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Giustina Selvelli
University Ca' Foscari of Venice
giustina.selvelli@unive.it

UDC: 821.161.1.09 Grinzburg L.
821.163.4(497.6).09 Karahasan Dž.

THE SIEGE AND URBICIDE OF LENINGRAD AND SARAJEVO:
THE TESTIMONIES FROM LIDIYA GINZBURG AND DŽEVAD
KARAHASAN*

In this paper, I will present a comparison between the experience of the siege of Leningrad and the one of Sarajevo through the analysis of the works of two writers: Lidiya Ginzburg's "Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka" and Dževad Karahasan's "Dnevnik Selidbe". My contribution will focus in particular on the topic of the relationship between citizens and their city, viewed as an attempt to overcome the opposition between individualism and commonality and the manifestation of the collective resistance to practices of "urbicide". The latter will be treated as an issue of crucial importance in understanding the symbolic dimension of city's destructions. In their works, both of the authors depict with accuracy the agony of the isolated city, trying to find out what remains of the human being and their environment after complete destruction and disillusion. Through the analysis of these works on the siege we can identify the traces of a humanity that does not surrender, continuing to carry on essential cultural and social values notwithstanding the extreme war circumstances. From this point of view, the siege reveals itself as an incommensurable experience allowing both of the authors to reflect on the fundamental principle of "staying human".

Keywords: Siege of Leningrad, Siege of Sarajevo, Dževad Karahasan, Lidiya Ginzburg, Urbicide, Dnevnik Selidbe, Zapiski Blokadnogo Cheloveka .

Introduction: Why a Comparison?

The topic of this paper is the comparison of the experience of the Leningrad siege and the one of Sarajevo through the works of two writers who were

* This paper was written within the Doctoral Studies Curriculum of Foreign Languages, Cultures and Societies at the Department of Comparative Linguistic and Cultural Studies of University of Venice, as part of a seminar called "Lidiya Ginzburg in the international context" held by Professor Sergej Kozlov (Russian State University for Humanities, Moscow).

associated with Primo Levi¹ for sensibility and rationality of their writing. To make a parallel between Dževad Karahasan and Lidiya Ginzburg in this context, it is appropriate to consider the fact that the cities of Leningrad and Sarajevo share the plight of having suffered a siege among the longest of modern history and that both authors were involved in literary theory by expressing particular aesthetic sensibility that was never lost, not even in extreme conditions. This peculiarity consists precisely of the combination of depth of experience and the clarity of mind, which allowed the two writers to produce such memories of the sieges being among the most important ever written.

Regarding the siege of Leningrad (September 8, 1941 to January 27, 1944), among its most respected witnesses, we find a distinguished writer and a literary critic Lidiya Ginzburg (Odessa, 1902 – Leningrad, 1990): her work *Zapiski Blokadnogo Cheloveka* has originates from the personal experience of the writer who lived and survived the terrible siege of her city, becoming the witness of its destruction and that of its people, including her mother. The work consists of several texts written in different years that were eventually published in the USSR in 1984. Dževad Karahasan, born in Duvno in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1953, the writer and professor of Dramaturgy at the University of Sarajevo before the outbreak of the Bosnian war, found himself to face the siege and destruction of his city and, based on this experience, wrote a series of texts that were collected and published in 1993 in Zagreb under the title *Dnevnik Selidbe*, which is considered as the most well-known book on the Sarajevo siege. The author remained in the city under the siege for more than a year before managing to escape, first to Croatia and then to Germany. He now lives between Graz and Sarajevo.

Two Painful Records in the Sieges of Modern History

That the enemy wanted to kill me and I was alive, that he wanted to kill the city, but the city lived on and I was an almost unconscious particle of its resistant life² (Ginzburg 1995: 97).

