

## The Russian Scientists that starved to death in a room full of food



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*The Defense of Leningrad*

Few military actions are as brutal as sieges. Often long, slow, drawn out affairs that claim the lives of thousands, they are some of the bloodiest moments in human history. One siege stands above all others: the Siege of Leningrad, not just for its brutality, but for the heroism and devotion to a cause it inspired. It was during this siege that a small group of scientists would die to protect the agricultural future of the Soviet Union

### The Siege of Leningrad

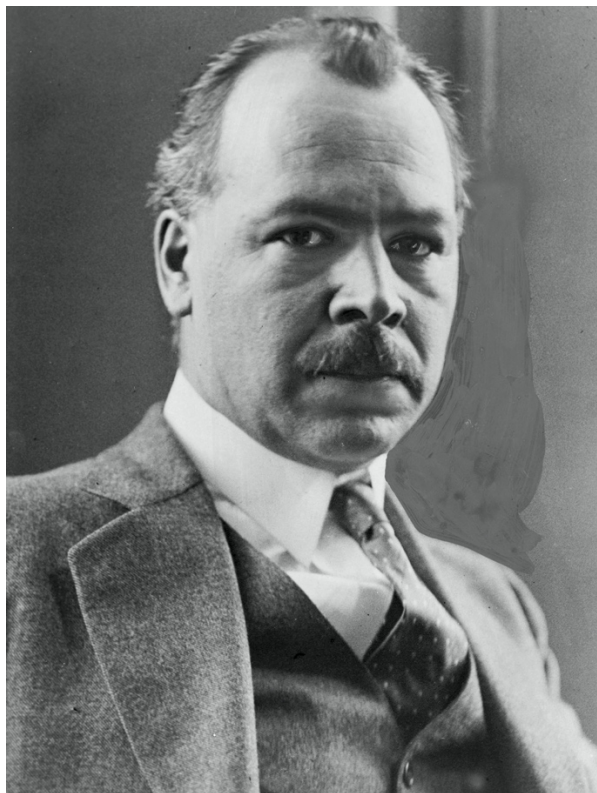
The Siege of Leningrad (today St Petersburg) stands head and shoulders above other sieges in

history. It is estimated to have claimed nearly 3 million lives by some counts over the course of 872 days of ruthless fighting between the Soviet Union and the German Wehrmacht. For a comparison, it's estimated that more people died in this one siege than the combined British and American losses in WW2. Or to put it another way, the siege of Leningrad claimed more lives than the bombing of Hamburg, Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

While bombs and bullets killed a great deal of people, starvation and disease were the main culprits. Huge numbers would die from starvation, 4,000 on Christmas day 1941 alone. Many are said to have eaten pets, then rats and birds, then eventually the dead and dying. Murder became a common way to get extra ration cards. Three separate evacuations were attempted and a great many managed to escape, but even more died as they fled, cut down by German and Finnish bullets.

Understanding the Siege of Leningrad and the conditions the people found themselves in is crucial to understanding the sacrifices and impossible decisions faced by a few scientists that were trapped in this living nightmare, encircled by the Germany Wehrmacht, surrounded by hungry Russian citizens, guarding a prize beyond value.

## Nikolay Vavilov



*Nikolay Vavilov*

Nikolay Vavilov was the founder of what would come to be the largest seed collection on the planet, the [Svalbard Global Seed Vault](#) of its day, containing upwards of 370,000 seed specimens. A geneticist and plant geographer, he collected seeds from Afghanistan, Iran, Taiwan, Korea, Spain, Algeria, Palestine, Eritrea, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, Brazil, Mexico and the US, as well as many others over the course of 115 expeditions. It's been suggested that many of our notions of biological diversity and food diversity promoting health can be traced back to Vavilov's work over 80 years.

Unfortunately for him, Stalin disapproved. The Communist dictator was a proponent of Trofim Lysenko, who was essentially a scientific quack pushing pseudo-science. This pseudo-science fit the Communist narrative and Stalin, looking for someone to blame for the disastrous famine that had resulted from his collectivisation of private farms in the 1930s, settled on Vavilov. In 1941,

while collecting yet more seeds for the Institute, he was arrested and detained at a Gulag in Saratov.

### The Institute of Plant Industry

As this was happening, the Nazis started their blitzkrieg across eastern Russia in Operation Barbarossa. Soviet leadership made the decision to evacuate all of the art and cultural items from Leningrad, which was an obvious target for the Nazis given its strategic and historical significance to the revolution. While it is a commendable act, Soviet leadership forgot, or simply deemed it unnecessary, to evacuate the Institute of Plant Industry's vital seed specimens, leaving the scientists in an impossible situation.

