within clear constraints. As Qualls notes, challenging Moscow could be both difficult and dangerous. But architects and planners in many cities including Leningrad were able to turn Stalinist aesthetic strictures into justifications for the perpetuation of local architectural traditions. In the case of Sevastopol, «the centre gave in to many of the periphery’s demands for historical preservation and restoration of the city’s architectural landmarks».\(^\text{22}\) Local officials, for example, resisted central planners’ suggestions for reconfiguring Primorskii Boulevard, and instead returned the central promenade to its pre-war form, down to replanting the chestnut trees that had been destroyed.\(^\text{23}\)

In Leningrad, local architects proposed a program of historical reconstruction and purification as the best means of simultaneously (and paradoxically) erasing the physical traces of war and commemorating «heroic events unprecedented in human history».\(^\text{24}\) The neoclassical grandeur imagined to have existed in the time of Catherine II and Alexander I provided the template for both reconstruction, for example of the Gostinyi dvor shopping arcade, and new construction, for example of the monumental Lenin Square in front of the Finland Station.\(^\text{25}\) Because imperial Petersburg was a «modern» city – in the sense of a city that «feature[d] monumental urban spaces» and had «a strong architectural cohesiveness»\(^\text{26}\) – its reconstruction meshed with the values of centralisation, rationalisation and modernisation, which animated Stalinist city planning in general.\(^\text{27}\) In
Leningrad, the locals argued, modernising the city and making it into a monument to victory required preserving and perpetuating what they called the Leningrad (rather than Petersburg) tradition in architecture.  

What united local planners and central officials – what made it possible for the locals to successfully negotiate with the centre – was the shared assumption that the cityscape could «transform people's understanding of place and self» in straightforward and predictable ways. The Leningrad case, however, illustrates that while the repaired city could facilitate both remembering and forgetting, it did not always produce the outcomes architects and officials anticipated. Historical reconstructions and simulacra recuperated what was lost (or an idealised version of what was lost), covering the memory of destruction with simulated continuity. Leningrad had no equivalent of the modern architecture that effectively – and also unintentionally (the goal was «the modern ordering of people and spaces») – memorialised the wartime damage around St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Yet for Leningraders who survived the blockade, the apparently undamaged cityscape also provided a powerful prod to memory, functioning as an unmarked museum in which they could place their remembrances of the pre-war and wartime city. 

The preservation of Leningrad's historical façades – coupled with the low priority accorded the construction of new housing – had the largely unintended consequence of preserving the domestic spaces where Leningraders lived before the war, survived the blockade and lived afterward. When Ales' Adamovich and Daniil Granin began collecting oral histories of blokadniki in the late 1970s, they visited numerous apartments that bore the physical marks of war, such as the yellow stain that marked the spot in Lidia Usova's apartment where the burzhuika, the small makeshift stove, had stood. Up until the 1990s, many blokadniki still lived in the apartments where they had survived the war. In many cases, wartime damage


29 Qualls, From Ruins to Reconstruction, 124.


31 On the low priority accorded housing as well as other urban amenities such as running water and sewerage, see D. Filtzer, «Standard of Living versus Quality of Life», in: J. Fürst (ed.), Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvestment, New York 2006, 86–92.

remained visible, and apartments functioned as informal and unofficial museums.33

The pastoral landscapes of the city’s new Victory Parks, which emerged from the interplay of efforts both to bring the city back to life and to commemorate the blockade, also functioned as unintentional museums. Consecrated to the memory of «heroic events», the southern Victory Park revitalised a heavily damaged district by eliminating physical traces of the war, including concrete and wooden pillboxes and a brick factory that had been used as a crematorium during the starvation winter. Bomb craters became ponds.34 Survivors often welcomed such life-affirming forgetfulness as both therapeutic and as the best means of honouring (though not recalling) the memory of the blockade. In the 1960s, when the city finally committed itself to building a war monument, many blokadniki proposed parks, where the misery of war could be forgotten and where future generations could find happiness, as the most appropriate memorials.35 At the public discussion of entries in the competition to select a site, the suggestion that the monument be «hale and hearty [bodrym], healthy, [and] life-affirming» met with applause. The alternative – to «build a cemetery on Victory Square» – was characterised by a participant in a later public discussion as «tactless».37 Still, for survivors the ponds, paths and trees never entirely displaced the memory of trenches, pillboxes and bomb craters. In January 1995, eleven survivors from among the women who had worked at the brick factory during the war dedicated a small monument on the former factory grounds. Seeing in her mind’s eye a building that no longer existed, Anna Kadykova told a reporter, «Right here stood two tunnel ovens, each 100 meters long. They were fired round the clock. And we worked in three shifts.»38

