A Politeia in Besiegement: Lidiia Ginzburg on the Siege of Leningrad as a Political Paradigm

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Making Sense of Besiegement: Theory from Within

Among the numerous testimonies about the siege of Leningrad, Lidiia Ginzburg’s Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka (Blockade Diary) occupies a special place representing as it does a unique piece of evidence from one of history’s greatest sites of mass extermination. The current revision of the history of the siege necessarily implies a rereading of Ginzburg’s notes about the blockade. Her many-sided and still not properly published and commented heritage has been recently attracting increasing academic attention, especially her notes from the siege.1 My purpose in this article is to contribute to the discussion by emphasizing Ginzburg’s effort, undertaken from within the blockade, to provide a scholarly, theoretical explanation of the phenomenon of besiegement. Hers is an extraordinary attempt at political theory and a philosophy of history, where she seeks to expand the experiences of the siege of Leningrad within the larger framework of Soviet and European modernity and to enable the situation of besiegement to assume a paradigmatic value. Reading Ginzburg as a theorist, however, is a challenge, given that the purpose of theory is to yield generalizations, objectivity, and reproducibility of knowledge. None of these qualities would be expected in autobiographical writing, which is often necessarily sketchy and elliptic, produced as it is from the subjective, deeply individual, and traumatized perspective of a survivor.

Ginzburg objected to being categorized as the producer of survivor literature. Even in her style of writing, she sought to uphold the theoretical.

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cal value of her conclusions, and this intention manifests itself through the peculiar rhetoric of scientific objectivity she adopts even when relating the most painful and intimate experiences. Constructing a distance between herself as interpreter and the horrors she experienced personally, she portrays the siege in a sometimes detached and objectified but invariably precise language that abounds in aphoristic dictums, schemes, genealogies, and classifications, as if she were seeking to achieve properly positivist objective judgments. Her way of applying Russian formalist analytical principles to history, society, and culture is a method more congenial to the poststructural critique of positivism than to the positivism she seems so eager to achieve.\(^2\) One can follow this contradiction throughout her writings.\(^3\) In this longer perspective, *Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka* (dated “1942–1962–1983,” first published 1989) reveals a structural continuity between the siege and the experiences of living in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and 1930s; as well as between the siege and the postwar period up to the late 1980s. Together with Ginzburg, we follow the metamorphosis of the Stalinist project from its early stages up to its dissolution in the wake of perestroika. The siege becomes the most important crisis, the focal point in which the complexities of Soviet society achieve their most visible manifestations. Another important continuity opens up when Ginzburg reflects on how the siege would be remembered afterwards, as she predicts the triumph of the official heroic narrative over the memory of the survivors. A third continuity arises as she reconstructs the political transformations of the Russian intelligentsia through ideological crises and political compromises. Finally, a fourth continuity is the one she seeks to establish between Soviet twentieth-century experiences and those of contemporary European modernity. These four lines of continuity all converge in her account/analysis of the siege of Leningrad, a *politeia* (*res publica*, common cause) in besiegement.

Lidiia Ginzburg (1902–1990) was born into a family of well-educated liberal Jewish professionals in Odessa.\(^4\) After graduating from a gymna-
slium in Odessa, she moved to Petrograd in the early 1920s to study with Iurii Tynianov and Boris Eikhenbaum at the formalist Institute of Art History. After a series of Marxist “campaigns of criticism” followed by purges, institutional restructurings and the eventual dissolution of her alma mater, Ginzburg was making a living as a freelance proofreader, editor, and rabfak teacher; in the late 1920s and early 1930s she attempted but failed to establish herself as a writer of popular science and fiction for youth and, for a short period, taught literature at a provincial university. During the war, she remained in besieged Leningrad where she took care of her mother who died from famine in 1942; from then on, the death of the Other became a recurrent theme in Ginzburg’s various fragments. She survived the siege thanks to a modest editorial position at Leningrad’s most influential propaganda institution, the legendary Leningrad radio committee. Pre- and postwar political repressions against the Leningrad intelligentsia devastated her nearest circle and affected her personally, socially, and professionally, but spared her life. Only after Iosif Stalin’s death did she find an opportunity to publish her works of literary history and theory. Throughout her lifetime, from the end of the 1920s until her death, which almost coincided with the end of the USSR, she was a prolific writer of notebooks and became known to the wider reading public primarily as the author of the *Blockade Diary*. Although schooled under the formalists, Ginzburg with time evolved into a dedicated critic of the early formalist theory of the immanence of literature, which, for her, indicated a neglect of history and society (a position that only superficially coincided with, and needs to be carefully differentiated from, the anti-formalist hysteria of the Stalinist literary establishment). This orientation also determines the way she rationalizes and explains the tragedy of the besieged Leningrad as it appears in her notebooks.

**Devastation in Tautology: Space and Time in Siege**

“A circle: the siege symbolism of a consciousness closed in upon itself. How can it be broken? People run around in circles and cannot ever reach reality.”\(^5\) Inside the triple encirclement imposed by war, famine, and terror, we find Ginzburg’s protagonist, a fictional “siege man” (*blokadnyi chelovek*) who is called “N.,” a “conventional composite” (*summarnyi chelovek*), vaguely male but otherwise without any further attributes. It is on behalf of N. that Ginzburg narrates the siege and it is his experiences that constitute the content of her notes. N. is unknown, a nonentity, a man without properties but with a very precise social address: he is “an intelligent in special circumstances.”\(^6\) Given her intellectual and political loyalties to the Russian democratic intelligentsia and her commitment to ethics in knowledge

\(^{1}\) See Thun-Hohenstein, *Gebrochene Linien*, 45–58. Ginzburg is quite reticent about her Jewish origins. On Ginzburg’s identity as a lesbian, another silenced autobiographical detail, see Van Buskirk, “‘Nikto ne plachet.’” 159–60.

\(^{5}\) Ginzburg, *Blockade Diary*, trans. Alan Myers (London, 1995), 76. On occasion, the English of these quotes has been modified slightly.

\(^{6}\) Ibid., 3.
production, the word *intelligent* provides a key to understanding Ginzburg. The *intelligent* has a mission of creating critical knowledge, thinking in an ethically accountable way, and acting toward a democratic equality and social justice. N., thus, represents a person in a place where knowledge, thinking, ethics, and politics are put to a severe test. “A man who is being tested to destruction by catastrophes is incapable of believing in beauty and the absolute value of the individual soul. It is much more natural for him to feel revulsion for that naked soul and a bitter futile longing for purification in the universal, some sought-for system of association—in religion? In existential self-projection? In a new citizenship?”