The siege of Leningrad was one of the longest and most destructive sieges of modern history and by far the most serious ever to have taken place in terms of

¹ Slavenka Drakulic compares Karahasan to Primo Levi in the “afterword” to his book and the same reference is made about Ginzburg in the back cover of her book.

² In this paper I will be referring to the English translation of Lidiya Ginzburg's *Zapiski Blokadnogo Cheloveka*, which was translated with the title *Blockade Diary*.

human victims. The Nazis established the city's blockade on September the 8th, 1941, with the interruption of the last communication line with the city, and the siege ended January 27th, 1944, therefore during 872 days (Reid 2011: 5).

The German High Command had considered the options to successfully destroy Leningrad, deciding that the mere occupation should be excluded, because this way the Germans would have had to be responsible for the food supply of the city. The solution therefore was to put the city under siege by attacking it with heavy shellings while letting its people perish of hunger. The Nazis sought to eliminate Leningrad from the surface of the earth not only through the annihilation of its residents but also by the demolition of its buildings, a strategy motivated by the political status of the city as an old and prestigious Russian capital and a simultaneously powerful symbol of the October Revolution. Leningrad, which counted a population of nearly 3.2 million people in 1939, ended up with just over 2.5 million inhabitants by the end of the siege.

If the siege of Leningrad was the heaviest in terms of victims, that of Sarajevo was the longest of a capital city in the history of modern war (Pirjevec 2001: 146). The siege of Sarajevo represents an episode of such gravity in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, that in order to find parallels in the history of Europe we must go back to World War II, to Leningrad precisely. The capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina was besieged by the army of *Republika Srpska* from April the 5th, 1992 until February the 29th, 1996 during the Bosnian war. The siege lasted three times longer than the one of Stalingrad and a year longer than the one of Leningrad.

On May the 2nd 1992, Bosnian Serb forces established the total blockade of the city, disrupting the main access roads, cutting off food and medicine supplies as well as water, electricity and heating. The second half of 1992 and the first half of 1993 represented the apex of the siege, in which the worst atrocities were committed. In the city, the Serbs controlled the main military posts, throwing grenades and monitoring the upper area with hidden snipers.

The Bosnian government officially declared the end of the siege of Sarajevo on the 29th of February, 1996, when the Bosnian Serbs left their positions inside and outside the city.

Bitterly, days after the 1000th day of the siege, Europe had celebrated the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz (Matvejević 1995: 43). Approximately 280,000 people were trapped in the besieged city and more than 10,000 were

killed, among them at least a thousand children. Karahasan comments: “Many aspects of the siege of Sarajevo are reminiscent of medieval wars and the sieges that occurred in that time. The similarity lies not only in the complete encirclement of the city, coupled with “scorched earth” tactics, but also in the use of “auxiliary instruments” of warfare (...) devices that are not weapons pure and simple but that kill human beings nonetheless”³ (Karahasan 1994: 48).

Karahasan also claims that the situation of Sarajevo recalled the first sieges of history, the medieval and cruel act set against the Cathar heretics, adding that the characteristic of these indirect means of warfare is the willingness to kill a city and its people with hunger, thirst and deprivation of fundamental conditions of existence. From the beginning of the siege, both Sarajevo and Leningrad, appeared closed and isolated, and also “abandoned” from the rest of the world, oriented towards themselves: they suffered and hence they had to fight and react.

The 'Urbicide' question: Patterns of Physical and Symbolic Destruction.

From the testimony of the two writers, it emerges that the siege not only aimed at the control of the territory, but also had a very specific purpose, targeting the crucial element of civilization: the city. It is the urban center that was put under fire from the enemy with its culture, life, history and the memory it contained. Serbian architect Bogdan Bogdanović formulated his definition of 'urbicide' already in 1972, long before the context of the wars in former Yugoslavia, in one of his first articles, *Grad kao simbol besmrtnosti i smrt grada*. After the war broke out in his country, Bogdanović wrote more on the topic, claiming among other things that in the history of their development, cities were exposed to different forms of dangers and threats, as there was always the need not only to build, but also to destroy, in a sort of eternal dialectic of the urban opposed to the anti-urban (Bogdanović 1995: 41).