The unpredictable, idiosyncratic and kaleidoscopic ways in which locals are able to read reconstructed or repaired cityscapes offers a second useful «subjective» comparative dimension, a corollary to the damage marked in the city of memory. Regardless of the strategy chosen by planners – the exact historical reproduc-


35 «Pis’ma», Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva Sankt-Peterberga (hereafter TsGALI SPb), f. 341, op. 6, d.1, ll. 123–124; «Pis’ma», TsGALI SPb, f. 341, op. 6, d. 7, ll. 20, 112.

36 «Stenograficheskii otchet, 1964», TsGALI SPb, f. 341, op. 1, d. 643, l. 31. See also ibid., l. 60.

37 «Stenograficheskii otchet, 1966», TsGALI SPb, f. 341, op. 1, d. 700, l. 35.

38 Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti, 26 January 1995; see also Chas pik, 25 January 1995; and Nevskoe vremia, 26 January 1995.
tion or radical modernisation, the clearing or preservation of ruins – the (re)built environment never entirely dominated the multiple meanings, memories and habits inhabitants brought to urban spaces. Comparisons structured around local perspectives highlight inhabitants’ multiple, sometimes unexpected understandings and uses of urban space. For example, while East German planners and officials understood the ruins of Dresden’s baroque Frauenkirche as a monument to the «destruction caused by «Anglo-American gangsters from the air»», it held different meanings for someone like Henny Brenner, one of 170 Jews still in Dresden in 1945, for whom «the attack – as macabre as it may sound – was a salvation». In West Berlin, the ruined tower of the Kaiser Wilhelm Gedächtniskirche was preserved – despite the preference of church and state officials for a modernist replacement – because locals protested its removal. And yet, Berliners still did not agree as to what the ruin said about the war, the city or themselves. Some urged its preservation as «a moral message against the consequences of Übermut», others as «a very personal symbol» of suffering and victimisation, and still others as a relic of the remembered Berlin of their pre-war pasts. Focusing on such local perspectives provides a framework for comparing the most seemingly disparate and incommensurable cases.

3. Comparing Local Stories: Leningrad and London

Revitalising the post-catastrophic city required not only rebuilding but also finding a way to tell – and tame – the story of the city’s destruction. By 1943, when the worst period of the siege was behind them and the return of trams, more regular electricity, and improved rations allowed the slow rebuilding of community life, Leningraders talked incessantly, perhaps obsessively, of their recent past. Werth quickly learned that «in Leningrad, sooner or later, the conversation always seems to get back to the black days, to the winter of 1941». In these stories, he got a glimpse of Leningrad’s devastation, if not of the cityscape. Visiting three years later in 1946, the novelist and journalist Il’ia Erenburg heard the same conversations: «Those who had lived through the blockade described its horrors for hours on end.»

Telling stories of the blockade allowed Leningraders to begin the work of integrating the traumatic rupture of the blockade into individual life stories, the fabric of the city, and the history of the nation. Leningraders told Werth of the horrors that numbed human emotion and response. One confided that during the famine winter when he saw others collapse, dying in the snow, he «just walked on». Werth also heard stories of resilience, mutual aid and civilised values triumphant. He met architects who attributed their survival, at least in part, to the fact that they remained at work during the starvation winter, completing blueprints of historic buildings threatened with destruction. Werth, who would have heard comparable stories of Londoners’ stoicism and heroism, seemed inclined to take the tellers at their word. This was the «myth» of the blockade: the shared, «simplified, dramatised story that has evolved [...] to contain the meanings of the war that we [or survivors] can tolerate». The mythologised account of an embattled, united, civilised community, while not the full truth, offered a real and indispensable means of managing the painful, perhaps shameful recollections of war.