How is a politeia possible among nonentities? And how is the nonentity of the human being produced by the siege? In a remarkable fragment from 1943 called “A Place in the Hierarchy,” Ginzburg uses metaphors of suspension, groundlessness, and suffocation to describe the human condition in besiegement as “a strange way of hanging and swinging in an airless space.” At the time, Stalingrad had brought about a turn in the course of the siege: survival had become a more or less normal way of living in war; the tight noose of the siege was beginning to slightly give way, and the spectre of imminent death from starvation had somewhat receded. She describes this period of temporary relief as a qualitatively new era after the disaster of the first winter and spring, as a return of the social and as a resolution of the anxiety of suspension; a time for thinking and acting that comes to replace the time of pure physical survival. “A sought-for system of association” begins to emerge from the dilemma of the state of siege,

7. Ibid., 88.
9. Was writing notes really possible in the conditions of the siege? According to Van Buskirk, part of Ginzburg’s notes do show signs of having been produced in the siege, while the greater part of the material results from later rewriting in recollection, ordering, and reflection. See Van Buskirk, “‘Samootstranenie,’” 272. For the writer, the siege divides into two distinct periods. One involves acute and almost terminal suffering from starvation during the catastrophic autumn, winter, and spring of 1941–42; the other, that of relative survivability during the remaining time of the siege. Ginzburg systematically compares these two periods of absolute and nonabsolute besiegement as she repeatedly refers to the former as “then” and the latter as “now.” The “then” and “now” of everyday survival corresponds to the periodization of the siege in official medical statistics, which differentiated between periods of “acute and sub-acute dystrophy” (distrofia is the Soviet medical term for starvation invented during the siege; it signifies nearly total starvation) from November 1941 to August 1942; “progredient dystrophy” (starvation relatively alleviated through an improvement in everyday conditions, a break in the totality of the siege, and a warmer winter, September 1942 to April 1943), and “recovery” (a further improvement of living conditions accompanied by further traumatization in air raids up to the termination of the siege in June 1944); M. V. Chernenrutskii, ed., *Alimentarnaya distrofia v blokiruvannom Leningrade* (Leningrad 1947), 200–201. Both Ginzburg’s “now-then” construction and the medical periodization of dystrophy reflect the policy of the Soviet center toward the city, from complete abandonment during the first stage to subsequent attempts to use the remaining internal resources of Leningrad for the purposes of war by transforming the city into a front line; this latter attempt resulted in the final evacuation of surviving dystrophic patients who were no longer useful and an improvement in the supplies of food for the remaining ones, those who could still be useful. The evacuation of the hopeless and the useless considerably improved medical statistics inside the city.
its “hanging and swinging,” its neither-here-nor-there. Leningrad’s civilian life during the siege is defined by a double negation: it is not engaged either by the purposes of the front line or by the concerns of the rear. The besieged city becomes an inconsequential insert in the epic of war that rapidly flows around it and rolls on into the depth of the country leaving the city behind. Hence, the “airless space.” “Hanging and swinging” in suspension is the subject of the siege: the civilian, the “unrequested human being” (*neponadobivshiiia chelovek*). 10 This species is not demanded either by war or by military production; he does not produce, he does not fight, nor does he hide in the rear avoiding conscription. There is no dynamic in, and no purpose for, his being. The unrequested man is only allowed to preserve his unrequested existence: a walking tautology. Tautology is circular like the siege itself: it produces no added value of meaning, no progress in time; it blocks judgment and suspends communication.

The unrequested human being starts to understand how social coercion can integrate, and how destructive it can be when mechanisms of power are suddenly suspended. “A water pipe is a human concept, a linkage of things that overcomes chaos, a sacred organization, a centralization.” The city suspended in unrequestedness quickly loses its structure as an organized community. Once ruled from the center and thus consolidating, social machines cut off from central power simply break down. At first this is only visible in the dysfunction of the urban infrastructure: electric grids, water and gas supply, and sewage. Before the siege, “a center existed, invisibly directing the red tramcars. The cars ran, the center functioned. The rails flowed out from the center and fell back into it. Every tram was centrally controlled, attached to the system by its trolley. . . . The battered red tram creaked round the corner, obedient to the center, bound to its rails, linked by its trolley-arm.” With the introduction first of military law and later on the state of siege in Leningrad, with the war rapidly advancing, the “center” finds itself in anomie and “attachment to the system” drowns in an all-embracing panic. The collapse of urban infrastructure is merely a manifestation of a deeper breakdown of symbolic structures. The discipline once imposed on the tram by the design of the track and the power lines does not apply any more and there is nothing to provide a “normal flow of things” any longer: the dysfunctional tram is an allegory of severe social disruption. The social world slips from under foot. Reality opens up into an abyss where the world “might have anything you like in store, up to and including the very worst.” 11

Individual life now presents itself quite graphically in all its groundlessness, a sensation already prepared by prewar experiences: political repression and police violence, antiworker legislation, obligatory state loans, and unending shortages of the basic necessities of life, especially food rationing. 12 Now, in the siege, groundlessness concerns anyone with-

11. Ibid., 15, 12–13, 12.
12. N. A. Lomagin, *V tiskakh goloda: Blokada Leningrada v dokumentakh germanskikh spetssluzhby i NKVD* (St. Petersburg, 2001), 25–27; popular reactions to political terror, shortages, corruption, and antiworker policy were faithfully registered by the NKVD who
out exception, requires no explanations, and arrives stark naked. Later on, describing Leningrad’s recovery from the extreme famine and disassociation brought about by the first year of the siege, Ginzburg would register the moment when new hierarchies would start to be created out of competition between the dying citizens for entitlement to food. New privileges at the expense of the most vulnerable and weakest members emerge as profoundly evil and perverted, based on corruption, betrayal, ruthlessness, and theft—and still, she would register their appearance as a symptom of “recuperation.” But before this new hierarchy would emerge, during the first autumn, winter, and spring of the siege, Leningrad barely avoids collapse both as an urban and as a symbolic landscape. Already after the first air raids in summer 1941, people discover themselves dwelling in structures literally hanging in the air, bared of their facades and reminiscent of stage sets in a theatrical production by Vsevolod Meyerhold. Communal apartments, symbolic structures of communality, no longer give either shelter, or any solid foundation to stand on.

