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## **Soviet Discursive Power versus War: Agitation and Propaganda in the Blockade of Leningrad**

### **Soviet Discursive Power under Siege: Agitprop in the Blockade of Leningrad**

In wartime, a crucial state goal is mobilizing civilians to sacrifice for the war effort and to feel a sense of loyalty to state and nation, and (hopefully) by extension to relevant elites. All talk and efforts for creating a loyal subject of a nation (or other political entity) are put to the test in war: at this moment, elites rely on non-elites to give effort and even lives, their own or loved ones, to defend the polity or to conquer in the name of national glory and status. As such, we expect efforts to shape discourses and symbols to increase in quantity and quality, painting the enemy as subhuman, as evil or a joke, in the hopes that this will overcome doubts or criticisms of one's elite and encourage investing in a collective wartime endeavor. In the modern era, especially since World War I, making war and making propaganda have gone hand-in-hand.

Different scholars and theoretical camps agree that control over symbols and discourses is one dimension of power, related to but not reducible to control of material resources.<sup>1</sup> One formal means of shaping universes of symbols and discourses is through agitation and propaganda (*agitprop*): the creation and dissemination of messages and meanings through various channels of communication, in particular through those controlled or influenced by the state. At best, agitprop can shape the

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accepted meanings and ideologies of target populations—this is the usual assumption of the goal and effect of agitation and propaganda. Yet even if agitprop does not entirely shape thinking of a population, its real force might be crowding out alternatives from fields of discourses, thus depriving a target audience of sufficient arguments, claims, and evidence to form and articulate coherent disbelief or alternatives to existing authority. As one strategy for the second dimension of power (control of discourse and agendas), propaganda might alter people's thoughts less by convincing them to buy into a position, than by leaving them no other choices and even making them think that different or dissenting positions might not be shared by others.

Before sociologists and political scientists expanded theories of power to give discourse and culture independent power dynamics, the Bolsheviks understood the importance of agitprop as one lever of power. Propaganda in the Soviet Union was ubiquitous, such that Peter Kenez dubbed the USSR a “propaganda state.”<sup>2</sup> Conducting agitation and propaganda was one central task of the Communist Party, a strategy of persuasion complementing punitive functions of the NKVD and police. Of course, agitprop ubiquity did not automatically translate into effective persuasion. Creating *homo sovieticus* might have involved subtraction more than addition: not only promoting *homo sovieticus*, but also preventing or removing possible alternatives as immoral, backward, or illegal. While the Terror and consistent economic challenges might have hindered effectiveness and messages of propaganda before the war, this does not mean it did not influence frames of interpretation. If local experiences contributed to coding Soviet socialism and Soviet power, broader media—movies, newspapers, leaders' speeches and writings—provided signals and codes for public behavior and repertoires of categories and methods for making sense of local experiences and possibly making claims. Further, local agitprop practices, such as lectures or small group meetings, provided a venue for civilians to question authorities, even if obliquely.

Not that agitprop always worked smoothly.<sup>3</sup> The quality of agitprop cadres could matter for the effectiveness of discursive control; but sometimes the messages and materials they were given were not up to the task. Even before the war, agitprop faced challenges balancing regime claims and everyday realities. In 1938, the Leningrad apparatus of the Party set out to improve political work, beginning with cadre quality. If agitators and propagandists appeared unable or uncomfortable framing issues of the day, civilians might not take the Party and ideology seriously. By 1940, there were approximately 60,000 agitprop cadres working on press material or giving lectures at Leningrad's clubs, factories, and palaces of culture. Stalin's *Short Course* was the centerpiece for a unified message (in theory).<sup>4</sup> Just in time, too, for the going was about to get rough: On June 26, 1940, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet passed its infamous decree to increase labor discipline through draconian punishments for even the smallest infractions, such as being twenty minutes late for work regardless of cause. Agitators went to shopfloors and spent more time discussing the decree and labor discipline than the *Short Course*. Yet agitation and propaganda did not calm workers. Using the regime's language of class enemies, some called the decree “sabotage” [*predatel'skii*] and “wrecking” [*vreditel'skii*].<sup>5</sup> Aleksei Kuznetsov eventually went to some factory meetings to warn directors against being too strict when applying the new law.<sup>6</sup> At shopfloor meetings, workers asked questions about deficits of household goods or