In the case of Leningrad, the myth of the blockade drew on a long literary tradition – the so-called Petersburg text or myth – that, in the words of Katerina Clark, became «Russia’s main myth of national identity». On one hand, Petersburg was a «city built on bones and tears», the embodiment of the autocratic ambition and ruthlessness that led Peter I to force thousands of labourers to build his new capital in the almost inaccessible swamps of the Neva delta. On the other hand, the city was «not altogether Russian», its straight avenues and neoclassical façades a triumph of European reason and enlightenment, an antidote to Moscow’s twisted alleys and onion domes. The city’s literary doubles shaped Leningraders’ sense of their city’s uniqueness if not superiority (especially in comparison to Moscow), as well as their understandings of both its destruction and reconstruction. The cultural historian Vladimir Toporov’s definition of the Petersburg text as tracing «the path to moral salvation and spiritual rebirth in conditions where life perishes in the kingdom of death» effectively describes many reminiscences that attempted to mythologise, and thus manage, the traumas associated with the famines that gripped the city during the Civil War and World War II. While other cities may not have a comparably rich literary life, the case of Leningrad suggests the impor-

44 Werth, Leningrad, 75.
48 Quoted from A. Belyi, St. Petersburg, trans. J. Cour-
tance of attending to the local stories and myths that have provided a context for constructing bearable stories of the trauma of war.

Despite Werth’s insistence that Leningrad and London were incommensurable, he likely heard echoes of London in Leningraders’ stories of working during the worst months of the blockade «with a kind of frantic determination, with furious defiance». Indeed, I would argue that the nearest analogue to the myth of the blockade is what historian Angus Calder has termed the «myth of the Blitz». Both grew out of the state’s effort to mobilise an urban population under attack. But neither was simply imposed from above. Leningraders memorised and found solace in the verses that the poet Ol’ga Berggol’ts recited on the radio. More «ordinary» Leningraders often told their own stories on the radio, and were profiled in the local press. They contributed artefacts to and visited the Heroic Defence of Leningrad exhibition organised in the still-blockaded city.

Both the myth of the Blitz and of the blockade drew on experiences recalled by individuals while at the same time providing survivors with a compelling and uplifting framework for understanding, narrating and coping with the death and destruction around them. In both cases, memorable and uncanny images of the familiar city made strange by war authenticated the myths by providing «irrefutable» visual «truths».

Photographs that highlighted the visual ironies of a city at war became indelible and often reprinted icons of blockaded Leningrad: barrage balloons over Nevskii Prospect, cabbage growing in front of St. Isaac’s Cathedral, young women in firefighters’ uniforms standing watch on the roof of the Hermitage. H. A. Mason’s famous photograph of St. Paul’s Cathedral, miraculously intact amid smouldering ruins, became not only a synecdoche for London and its people, but also a «prime signifier for the Blitz as a whole», a symbol of «British creative genius as well as her Christian tradition».

Stories of the Blitz and the blockade tended to represent urban populations under attack as active citizens – extinguishing incendiary bombs in buckets of sand, rescuing victims from the ruins, fighting fires, bravely queuing for bread under artillery fire – not passive victims. In Soviet parlance, both London and Leningrad were «hero cities». Londoners and Leningraders could understand themselves as innocent heroes – defending their homes and their hometowns from unprovoked and brutal attack – rather than innocent victims. Certainly the death of innocents (especially children) added pathos to Blitz and blockade stories, but the overarching narrative in each case was heroic defence.