What used to be a home becomes a battlefield. Houses are now perceived “analytically” or strategically: no longer a family hearth, a semi-ruined structure is now considered solely in its physical capacity to give temporary shelter during an artillery attack or an air raid. Given such a radical appropriation of the polis by war, the unrequested human beings transform from a citizenry into a population. Those who are not conscripted or evacuated and remain inside as civilians have no place in the new hierarchies based on considerations of the individual’s utility for the purposes of war. The useless ones—2.5 million people at the beginning of the siege—therefore find themselves bereft of representation and power. Their agency is equally insignificant, and they are reduced to desperate begging in bureaucratic offices. In the eyes of the military, these are mere biomass, albeit with unknown and potentially disruptive properties. The biomass needs to be taken care of: contained, observed, statistically expressed, steered, fed, sanitized, and organized, where possible, for the purposes of war. Initiative from below needs to be scrutinized and carefully controlled for treason, evasion from obligatory defense work, or hunger rioting. Thus, needed by no one, but closely and suspiciously watched, infiltrated by hundreds of thousands of secret informers and denouncers, cruelly and inefficiently disciplined and thoroughly humiliated special emphasis on control over public opinion (nastroeniia); for details and principles of organization of NKVD control and surveillance in prewar Leningrad, see Nikita Lomagin, Leningrad v blokade (St. Petersburg, 2005), 85–154.

16. Ibid., 25.
17. For the practical organization of internal control and policing in the besieged city, I refer the reader to the detailed account in Lomagin, Leningrad v blockade, 223–439.
ated, human life spreads over the wide spaces of the city—the streets and squares that once used to be so abundantly invested with historical, aesthetic, and political meanings and that now, in the infernal darkness and cold of winter 1941, frozen and famished, appear in all their alienated “mocking beauty.”

A tautological, circular configuration also describes the temporality of the siege. With life equally excluded from the front line and the rear, time itself seems suspended. Not occupied, nor organized, nor distributed by the regimens of fighting (attacks and pauses in between) or production (work shifts and rest), the unrequested nonentity’s time is all of a sudden in overabundance, idle and in need of being disposed of: “time (is) empty but not free.” It makes no progress toward a useful goal, nor does it ascend to a destination in a historical or divine absolute. Temporal suspension makes reality appear “strange.” Alienated from human action, flowing nowhere, and carrying human life along with it, time becomes an additional circle to the physical encirclement of the siege, as the siege is maintained by the concerted effort of the enemy outside and the military rule inside. Instead of going somewhere and bringing about change, time runs idle in an accelerating iteration of cycles: it is only noticeable in the regular recurrence of air raids, artillery fire, and police interventions. “The circle had to close (in order to begin again—hence the circle). . . . The circle drearily seeks its own non-existent end.”

This reminds the unrequested human of how time used to be at the height of the terror in 1937. Then, too, time was made of recurrent intervals of fear, relief, and fear again, without a resolution into something different: “[in the siege] a strange reality was established, in someway resembling that of 1937. Both ‘those’ [the NKVD] and ‘these’ [Nazi bombers] had their respective timetables. ‘These’ flew in at strictly fixed times: German precision became part of the psychological assault . . . ‘those’ had been less meticulous . . . From around four in the morning until evening you could imagine yourself safe.” Dominated by this circularity, life shrinks to “repeated renewed segments,” “the pointlessness of goals . . . repetition of the gestures.” Experience provides no meaning and all meaning reduces to the literal, most immediate, and direct sense of things: the “strange literalness” of the siege. Thus, hunger strips food of its cultural connotations, its rites and mythologies (as a feast, a mode of communication, a form of erotic behavior, a source of enjoyment, a marker of class, status, occasion, and so on). Food shrinks to a substance that provides nourishment for the body and nothing more. The master

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18. Ginzburg, *Blockade Diary*, 16. On the informers, see Lomagin, *V tiskakh goloda*, 12–13: “Every month the NKVD recruited from several hundred up to a thousand and a half new agents and informers while losing between three hundred and a thousand.”
20. “Strange” is a frequent word in Ginzburg. For profound analyses of Ginzburg’s use of (self) estrangement as an analytical and psychobiographical method, see Van Buskirk, “‘Samootstranenie,’” and Thun-Hohenstein, *Gebrochene Linien*.
22. Ibid., 92–93, 106, 112.
signifier of (absent) food invades and takes over, erases all life without a residue, “strange literalness” means the extreme denuding of life. 23 With the symbolic meanings of food obliterated, hunger remains the only force that makes sense; starvation consumes the meaning of being human as efficiently as it dissolves proteins and fats in the famished body. A literalization of sorts also occurs in the urban landscape when the city loses its infrastructure of communications. “A city plan has transpired, with the islands, the branching Neva, a visual system of city districts, because in winter, without telephones and trams, friends . . . didn’t meet for months on end and died unnoticed by one another.” 24 Life becomes being-as-such without any predicates, disconnected from itself and devoid of reciprocity (“friends dying unnoticed by one another”), no longer a life but a “bare existence,” “a feeling of life as it is,” or “a pure passage of life” (chistoe protekanie zhizni). 25

Being Besieged in the Body

In The Republic, Plato makes his famous analogy concerning the body politic through the allegorical connection between a perfect community and the perfect body of a harmonious and just human being. 26 Ginzburg’s

23. On the power of erasure inherent in hunger, compare Ginzburg’s construction of starvation as eradication of meaning with Viktor Shklovskii’s account of mass famine in the previous siege of Petrograd in 1918. Shklovskii interprets starvation as a creative force, as apocalyptic purification in revolutionary fire. Viktor Shklovskii, Khod konia: Shorsik statei (1923; reprint, Moscow, 1986), 18–35. Further in this article, I am reading Ginzburg’s analysis of the crucial difference between Shklovskii’s creative hunger and tautologically structured hunger in the siege of Leningrad.

26. In The Republic, Socrates and his interlocutors research the problem of justice. The parallel between a human individual and a city is proposed as a methodological tool. “First we’ll investigate what justice is in cities. Then, we’ll also go on to consider it in individuals, considering the likeness of the bigger in the idea of the littler” (369a). Further on, the method based on this likeness is explained in greater detail: “We thought that, if we should attempt to see justice first in some bigger thing that possessed it, we would more easily catch sight of what it’s like in one man. And it was our opinion that this bigger thing is a city. . . . Let’s apply what came to light there to a single man, and if the two are in agreement, everything is fine. But if something different should turn up in a single man, we’ll go back again to the city and test it; perhaps, considering them side by side and rubbing them together like sticks, we would make justice burst into flames, and once it’s come to light, confirm it for ourselves” (434e–435a). In search of the best regime of the city and the human being, Socrates tries different modes of this likeness, first exploring the analogy between the virtues of the city and those of the soul, “a perfectly good city” being “wise, courageous, moderate, and just” (427e); then the parallel between the body and the city, this latter represented as “a community of pleasure and pain” (426b–d). Plato, The Republic of Plato, trans., with notes and an interpretive essay, by Allan Bloom, 2d ed. (New York, 1991), 45, 113, 105, and 103–4.