In this regard, he calls barbarian tribes that sacked Rome in 527, not only “pre-urban” (excluding urban development), but also “anti-urban”, because in such case pressures to destroy the city went beyond strategic needs of conquest. He further adds that many of great myths, epics and sagas of history until today contain some sort of passionate support to the destruction of the city: “We can

³ In this paper I will be referring to the English translation of Dževad Karahasan's *Dnevnik Selidve*, which was translated with the title *Sarajevo: Exodus of a City*.

only conclude that what lies behind both the fury of the Old Testament prophets and the destructive energy of our own ancestors is first and foremost fear, a fear of the city.” (Bogdanović 1995: 43). “What does it mean to murder a city? It means to snuff out its strength, stifle its metaphysical eros, its will to live, its sense of self; (...) scattering its memory to the winds, annihilating its past along with its present.” (Bogdanović 1995: 72-73)

The destruction of the city is in fact also the destruction of its memory: the devastation of monuments, houses, libraries and hospitals is accompanied by the loss of what they represent to the society who lived at their side. Applied to the case of Leningrad, the two-and-a-half-year siege not only caused the greatest loss in terms of human lives ever known in a modern city, but also the destruction of most historical reference sites such as the Catherine Palace (Morgan & Orlova 2005) and Peterhof Palace. According to the express orders of Hitler (with clear “urbicidal” intentions), all buildings had to be taken over and destroyed, and that is why, in addition, many art collections were stolen by the Nazis.

In Sarajevo, the shelling and shooting by Serbian snipers heavily damaged the residential and cultural structures of the city. Already in September 1993, it was estimated that almost all buildings in Sarajevo had suffered some damage, and 35,000 had been completely destroyed. The war seems to have been proposed as a part of a rearrangement of the city, in order to symbolically punish and eliminate what it embodied before.

Ginzburg describes how quickly the city loses its appearance as a form of an organized community: the collapse of the urban infrastructure is thus only a manifestation of deeper disappearance of crucial symbolic structures. Already after the first raids of Summer 1941, Leningraders start to discover the “innards” of their city, finding themselves face to face with buildings without facades, showing the new face of a depressed city. Through the pages of *Zapiski blokadnogo cheloveka*, Ginzburg depicts the culture of Leningrad transformed by shelling and starvation while looking at the perception of space in the city that drastically changed: “I returned home along streets apparently still pre-war and past objects still pre-war but whose significance was now altered” (Ginzburg 1995: 5). “I would walk past the memorable Leningrad ensembles and could not return to them that slightly artificial iridescent definition I had so loved in the former life” (Ginzburg 1995: 98).

For the people enduring the siege of their city, it seems that space completely replaces time as a reference dimension: it is in accordance with space, in fact, that

everyday life is organized and based, in the distance between the points of a new topography in which people can get their portion of bread and water, in relation with difficulties that will be encountered on the way (Kobrin 2012 : 254): “Throughout the day, there are many more spaces still to traverse – chiefly the one separating you from dinner” (Ginzburg 1995: 16).

Similarly, in Sarajevo Karahasan tells about his daily confrontation with a modified geography evoking destruction, which is at the same time an inner one, of his hopes and dreams: “(...) I go to fetch to get some water from the basement of the building that used to house the Assembly of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is a sad ruin now”. (Karahasan 1994: 50-51)

The next shock concerns the beloved National Library, the Vijećnica, which was put to fire and burned, and thousands of irreparable texts were destroyed, which is a reason why the city has also been compared to a “Second Alexandria” (Bogdanović 2008a: 59-60). And referring to its destruction, an event he had feared for months, the author writes: “(...)when at the end of August this eventually took place, I experienced the news as a shock I will never be able to recover from”⁴(Karahasan 2012: 93).