51 See «Excerpts from Evgeniia Shavrova’s ‘A Schoolgirl’s Diary’», in: Simmons / Perlina, Writing the Siege, 43; and Adamovich / Granin, Blokadnaia kniga, 10, 16.
53 Smith, Britain and 1940, 3.
54 Ibid., 82, 89–90. The photograph was published on the front page of the Daily Mail, 29 December 1940. The front page is reproduced in Smith, Britain and 1940, 81.
55 Smith makes a similar point in reference to London in Britain and 1940, 89.
This official emphasis on active resistance becomes clearer when contrasted to the stories of victimisation that emerged in other, if not most, destroyed cities and especially in cities on the losing side of the war. Clearly reflecting the realities of massive destruction, the stories of victim cities were also myths – simplified, soothing narratives that posited the locals as innocent and equated «war» with local losses. At a 1955 event commemorating the tenth anniversary of the destruction of Nuremberg, for example, the mayor «situated the air war [...] within a longer-term narrative of catastrophes visited periodically upon the town: floods, the plague and cholera, as well as the Thirty Years War and the First World War. The bombing thus took its place within an historical continuum in which tragedies were inflicted upon a passive, innocent city from outside, not as the result of the behaviour or choices of residents themselves.» In narratives of cities and civilians as victims, «it would seem that churches, cathedrals, symbols of a Germania Sancta [...] were at the top of the target list». Once again but from a different perspective, the city embodied civilisation under siege.

Survivors, of course, would have recognised these mythic narratives as partial at best. Wartime London may well have been «a place of courage, humour, unity, and defiance, an island of warmth and civilization threatened by the cruelty and barbarism of Nazism», but it was also a place of panic, fear, suffering and death. Cultural historian Dmitrii Likhachev, looking back on the blockade from the vantage of 1957, likewise recognised that «in the time of famine» some Leningraders «turned out to be marvellous, incomparable heroes, others – scoundrels, villains, murderers, cannibals». But his narrative is ambivalent and also endorses the vision of Leningrad (like London) as a stronghold of civilisation: «People kept diaries, wrote philosophical essays, scientific works, thought sincerely, from the heart, showed unusual resolve.»

For planners or state officials hoping to control the production of meaning, embedding mythic narratives in the cityscape offered a way of getting city dwellers to «read» the reconstructed or remodelled city in a particular way and therefore of limiting, if not completely suppressing, the multiple meanings and uses of urban places. Thus, when in the 1950s Leningrad officials unveiled a recreated artefact of the blockade – a sign warning pedestrians that, in the event of an artil-

56 Warsaw seems to me a very different case, as there citizens organised armed (if doomed) uprisings against the Nazis.
57 N. Gregor, Haunted City: Nuremberg and the Nazi Past, New Haven/Conn. 2008, 205. See also Rosenfeld, Munich. 133–138.
60 D. S. Likhachev, Reflections on the Russian Soul: A Memoir, tr. B. Adams, Budapest 1999. 244.
lery attack, they were standing on the dangerous side of the street – it came fitted with both a plaque that explained its significance and a shelf for flowers. While the warning sign alone might call up all sorts of memories for survivors, the accompanying dedication proposed a single narrative frame: «Placed in memory of the heroism and steadfastness of Leningraders during the 900-day blockade of the city.» Signs explaining artillery damage on the Anichkov Bridge and the Church of the Saviour on Blood as the result of «one of the 148,478 shells directed at Leningrad by the fascists, 1941–1944», similarly attempted to turn small corners of the city into marked museums and to assert the centrality of shared public narratives.