Plato’s “likeness” between the state and the human being is developed in Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan, but here the trope that Socrates uses as a technique of cognition becomes a constructive principle of the state, the “Body Politique.” As Hobbes’ famous maxim in the Introduction goes, “by Art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMON-WEALTH, or STATE (in Latin, CIVITAS), which is but an Artificall Man, though of greater
Leningrad appears as a Kafkaesque metamorphosis of Plato’s ideal city, the analogy between body and polis retaining its relevance as Ginzburg follows the isomorphism between the dissociating body of the city under siege and the decaying body of its citizenry in alimentary dystrophy.27

Ginzburg’s dystrophic subject inhabits a body that is alienated from itself, its physiological decay following the same whirlpool pattern of temporal and spatial tautologies. Slowly succumbing to starvation and cold, the individual falls into a cyclic structure in which acute crises are relieved by temporary emergency measures (such as being hospitalized on the verge of death) but new attacks of hunger resurface once emergency help is withdrawn. For a rank-and-file existence not supported by the privileges the regime grants to its “useful” members, physiology, change of weather, and sheer luck become the deciding factors. Thus, those who are lucky enough to survive the hell of the winter of 1941–42 eat grass and bask in the pale springtime sunlight, preparing their degenerating bodies for a new attack of hunger next winter. Also cyclical is the organization of the time of day by the routines of survival: taking out waste, fetching water, standing in lines for food and searching for wood, cooking the miserable dinner out of inedible supplies, and fighting against the deadly cold at night in frozen rooms. Such circular private time develops into a regimen that Ginzburg defines as “the rotating movement of the dystrophic life”: “the endlessly renewed achievement of endlessly shattered goals was no more than running round a closed circle.” In the dystrophic imagination, these endless cycles produce a specific obsession of return, a dream of recuperation of health and restoration of social standing. As if to respond to this obsession, hunger fills the empty body with edemas, the tissues being incapable of evacuating excess liquid from the organism. A body thus filled with waste acquires an illusionary roundness that makes edemas look deceptively like recovered healthy body mass. “For a long time people didn’t know whether they were swelling up or putting up weight.” 28

The smoothness of the water-filled body is one of the many guises of hunger, but the dystrophic subject denies that this is a symptom of advancing disaster.

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27. As noted above, dystrophy is the official term developed inside besieged Leningrad and adopted by Soviet medical nomenclature to describe the pathological effects of starvation. The term was also widely used to medicalize mass death from starvation, brutalities, and hard labor in the gulag.

28. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 20, 17, 10.
Under the stress of prolonged and almost absolute starvation, the body’s organs survive by radically reducing their own activity to minimize the loss of energy in life processes (*vita minima*, or life at its ultimate limit). This process amounts to internal organs competing against each other for nourishment, with those less “requested” by the circumstances (like the reproductive system) withering first and thus allowing those more “requested” (the brain and the kidneys) to continue to function. At the cellular level, this reveals itself in the process of cell death, called apoptosis. Deprived of nutrition, weaker cells die providing nourishment for the stronger cells. The physiological description of apoptosis reads as if written to serve as an allegory for the dying Leningrad. Ginzburg’s parallel between the devastation of the polis and the sense of internal emptiness in the dystrophic subject is not merely a turn of speech. There is, as medical science argues, a physiological reality behind it: the survival of the starving organism is achieved through consumption by itself of its own parts (“endogenous nutrition”). Apoptosis, a mechanism of surviving absolute starvation, diminishes energy consumption by exterminating the dystrophic body from the inside: “A whole series of foul processes is going on inside the alienated body—an intense feeling of something hardened and slippery, its painlessness especially fearful: a layer of dead tissue in (one’s own) mouth.”

“A hostile world was on the offensive and pushing its outposts forward. The closest of these outposts suddenly turned out to be one’s own body.” For the sake of survival, the body cannibalizes itself, just like Leningrad was devastating its own social body by letting its privileged, useful ones survive at the expense of ordinary citizens. Driven by a phobic suspicion of betrayal and surrender, draconic policing is imposed over the city. In a comparable way, a dystrophic body overtaken by apoptosis requires strict self-control through willpower, control by consciousness penetrating the body down to the level of nervous reflexes. Just like the city itself, the individual body also needs to be securitized: “It turned out, for example, that the vertical posture was by no means inherent in the body; the conscious will had to hold the body under control, otherwise it would slither away as if it were falling from a cliff... the body has thus slithered out of control and wants to fall like an empty sack into some incomprehensible abyss.” When the somatic automaton gives up, nothing happens unconsciously, by itself: not even the minimal bodily activity, like walking, is possible without untiring self-scrutiny. The expansion of the rule of consciousness at the

31. Ginzburg, *Blockade Diary*, 10. Physiologically, Leningrad’s physicians compared vita minima to hibernation in animals. This is a misleading comparison. Hibernation is a mechanism of adaptation, while vita minima is slow death: there is no way the body can biologically adapt to starvation. V. B. Simonenko et al., *Leningradskaia blokada: Meditsinskie problemy—retrospektiva i sovremennost’* (Moscow 2003), 46.
expense of self-regulation (in the micro-cosmos of the famished body) faithfully reproduces what takes place in the macro-cosmos of the besieged polis: the tremendous expansion of the power of the NKVD, secret control through vigilant surveillance, intimidation, and repression of the city’s vita minima. In the NKVD’s phobic imagination, the dying human biomass is riddled with saboteurs, wreckers, vicious spreaders of panicky rumors, agents provocateurs, spies, and defeatists; it is full of potential rioting and treason. But even the omniscient and omnipresent eye of the secret police is helpless against starvation. Seeing a lock on the doors of a domoupravlenie—the lowest level in the system of secret policing—the dystrophic subject, the target of domoupravlenie’s surveillance, reflects on “the dialectics of the varieties of evil . . . evil under heavy lock and key: the dystrophic upravdom could no longer get to his office.”