Sarajevo was put under fire from the enemy because it represented the symbol of a possible coexistence, expressing the beauty of multiplicity and diversity over the centuries. The army conducted a campaign of such violence against its people by reducing them to a state of continuous deprivation, plunging the population into panic even in homes, schools and hospitals, at the point that there was not a room left in which to feel safe.

Karahasan reflects on how a cultural community exists on a symbolic level, precisely by virtue of its libraries, museums and national theaters, which is the reason why if one destroys in practice or even symbolically one of these institutions, it diminishes the degree of the existence of a community, its level of reality.

(...) as a community, consequently, founds its existence in such institutions, we can say that Bosnia-Herzegovina has become less real after the destruction of the National and University Library.⁵ (Karahasan 2012: 95)

⁴ (My translation). This chapter only appears in the second Italian edition of the book.

⁵ (My translation).

During summer and autumn in 1992, the cultural, financial and communicative centers of the city were targeted by enemy snipers: the offices of the newspaper *Oslobođenje*, the Bosnian government building, the Twin Towers UNIS, the Hotel Holiday Inn and the Hotel Europe. In particular, the end of this last building represents for Karahasan a great tragedy:

The Hotel Europa is the physical and semantic center of the city of Sarajevo. It is the physical center because it sits exactly on the border between the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian parts of the city – at the precise midpoint of what Sarajevo truly is. This hotel embodies the foundation of the city's identity: that combination of facts and traits linked with its name (Karahasan 1994: 89).

Karahasan speaks of the urban, architectural and symbolic structure of his city in the first chapter of his book, claiming that Sarajevo represented a “second Jerusalem” (Karahasan 1994: 60). For this reason, he states, the tragedy of Sarajevo belongs not only to the city but also to the entire world, which was deprived of the symbol of a “possible Jerusalem”. Karahasan does not hide his bitterness while remarking how piece by piece his city has been deprived of its identity and history, describing the minarets, churches, domes of mosques, Islamic schools, symbols of a cultural and religious memory that was targeted with methodical fury and “monoethnic” rage: “(...) the Magribiya Mosque had no roof or minaret; the Church of St. Joseph lost its roof; the Unis skyscraper was burnt down; there were a few huge craters in the street” (Karahasan 1994: 26).

The writer finds himself employing the stones from the mosque to strengthen the defenses of his apartment against the bombings: an unusual way to repossess a religious building which takes on a special meaning in relation to the inner and outer changing geography. The emotional, spiritual as well as topographic components of the wounded city seem to merge together: “The bricks we had in the basement were not enough, so I decided to take some ashlar from the ruins of the Magribiya Mosque. How many missiles and shells must have hit it to raze it so thoroughly?” (Karahasan 1994: 28). “Unfortunately, there are ever fewer places of worship in Sarajevo, I thought as I lugged the ashlar. They are systematically destroying them, like everything else that gives identity and cultural value to the city.” (Karahasan 1994: 29).

People were continually denied basic reference points of a common history and thus became less and less able to recognize their city and position themselves in a history of sense. A kind of essentialization of urban life and uncovering of uncanny forms also occurred in the urban landscape of Leningrad, when the city, deprived of its communication structures and with life reduced to mere survival, revealed a skeleton of itself. Since the beginning of the war, the city had actually begun to sprout unusual details that showed in all their bitterness:

Unobservant people suddenly saw what constituted their city. It was made up of discrete areas of incomparable Leningrad beauty, out of astonishing complexes of stone and sky, water and foliage and for the rest, of houses of the second half of the nineteenth century, with a certain trace of pre-revolutionary modern and boxes dating from the first years of the revolution. (...) Now we saw these houses, shabby and bare, standing in damp and rusty streams of poor-quality paint. (Ginzburg 1995: 24-25)

The destruction provoked by the war had caused not only the interruption of transports and communications, but also the actual physical destruction of bodies, buildings, structures. The daily routes showed the inhabitants the tragic condition of the city's buildings, houses which, as Ginzburg wrote, sometimes reminded of the theatrical sets of Meyerhold, erected alone amid the bare stage: "The house sections illustrated the storeys, the thin strata of floor and ceiling. You begin to realize with astonishment that as you sit at home in your room you are suspended in space, with other people similarly suspended over your head and beneath your feet" (Ginzburg 1995: 24).