As Leningrad was encircled by the German Wehrmacht, the food supplies and communication were cut off and the city descended into Hell. Desperate to protect the work of their founder, the dozen scientists trapped within the small building made a fateful decision. They would defend the vault with their lives.

Windows were boarded up and building was turned into a defensible bunker. Each scientist took turns guarding the precious stock of seeds, some of which were in various stages of germination, and all of which were perfectly edible. Naturally, they were guarding them from the Germans and Finns, but also from the Soviet citizens starving to death all around them, as well as rats, and even from each other.

As the siege continued on, the agony of guarding the seeds will only have grown worse. It was not simply their own hunger they needed to contend with after all, but the moral weight of sitting on a gold mine of seeds when outside hundreds of thousands starved to death.

We might look at their actions and call them foolish, selfish even. If the goal of science is the betterment of humanity, how could these scientists not offer the seeds to the people.



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Perhaps they could have grown something?  
Perhaps they could've saved the city? They probably had the same thought.



*Siege of Leningrad*

But we should remember two things before we judge them too harshly. Firstly, the reality of giving away the seeds. Starving, dying people aren't going to use the seeds to grow food, they're going to eat them. What use is food in a few months when you'll be dead by the end of the week? By giving the seeds away, the scientists would have staved off death for a few thousand people for a week or so at most. While noble, it ignores the bigger picture.

While certainly important, there was a simpler reason to protect the seeds — famines. The Soviet Union mismanaged its farms to such horrendous extent that between 1932 and 1933, a famine spread through the Ukraine and killed between 3 and 12 million people depending on the count. This is what Vavilov sought to protect against and the dozen scientists in his institution believed in that vision.

Eating the seeds then would've doomed millions more across Russia to famine and death. The choice remains horribly utilitarian and the scientists had to live with that throughout the siege and for the rest of their lives. For most of them, that would not be long though. Nine of the scientists would die from starvation while in

the bunker, guarding one of the largest stockpiles of food in history.

## Legacy

The Siege of Leningrad wouldn't be lifted until the 27th of January 1944, when the Soviet Red Army pushed the German and Finnish forces back beyond the city. One year earlier on 18th of January 1943, they had managed to open a vital, narrow land corridor to the city, getting in much needed supplies and evacuating civilians.

8 days later, on 26th of January 1943, Nikolay Vavilov would be dead. After enduring 1,700 hours of interrogation at the hands of one of the Soviet's most ruthless interrogators, Vavilov still refused to recant his views. He is reported as saying:

“We shall go into the pyre, we shall burn, but we shall not retreat from our convictions.”



*Piskaryovskoye Memorial*

In perhaps one of the greatest twists of irony in history, it would not be a Soviet executioner that would take his life, but starvation. In 1948, all views that contradicted Trofim Lysenko were banned by Stalin, including Vavilov's. All this despite the fact that between 1946 and 1947 another famine swept the Soviet Union, claiming another 1.5 million lives.

The Institute of Plant Industry still exists to this day and in 1979 it was estimated that 80% of the

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Soviet Union's cultivated areas are sown with seeds from the institute. In 2010 the site was saved from demolition by President Dmitri Medvedev, likely with heavy influence from Vladimir Putin, following a public outcry for the historic building to be saved (*see bonus fact at the end*).

Few cities hold as many ghosts as Leningrad. Despite the fact it has a different name and the scars of the siege have been erased, leaving only monuments behind, somethings can never be wiped away. There are 186 mass graves in St Petersburg and they're commemorated at Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery. It is typical for people to leave flowers, as well as loaves of bread, to honour the lives lost to the siege and famine.



*The Eternal Flame, with the Motherland Monument in the distance*

At the centre of the memorial is a statue called the Motherland Monument and behind it are inscribed the words that capture not only the sacrifice of the scientists, but of the entire city:

Here lie Leningraders

Here are citydwellers — men, women, and children

And next to them, Red Army soldiers.

They defended you, Leningrad,

The cradle of the Revolution

With all their lives.

We cannot list their noble names here,

There are so many of them under the eternal protection of granite.

But know this, those who regard these stones:

No one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten

**Bonus Fact:** During the siege, a couple were trapped in Leningrad, fighting and starving alongside the other soviet citizens. The woman was so emaciated at one point, people assumed she was dead and they almost added her to a mass grave. The man would be invalided during the fighting and their son would die from what is assumed to be diphtheria and be buried in an anonymous grave.

The couple would survive the siege and the war though, and they would go on to have another son who's still alive today. His name is Vladimir Putin.