Empty and idle but not free, subjected to unceasing control that desperately seeks and fails to regulate, the dystrophic subject balances on the verge of insanity. When the mind surrenders to hunger, it gives the face of the dystrophic subject a “strange expression” (ne svoe vyrazhenie), in which the observer reads his fate. “The doomed were not those with the blackest features, or those most emaciated and distended. They were the ones with the strange expressions, looks of weird concentration, the ones who started trembling in front of a plate of soup.” As if to confirm this everyday observation, Leningrad’s medical statistics registered many deaths in cases where physiological starvation had not yet reached its lethal limits. Insanity—panic in the face of one’s own panic—was capable of killing those who could have survived hunger, artillery, and bomb raids. Under normal conditions, the instinct of self-preservation protects human life against unnecessary exposure to danger. In the siege it is, on the contrary, the absence of fear, that is, the shutting-off of self-preservation that turns out to be a lifesaver. The body switches off fear in order to anaesthetize mental anguish and thus resist terminal madness. The impulses of fear in the besieged body with its atrophied nervous system diminish with the monotonously repetitive returns of violent destruction. With time, the body stops fearing air raids and shellings; seeking shelter would waste too much of the precious effort needed for living. There appears instead an even worse fear: that of contact with the unknown, the irregular, the Real (in the psychoanalytical sense of the word); the fear of having to confront something that is not part of the absolutely needed and routinely implemented, not included on the list of the nearest tasks of immediate survival, something that occurs out of schedule and pattern and thus threatens to break through the armor of accustomed indifference to death-on-schedule:

32. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 8, 9–10, 12, 84.
33. Ibid., 19, 57.
34. On death statistics during the siege, see Cherepenina, “Golod i smert’ v blokirovannom gorode,” 35–80. On the mystery of sudden death without lethal symptoms and its ratio to cases of slow death and those of quick death from dystrophy in men and women, see Chernorutskii, ed., Alimentarnaia distrofia, 195; see also the examples provided by Magaeva, “Fiziologicheskie i psikhosomaticheskie predposylyki.”
“The will shrank and froze in fear at contact, at the slightest effort at acting upon a world which had become a source of perpetual suffering.”

A salutary impenetrability to the Real is achieved by following routines and protocols: “Hopeless activities aimed at satisfying incessant and monotonously recurring needs were automatic.” Life alienated and approaching its limit in “bare existence” ends up in an equally alienated death as the dystrophic subject gradually sinks into a benumbed, torpid immobility at the critical stage of the disease:

Dystrophy was the extreme degree of this separation and even freed one from choice. It freed one from moral unease because we, the malnourished, realized that we had been sacrificed to the war. . . . Dystrophy gave a man a protective indifference, under cover of which he could die relieved.

I was stricken with a peculiar siege malaise of the will. . . . Illness was the supreme right to paralysis.

I knew that this was the way people went into the easy death of dystrophy. Death without resistance. Death without surprise: there was a man and now he is no longer. . . . Death leaving no trace of life.

“A Pretty Well Organized Hunger”: Political Economy in the Ninth Circle

Ginzburg’s allegory of besieged Leningrad as a dystrophic political body opens up the siege to a tentative structural analysis as an unprecedented large-scale experiment in social engineering under the sign of biopower. Inside Leningrad, power targets the generalized object of population (the bio-landscape of the siege), administers survival on the basis of specialized classified knowledge (expressed in an all-embracing, detailed, secret statistical coverage), and imposes routine-based order through policing. In one of Ginzburg’s aphoristic understatements, this situation is described as “pretty well organized hunger.” This is a devilishly ambiguous formulation. Does she mean that hunger was organized toward extermination of the will and population? Probably not. Instead, this is a sickle to the wickedness of the bureaucratic will: it is the will that dies peacefully in dystrophy.

35. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 95–96.
36. Ibid., 96.
37. Ibid., 97, 100–101, 102.
38. Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower “entails one or more discourses about the ‘vital’ character of living human beings; an array of authorities considered competent to speak that truth; strategies for intervention upon collective existence in the name of life and health; and modes of subjectification, in which individuals work on themselves in the name of individual or collective life or health.” Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, “Biopower Today,” BioSocieties 1, no. 2 (June 2006): 195–217. Foucault also emphasizes that in its “care for population,” biopower necessarily uses police methods, cf. the situation of the siege as described above and analyzed by Nikita Lomagin; see Foucault’s original conceptualization in The Will to Knowledge, vol. 1 of The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (1976; London, 1990), 133–60 and the most elaborate, even though short, discourse on biopower in “Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76 (London, 2003), 299–64.
39. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 37, 56.
nation (Ol’ga Freidenberg’s firm belief)—or that rescue was organized toward, but failed to achieve, survival? Does she mean that survival was organized “well” and thus saved life, or that it was organized insufficiently well (“pretty well”) and thus caused a horrifying loss of life? To use the terms of biopower, is her explanation of what happened in Leningrad during the siege biopolitical or thanatopolitical?40

“Pretty well” organized starvation is lethal in its principles, introducing as it does a total ban on any individual initiative toward survival. Because it is imposed and maintained through police technologies, centralized control over scarce resources immediately produces what it is supposed to eliminate: corruption, parochialism, embezzlement, theft, marauding, and banditism, including heinous crimes such as kidnapping, human cadaver trading, and cannibalism—these latter duly recorded in Leningrad’s macabre rumors and duly registered in the NKVD secret reports.41 Ginzburg focuses her attention, not on the quality or efficiency of the organization, but on the social innovation produced by the siege:

40. In the present-day debate on biopolitics, Foucault’s formulation of biopower as a modern technology of power that aims to control an entire population according to the principle of “make live and let die” is opposed to Giorgio Agamben’s version of sovereign power over bare life, or “thanatopolitics.” For Agamben, the modern power over life and death derives from ancient practices of sacrifice and analyzes the death camp—the ultimate locus of thanatopolitics—as a political paradigm of modernity. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, 1998), 119–80. The target of thanatopolitics is represented in the figure of *Homo sacer*, a nonsubject omitted from the rule of law so that his murder would neither constitute a crime nor entail any legal responsibility (compare Ginzburg’s analysis of the status and the body of the *blokadnyi chelovek*). The motive of cursed sacrifice in Ginzburg’s interpretation of the first stage of the siege (the dystrophic subject’s absolute abandonment to extermination) seems to support Agamben’s construction of *Homo sacer* and of biopower as totalitarian thanatopolitics. In Ginzburg’s conceptualization of besiegement as “pretty well organized hunger,” though, there is a stronger biopolitical motive that supports the Foucauldian version of biopower rather than the Agambenian one. Foucault emphasizes the state’s control over the life of the population as a form of care through the application of power-knowledge, not as a distribution of death as in thanatopolitics. Foucault’s biopolitics occur in administrative apparatuses, such as hospitals, mental asylums, factory floors, and educational establishments, not in death camps. Biopolitical care relies on statistical knowledge about the body of the population at hand, uses police technologies to implement policies, and is oriented toward supporting institutions rather than supporting life as such. This is care that turns life into a by-product of what happens within institutionalization. Another by-product of biopower is the subject of survival: Foucault’s *Homo economicus* seeking his own agency surrounded by a labyrinth of bureaucratic rules and bans. Also, Foucault’s thesis that the biopolitical “society must be defended” by its subjects finds its echo in Ginzburg’s defense of the consensus (during the later stages of the siege and after its termination) between the dystrophic subject and the political regime in the regeneration of Leningrad’s polity, which she sees as a necessary, even though ethically complex, “common cause” (*obshchee delo*) of responsibility and memory.