Leningrad and Sarajevo, besieged and battered, lost their foundation as a succession of streets, houses, lines of communication and transport, showing a new face of chaos, devastation and pain. In Sarajevo, where daily life became the search of a water tank, of a few vegetables grown in the improvised gardens amid the ruins of buildings and houses, it seems that chaos, together with some elements of the "countryside", had returned to invade the city. In this context, the term *Urbicide*, describing an attempt to deny and destroy a city symbolically, finds its meaning also in the fact that many of those who attacked Sarajevo came from rural areas and belonged to a "non-urban" culture. In response to the dynamics of attacks and destruction against Dubrovnik and Sarajevo during the war, Bogdanović wrote that "The horror felt by the West is understandable: for centuries it has linked the concepts 'city' and 'civilization', associating them even

on an etymological level. It therefore has no choice but to view the destruction of cities as flagrant, wanton opposition to the highest values of civilization” (Bogdanović 1995: 53).

The Identification with the City: Discovering a Sense of Collectivity

If the war dramatically takes possession of the city, citizens, in response, appear to become its even stronger representatives, in spite of those who would like to transform them into mere “population”; therefore, as a piece of evidence of the difficulty to break their will, according to Ginzburg, human life “spreads over the wide spaces of the city” (Ginzburg 1995: 16).

The citizens of Leningrad had always shown a particular pride for their city, which could be explained by a particular story of high urban culture and the belief that the city was a mark against barbarism and thus a source of 'civilization' (Simmons 2001: 2). But here it is appropriate to make a distinction between Soviet culture before the war and during the siege of Leningrad. The siege in some sense also gave a sense of freedom to people, especially intellectuals who were no longer subjected to ideological pressures as strong as in the period before the war. In this way, the siege strengthened a kind of sense of cohesion in the community of Leningraders who had recognized a growing relationship with the fate of the war and the survival of the city. This was now considered as a united entity, their “Piter” (Simmons 2003: 2). By defending Leningrad, seen as the most 'civilized' city, its inhabitants expressed a kind of acknowledgement of the urban center as a larger entity, demonstrating mutual solidarity. As noted by Ginzburg, people were inclined to identify themselves as a part of the same community in the common war effort, saying for example: “*We* are surrounding Kharkov”, “*We* have taken Orel.” (Ginzburg 1995: 7) “And all the people crowded in here – the grumbling, the terrified, the alienated- obedient to the behavioural norm, are carrying out their historical function as Leningraders. A woman: ‘you’re a Leningradka, aren’t you? Leningraders are supposed to keep calm’” (Ginzburg 1995: 55).

In his besieged city destroyed by the ferocity of the Republika Srpska's Army, Karahasan explicitly identifies a relationship between the place, the city and the citizens, thanks to which local and universal elements and values can coexist and survive. In the suffering city, the author recalls the peculiarities of Catholic, Orthodox, Islamic, Austro-Hungarian, Turkish and Bosnian cultures, which can still coexist and reinforce each other: by virtue of such incredible mixture, the city becomes a metaphor for the world in its entirety. The citizens of Sarajevo, as well

as those of Leningrad, while being confronted with the destructive fury of war, were struggling to defend their city and its cultural monuments, all what it symbolically represented and the memory it retained. The identification of the individual with their city is a useful mechanism to overcome individualism and to join in a sense of “commonality” experienced in such extreme situations. Ginzburg emphasizes the importance of common resistance, recounting how even the smallest actions were contributing to the survival of humanity and represented a courageous way to support the implicit social contract, by fomenting the nation's response to war: “The people of besieged Leningrad worked (while they could) and saved (if they could) both themselves and their loved ones from dying of hunger. And (...) that was also essential to the way effort, because a living city barred the path of an enemy who wanted to kill it”. “They think they're not at war, but just keeping themselves alive, but that's not true either, because they're doing what has to be done in this fighting city, to prevent the city from dying” (Ginzburg 1994: 3).