The difficulty of controlling the production of meaning and narratives throughout a living cityscape may help to account for official interest in the construction of museums, where virtual cityscapes could be carefully managed and narrated. During the blockade, the Heroic Defence of Leningrad exhibition, which was sponsored by the city and military authorities, showed crowds of Leningraders their recent past: a mock-up of a bakery, complete with an iced-over window that displayed the starvation ration of the winter of 1941–1942, as well as a tram destroyed by German artillery and strewn with the tattered clothes of the dead. A small part of a much larger exhibit celebrating Soviet military might, these virtual and sanitised cityscapes – there were no dead or starving, just their material traces – aimed to write individual memories into the grand narrative of heroic defence and Soviet victory. Over forty years later, when blokadniki joined a campaign to reopen the museum, which had been a victim of the late Stalinist purges, what they recalled most commonly was their emotional responses to the recreated street scenes, not the overarching narrative. The small museum re-established in 1989 on the original site similarly recreated the interior of a «typical» Leningrad apartment during the blockade – warmed by a burzhuika and lit by an oil lamp (koptilka). Steeped in authentic period details likely to resonate with survivors, the recreated blockade interior was also thoroughly tidied, disinfected and romanticised. The virtual cityscape provided a setting for recalling both the myth and the horrors (perhaps unintentionally, perhaps mainly for survivors) of the blockade.\textsuperscript{61}

A subjective comparison focuses precisely on this complicated interplay between curators’ intentions and locals’ understandings. In London, which unlike Leningrad has no large-scale memorial to the city’s wartime experience, the «Blitz Experience» that opened in 1989 at the Imperial War Museum promises visitors authentic «sights, sounds, and smells» and the «sensation of being caught in the bombing of London».\textsuperscript{62} The virtual Blitz, like the virtual blockade, has been significantly – and quite literally – sanitised. The Blitz Experience «privileges images of good-humoured cockneys, community spirit and national unity over and above

\textsuperscript{61} On Leningrad museums see Kirschenbaum, Legacy of the Siege, 92–95.

the images of death, injury and destruction»; its authentic smells do not include the «stench» of a public shelter with «no lavatory – just a bucket». Lucy Noakes argues that this sort of interactive «experience», in which singular and authoritative meanings seem to flow naturally from events, limits more effectively than a «traditional museum display» the interpretive possibilities open to viewers.63

Certainly the curator of the virtual cityscape wields greater interpretive power than the designers of buildings or memorials who build in the real city with its multiple associations and uses. Still, the virtual cityscape’s reality effect relies on its reproduction of recognisable local detail – the unmistakably London working class accents of the voices on tape at the Blitz Experience, the 125 gram starvation ration that hardly resembled bread on the scales at a «bakery» in the siege museum – that opens up unintended interpretations, at least for locals. Noakes’s concern is tracing how the Blitz Experience works «to support the New Right’s construction of British national identity as something natural and unchanging».64 My concerns are both more local and more comparative. In addition to tracing how planners, curators, city officials and architects worked alternately to preserve «hero cities» in amber, to enact «a fantasy of undoing loss», to «ideologically manipulate» urban space, to break with, cover up or recover the past, the case of Leningrad suggests the value in any comparison of post-catastrophic cities of attending to local perspectives.65 Exploring the view from the street requires asking how those who survived urban catastrophe interacted with and understood the city’s reconstructed, modernised, ruined and virtual cityscapes. Such a perspective was particularly necessary in Leningrad, as Werth’s inability to «see» damage in the largely intact cityscape attests. But a comparison grounded in local subjectivities has broader application. Highlighting locals’ perceptions of destruction and reconstruction allows us to see cities not only as physical spaces but also as places constituted by imagination and memory – places that cannot be understood without the stories inhabitants tell about them.

64 Ibid., 433.
65 James discusses the «fantasy of undoing loss» in «Undoing Trauma», 244; and Alvis looks at the «ideological manipulation of space», in «Berliner Dom».

Remembering and Rebuilding:
Leningrad after the Siege from a Comparative Perspective

The paper takes as its starting point the recognition that when compared with other post-catastrophic cities, Leningrad appears to be an outlier that offers little insight into more «typical» cases. Blockaded for almost nine-hundred days, Leningrad suffered less damage to its physical plant than the iconic destroyed cities of World
At the same time, the city’s relatively intact cityscape barely hinted at the vast human losses—perhaps one million Leningraders died of starvation—that also defy comparison. The uniqueness of the Leningrad case underscores the utility of comparisons grounded in local subjectivities. I propose a comparative analysis structured around examining the key questions – what was destroyed, what was rebuilt, how was the story told – from the perspective of people who lived in the city before, during and after the catastrophe.

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