the human being is “pretty well” controlled by means of hunger, hunger is “pretty well” steered by bureaucratic administration, both are “pretty well” contained by technologies of repression.

Even though it is proclaimed as such, hunger relief is not exactly the purpose of control; the purpose is control itself. The system “only hears what [it] itself is saying.” The bureaucratic machine is narcissistically impervious to the sufferings and entreaties of its dystrophic client. A petty secretary in the administration rejects people as easily during the siege as she did during Leningrad’s “normal” life before the disaster. The embodiment of the system, she does not see the difference between a “normal” client applying for additional privileges in a system with a centralized distribution of goods—and a dystrophic client who has lost her bread coupons at the beginning of the month and is seeking protection against imminent death from starvation in a few days. This is not her personal fault but a systemic, operative indifference. The system is not embarrassed by the “weird combination of the old (bureaucratic) form and new content (people dying of hunger).”

To return to Shklovskii’s Romantic depiction of the 1918 Petrograd starvation as an allegory of revolutionary renovation, the starvation of the siege of Leningrad is qualitatively new, and it is the centralization and bureaucratic management of starvation that make the hunger of the siege historically unprecedented: “During the civil war years it had been a different kind of starvation, elemental and chaotic (especially in the provinces). They ate all sorts of fantastic things: vegetable peelings, rats and so forth, at the same time, mixing stuff together and ringing the changes; then suddenly they’d get hold of a sack of potatoes.” In Ginzburg’s interpretation, Shklovskii’s hunger was not the ultimate hunger. Then, individual starvation was not wholly removed from the general structure of social and economic relationships, nor was hunger totally divorced from private initiative (getting hold of a sack of potatoes) and imagination (eating fantastic food). The hunger of besieged Leningrad is radically different: survival is completely dominated by the routines and practices of administration. “The siege starvation was a well-organized one. People knew that they would receive from someone invisible the minimum ration, at which level some lived and some died—which it was, depended on the organism.”

It is this fundamentally procedural approach to life through a technology of power, it is not hunger as such, but the methods of “organizing” it that bring about that “literalization” that, according to Ginzburg, characterizes the social during the siege: the elimination of culture-generating metaphors (like food) and the ensuing removal of any constitutive attributes of humanness. Only after the grip of cold and hunger eases during the summer of 1942, does the master signifier give way and allow for the emergence of meaningful differences inside its own structure. Its totalizing power over the city is still not alleviated but

42. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 82, 81.
43. Ibid., 57, 57–58.
produces instead a more differentiated landscape of various genres of malnutrition and a more stylistically differentiated landscape of suffering, desire, and gratification:

The regular [rationed-] food was almost free and was paid for by precious coupons. Its psychological ambience was cruelty, limits which were not to be questioned. Therefore it evoked melancholy. There were also additional distributions: soya; soya milk; the well-known cattle-cake (soya waste) which amazed those who visited Leningrad from the “mainland” or the front line; meatless bones (others had already eaten the meat) which people boiled up into a brawn. This was optimistic food, a gift, a windfall and you could devour it at once with a feeling of righteousness. Finally, there was food for which you paid enormous sums (there were different kinds here too—the market and covert speculation). Attitude to it was morbid and inhibited.44

The emotional hierarchy of these sources of food supplies (namely, coupons, additional distributions, and the black market) is complemented by the hierarchy of utility values that the regime imposes on the community of “pretty well organized hunger” (“others [more privileged ones] had already eaten the meat”). The system supports the useful and encourages them to be even more useful by distributing better nourishment to its nomenklatura while letting those less useful starve: the make-live-let-die principle that is decisive in the organization of biopower, “a power to foster life or to disallow it.”45 The centrally distributed survival minimum is meagre; but signification does not depend on the absolute figures of privileges received or privation suffered. It is the law of small differences that determines the hierarchy of statuses: “the psychological difference between 1000 roubles and 500 roubles would never be as naked as the difference between 600 and 400 grams of bread, because it is human life that is weighed here outspokenly, the right to life. . . . This difference is psychologically more crass and hurtful because of the outspokenness with which the human being is measured for its utility.”46 Hunger extinguishes pity: pity is useless and even harmful in the apparatus of the siege.47 The care for the life of the other is no longer in the individual’s competence or power but has to be delegated to the competent bodies. The demise of pity puts an end to the ethical project of the Russian democratic intelligentsia that once elevated pity into a social virtue, a moral debt toward the oppressed. The intelligent discovers that the siege is a fiendish parody of his own utopia of equality: now it is the travesty of equal rights, nondifferentiation, and indifference that become systemic factors, where the right to give is monopolized by the apparatus and giving itself is transformed into a dysfunctional machine for the selective distribution of coupons. Seeing or making a difference—the foundations of the intelligent’s critical thought and ethical doing—is no longer an aspect of the individual’s

44. Ibid., 69–70.
45. Foucault, Will to Knowledge, 138.
46. Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 173.
47. Ibid., 177–79; Van Buskirk, “‘Samootstranenie.’”
A Politeia in Besiegement

authority. Sorting out living beings into those deserving and those not deserving survival is merely part of routine office work. The “pretty well organized” bureaucratic nondifferentiation seems to find a response in—or to serve as response to—the grey nondifferentiation of the circular time of the siege and the indifferent, anonymous, alienated “hungry death” (golodnaia smert’) of the dystrophic patient. The politeia of Leningrad dies in a biopolitically orchestrated system of nondifferentiation.