In the writing and thought of Ginzburg, it is possible to identify an important aspect corresponding to the antithesis between *individualiz'm et sotsialnost'*, which refers to it in a determining way. Already from her notes of the late 20sm, it is clear, how, according to her vision, even the most intimate consciousness of man is to be considered a historical phenomenon dictated by society (Sandomirskaya 2010)⁶. Applied to the period of siege and war, this principle seems to lead us into a new epistemology of relationships, a new way of being human (Kozlov 2012: 26), of retaining humanity.

The identification of the single person with his/her city is also a useful mechanism to overcome individualism and to join in a sense of commonality experienced in such extreme situations. Karahasan describes the resistance that he and other intellectuals participated in by continuing to pursue the cultural life of Sarajevo despite unbearable conditions: “And then I tried to explain that it is more important to save Sarajevo and the possibility of four religions and four people living there together, than to be concerned with having enough water” (Karahasan 1994: 59). Through the description of daily life at the time of the siege, Karahasan calls upon the ethical necessity to keep alive some community vision that is bound

⁶ Sandomirskaya 2010: “It was as early as 1926 that Ginzburg started her lifelong project of writing notebooks — the lion's share of which remain unpublished — which she continued until her death in 1990”.

to an undeniable cultural attitude: for him, it is essential to continue to think about literature, as it is right to continue to greet each other in a polite manner and to use cutlery at lunch: all these actions represents the ability to continue to exist as cultural beings, to “stay human” and a strategy to defend one's own city.

Urban culture understood in this sense must be preserved precisely through the pursuit of a shared social life by its inhabitants: “I could endure not having water and electricity, not having food and being cold – but how can I take the fact that I am being left forsaken in my own city? How can I believe in the unity and completeness of the world, if the world is being affirmed only in Jerusalem?” (Karahasan 1994: 67).

In his great work devoted to urban history, Mumford (1938) tells how the city was built to establish a type of context for cooperative association, a protected environment and a collective service capable of guaranteeing safety to human beings. Permanent urban settlements did not only imply continuity, but also security, and it is for this reason that at a psychological level the attack in Sarajevo shocked its citizens, who did not believe they could be attacked within their city, much less by the army which continuously tried to convince them to be 'theirs' army. Thus, we understand even better Mumford's words, when he affirms that human life, civic life is the condition which limits the grounds of fear and reduces normal precaution against the misfortunes of existence. Obviously, civilization which flows into the cult of barbarism is a civilization which has disintegrated. Similarly, Bogdanovic, also refers to the cultural value of the city, in terms of civil coexistence: “Urbanity is one of the highest abstractions of the human spirit. To me, to be an urban man means to be neither a Serb nor a Croat, and instead to behave as though these distinctions no longer matter, as if they stopped at the gates of the city”⁷ (Bogdanović 2008b).

From Ginzburg's and Karahasan's testimony we can conclude that, in both Sarajevo and Leningrad, the siege provoked actions of humanity which led to the identification of new cardinal points of a shared urban geography. An underground link was connecting actions of all individuals by transforming their survival efforts in the survival of the city and the citizens, because, in spite of the enemy who wanted to destroy the city, this continued to live and everyone performed their historic role as its protectors.

⁷ <http://www.notre-europe.eu/media/re7-bbogdanovic-en.pdf?pdf=ok> (Last retrieved on 31/01/2016)

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