It is not by accident that in her description of the frozen Leningrad of the winter of 1941 Ginzburg makes a vague reference to Dante and the nine circles of his Inferno: “People run in the frost, overcoming the now tangible space. The more intellectual [intelligentnye] of them recall Dante as they do so, that circle of Dante’s Hell where cold reigns.” Inferno’s Ninth circle, Round One, is a city called Caina, home to those who are traitors to their kindred, where the souls are immersed in eternal ice. The dystrophic inhabitants of the city of hunger—those who fail to notice the death of the Other, who have given up pity and delegated care of the Other to “someone invisible”—are thus implicitly compared to Cain, the bearer of the sign of the curse, the fratricidal brother, and the giver of an insincere, calculated, and therefore rejected sacrifice. In her detailed analysis of Leningrad’s sacrifices, Ginzburg dissects the political economy of the siege from the point of view of its dystrophic Homo economicus. A cursed sacrifice is part and parcel of such an economy.

Himself a humble recipient of insincere gifts from “someone invisible,” the dystrophic subject in his turn becomes a self-appointed and reluctant giver. In his role of an unlicensed oikonomos, he has to further divide the miserly resources (granted to him in return for his relative utility) among his starving near and dear, the children, the elderly, and the sick, whom the system does not consider useful enough to support. For the dystrophic oikonomos, this means an endless process of calculating, planning, and assessing utility and risks in the division of a piece of bread or a half portion of porridge, making morally excruciating choices in the matter of the death of the Other.

Abandoned by the system, the dystrophic subject is forced to make constant sacrifices in the always already inefficient and insufficient care for the needs of the Other: micro-biopolitics at home. For the one who is forced to give, the Other is “the element of persistent recalcitrant disorder. He was irritated by her [the dying sister’s] growing uselessness and the sacrifices he had made and continued to make for her sake. And he told her about it with a roughness which astonished him.” N.’s sister dies as if to demonstrate that the dystrophic subject’s sacrifice was bad: a half-hearted, retractable gift that had been given out of necessity and dictated by guilt, offered not in faith but in despair, and accompanied by reproach. The rationally calculated good that such a sacrifice implies opens up its “pretty good” (that is, not entirely good) origins in the calculation of the

48. Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 16. The Inferno’s Ninth Circle is described in Dante, The Divine Comedy, Canto XXXII.
49. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 68.
perceived usefulness of sharing. The moral outcome of such a forced gift is profoundly destructive: the dissolution of all human relationships, all love, all bonds of family or friendship. The Other becomes an item in a bureaucratic nomenclature (a dependant), the endlessness of the Other and its irreducibility to the needs of the self are abused and profaned. The Other, the one-whom-I-love, becomes the-one-whom-I-cannot-leave, an additional circle of the siege to contain the giver. The immensity of the Other thus violated, the gift becomes a cursed one. In an economy based on cursed sacrifices, the individual strategy also changes accordingly: “an egoistic man wanders blindly among aggressively or indifferently hostile phenomena, looking for loopholes of the least evil for himself.”

In the circumstances of the siege, the first and closest degree of the social guarantee was the family, the cell of blood and existence [byt] with its inexorable demand for sacrifice. People say: the ties of love and blood make sacrifice easier. No, it’s much more complicated than that. So painful, so fearful was it to touch one another that in propinquity, at close quarters, it was hard to distinguish love from hatred—towards those one could not leave. . . . Wrung with pity or cursing, people shared their bread. Cursing they shared it, and sharing, they died.

The Res Publica of Loopholes of Lesser Evil

Having miraculously survived the catastrophic winter and spring of 1941–42, the political body of Leningrad is beginning to slowly recover from its lethargy like the dystrophic body in recuperation recovers its “juices” and “a living nucleus.” There appears “an ethical limit, which does not wholly determine behavior, but toward which behavior is approaching and which already regulates evaluations . . . what is going on is a kind of internal movement of the juices, beneath the once empty envelope an adequate living nucleus gradually takes form.” Rejecting its enforced egoism, the particular and the singular seek “a purification in the universal.” In the reality of besiegement, singularity (edinichnost) is a “most tragic nonsense . . . the most extreme, logically clearest, and psychologically most torturous expression of noncoherent, nonsensical being.”

50. Ibid., 7, 83.
51. Ibid., 7–8.
52. As already mentioned, Leningrad’s gradual social and political recuperation starts after Stalingrad. Andrei Zhdanov’s policy of transforming the city of death into a military city required a mass evacuation of dystrophic patients and “dependents” unfit for industrial work, first undertaken in the first half of 1942 and completed in summer 1943. Thus, Ginzburg’s “unrequested human being,” strictly speaking, does not participate in the recovery of the city. Leningrad’s industrial renaissance and Soviet rehabilitation was performed by those who had been found usable for the purposes of war, that is, “requested” by its technologies. This is a significant political difference between Ginzburg’s “now” of the time of recuperation and “then” of the winter of hunger. For statistics of continued and quite heavy loss of life among the “unrequested” evacuees, see M. I. Frolov, “Zabolevaemost’ i smertnost’ evakuiruemykh po puti ot Leningrada do Kostormy,” in Barber and Dzeniskevich, eds., Zhizni i smerti, 81–97.
54. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 88.
55. Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 171.
As opposed to the nonsense of internal isolation, “value is a category of relation.” Relation makes a difference, while difference makes sense. The opening up of the siege begins with the desire to live as a human being, not as a “swine who sees no difference.”56 The mobilization of consensus against the siege is at the center of Ginzburg’s attention as she writes its retrospective analysis in 1943–44.57 How to recover from the dystrophy of community? It is a controversial and contradictory process in which a likeness of a social contract gradually shapes up. This is a bad contract, a product of enthusiasm, hope, and self-delusion on the part of the subject, ungrounded expectations from below, and insincere, manipulative “flexibility” from above.58 It is not made by choice but necessitated by the pressure of the “social evil” of the siege and leads only to “a new debauch of social evil” in future.59 Its origin is in privation, that deep negativity that underlies the political choice of a lesser evil as an alternative to an even worse evil.

Based on this bad contract, the “common cause” of Leningrad starts to shape up: Ginzburg’s obshechee delo, Plato’s politeia, or res publica. There appears “an ethical limit” in the vicinity of which the egoism of disindividuated individuals as well as the bureaucratic, systemic narcissism of “someone invisible” gives way to a shared “reasonable understanding of what is due.”60 This “understanding” disregards the fact that “someone invisible” had sacrificed Leningrad to biopolitical experimentations while establishing its draconic and inefficient regime of “pretty well organized hunger.” It also disregards the guilt of the subject who “survived—that means [he] had not sacrificed enough.”61 The Leningraders . . . had avoided sacrifice wherever they could—driven by their egoistic impulses. But the actions which they produced under coercion, happened to coincide with the ethical limit, which their minds developed irrespective of their egoistic impulses.”62 All this only becomes coherent and makes sense

56. Ibid., 172, 173.
58. As Richard Bidlack has shown, the “flexible policies” of the city and industrial authorities and the readiness among the starved population to work hard for the sake of victory should be attributed not only to the success of patriotic propaganda or the spontaneous city patriotism but primarily to the necessities of hunger. Bidlack, Workers at War: Factory Workers and Labor Policy in the Siege of Leningrad (Pittsburgh, 1991), 35–37. No such “flexibility” was demonstrated by the secret police. For the political center, Leningrad’s image of heroism and martyrdom, as well as the expectation among the Leningraders of political reforms, presented a strongly undesirable and destabilizing factor. Lomagin, Leningrad v blockade, 438–39. Leningrad was later “sterilized” (NKVD’s term) for the attitudes and agencies of the “common cause.” On the Leningrad Affair in the context of the politics of memory, see Ganzenmüller, Das belagerte Leningrad, 320–35.
59. Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 83.
60. Ibid., 184.
61. Ginzburg, Blockade Diary, 8.
62. Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, 184. Emphasis added. Ginzburg’s representation of the subject of the siege as “egoistic” seems to contradict her own concept of “the Leningrad situation” as “a common cause.” Simmonds and Perlina in their work on the women writers of diaries and their memories in the siege point out the heroic, self-sacrificial
in retrospect: one needs a gaze from the outside in order to cocreate the narrative of a collective self. It is in the writing of the future historian that Leningrad would have eventually obtained an identity and therefore a place in history, both coming at the price of a considerable share of selective forgetfulness. But, according to the least-evil-loophole logic, even if it is the falsified Stalinist history of the Great Patriotic War, such a mendacious history is still a lesser evil as compared to the absolute evil of indifference and oblivion. “They [the Leningraders] . . . regard themselves in the same way as the world regards them, from the point of view of the final result. And when seen like that, it turns out that, on the whole, they were doing what was demanded. That their behavior can in all justice be characterized as staunch, courageous, and even heroic.”63 Signing this contract, Leningrad agrees to concede the truth of its experiences and to receive in exchange a memorable (or forgettable), narratable (or falsifiable), judgeable (or mis-judgeable) history. Given a narrative, loopholes of lesser evil become moral acts post factum. Such a deal requires a selective politic of memory, a consensual amnesia for the sake of belonging: “Retrospectively, they (the Leningraders) reject and suppress in their behavior everything that was produced by inner faint-heartedness, vacillations, deviations, irritation and preserve that diagram of actions, that sum of results that goes into the press and lists of awarded.”64

Thus, the unwilling acceptance of the terms in which their history would be told by others creates the “common cause” where the dystrophic subject finds a place for himself in time and narrative, partly resolving, partly forgetting the circular, tautological temporality of the siege. “Until one was explained and persuaded that one had been a hero,” he had been something else that had no name to it, a nonentic “N.”65 Now that this name (the hero, the martyr, the patriot) has been awarded, the subject erases his previous condition of strangely “hanging and swinging in airless space.” The res publica of Leningrad in resurrection “is an acquired value, a value that will remain. It will be proceeded from and referred to. . . . And of course it will be abused and boasted about.”66 A prophetic vision, as it is.67
This is how suspension resolves in action (as opposed to reaction) and value (as opposed to inhuman indifference). *Postupok*—an ethical act that is based on choice and transcends the economy of reaction with its motivation in bare need—is valuable notwithstanding its motives and compromises. It would be boasted, censured, and lied about, but it would also be remembered and cited—and that means the time of the siege, even though violated by the manipulative politics of memory, would be restored as time, not as a whirlpool of tautologies: “In the abyss of lost time—time regained.”

“*At Least a Deed of Sorts,*” or *Politeia after the End of Politics*

Ginzburg analyzes besiegement as a phenomenon of bad infinity, the circle representing the totalizing structure inherent in all of its manifestations. Space, time, body, communication, and action in the siege all transform to follow the pattern of monotonous tautologism. In the endless repetition of the same, life gradually impoverishes (“literalizes”), implodes, and collapses into a state of oblivion and nondifferentiation. In the polis of Leningrad, the effects of besiegement—containment of will and tautologization of gesture—follow the same patterns of monotonous repetition, impoverishment, and eventual implosion as observed in the body of a *distrofik* gradually succumbing to total starvation.

Ginzburg’s formalist interest in devices and techniques motivates her conception of besiegement as an aggregate of technologies of power, on the one hand, and techniques of survival, on the other. This explains why she insists on situating the story of the siege of Leningrad within the historical and political context of twentieth-century modernity with its technologies of total war, total mobilization, and terror. Thanks to her awareness of technologies, her description of besiegement opens up its previously unappreciated, Foucauldian aspect, namely, the use of the siege by the military and civil authorities as an immense stage for a historically unprecedented mass-scale experiment in exercising biopower over the civilians. In the “pretty well organized hunger” of Leningrad, the regime invented and elaborated ways of controlling people not as citizens (in this capacity they were controlled and contained by the NKVD) but as bio-landscape to be administered, managed, and disposed of as required by the needs of the moment. Biopower in Leningrad is organized to support life. This support is awarded on the basis of selecting the “useful” from the “useless” ones, however, so that life becomes a privilege. This selective entitlement to life creates an everyday economy based on practices of bad sacrifice, in which the gesture of giving cannot be distinguished from that of betrayal.

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68. Ginzburg, *Blockade Diary,* 77
Thus, ethical and political action in besiegement becomes theoretically impossible for three reasons: first, because its circular structure results in self-devastating tautologism; second, because power is exercised as biopower, which effectively divests the human of subjectivity, agency, and representation; third, because ethical and political awareness is erased by the subject’s bad conscience. Still, in the practice of writing, Ginzburg’s own example disproves her theory. Even though Ginzburg is highly pessimistic both in evaluating her own achievement and in assessing the possibility of ethics in besiegement in general, still she teaches an important lesson of how to act politically and how to interpret the political after the end of politics. “People run round the circle and can’t reach reality. . . . That is the way with people whose activities are not actions [postupok] but mere reactions. How to break the circle with a deed [postupok]? . . . To write about a circle is to break a circle. At least a deed of sorts.”

69. Ibid., 76–77.