real meanings of such slogans as “catching up with and overtaking capitalist countries.” That lecturers could not always answer these questions did not inspire confidence or respect.<sup>7</sup> On the eve of war, one report to the Party bureau for the Trade Administration in Leningrad noted that newly-recruited cadres were skipping required military training, needed to improve their level of “culture” (i.e. theoretical knowledge), and were spending too much time on “cultural” and not “productive” (work-related) agitprop.<sup>8</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the sudden outbreak of World War II, the rapid retreat of the Red Army, and the suffering of soldiers and civilians despite earlier claims that the Soviet state could protect them challenged all of this, leading one to wonder why the authorities even bothered with much agitation and propaganda beyond the basics of supporting the leadership. One extreme case of the shock and suffering of war was the Blockade of Leningrad, where the 872-day siege led to mass death as well as suffering and created a new world of survival tactics and expedient policies<sup>9</sup>. Finding or producing and distributing scarce food and maintain social order were prime concerns of the Leningrad leadership<sup>10</sup>; for civilians, surviving meant adopting innovations in everyday practice, from trading at the *rynok* or stealing food to devising new forms of “food.” It might seem that under such circumstances, discourses and symbols would be relegated to low status in regime policies and civilian consciousness. Yet agitprop remained important, even as the Germans refused to cooperate with the usual Soviet interpretation of events.

### **Challenges of Crafting and Transmitting the Blockade Message**

To those pre-war challenges, the Blockade added new obstacles to imposing a new set of relevant symbols and meanings that would mobilize civilian practices and dispositions. The first challenge was having a medium to deliver this discourse in the first place, but material challenges played their role. Agitation and propaganda efforts faced the same difficulties as any other endeavor in Leningrad, especially in the first winter. Like industrial workers or even members of the police and NKVD, agitprop cadres were not immune to hunger and cold; the materials for producing newspapers and leaflets were no easier to find than other material inputs in the blockaded city. Hungry lecturers might not be able to give their own lectures or attend discussion hours because of weakness or illness. Even if they could attend, civilians might be stuck at work, too hungry or ill to attend, or did not want to go out of their way to sit in a cold room to listen to a lecture when there were other more important issues of survival to attend to (e.g. stand in line for bread or seek additional food at the *rynok*). And rooms were cold or ill-lit: what little electricity and heating there was could not be spared from the factories that produced armaments or food. As Anton Plotkin noted in a 1946 discussion with a Party interviewer, agitation and propaganda in the first months of the war and Blockade was far from as effective as it should have been, but there were reasons why this was so. Everyone was hungry, which meant fewer lecturers and attendees for lectures. Constant air raids required that people congregate in shelters rather than lecture halls. Many Party members and leaders had volunteered for the Red Army, and the new leaders and propaganda cadres taking their places were less experienced and organized—thus, their work was less disciplined and less effective. This conspiracy of disruptions reduced the quality and quantity of work in agitation and propaganda, at least at the Bolshevik factory.<sup>11</sup>

In the first three months of 1942 there were too few public places with heat and light, reducing the number of civilians who bothered to come to lectures and discussions,<sup>12</sup> and holding lectures or conversations was impossible during air raids and moments of artillery bombardments anyway or when people were supposed to be at work or MPVO and other military posts and duties.<sup>13</sup> Putting together and delivering propaganda lectures required energy and organizational effort, but “sometimes neither organizers nor lecturers had enough [energy]” to pull these off. For example, a scheduled lecture on Africa had an audience of listeners, but because the trams were not running, the lecturer could not make his own lecture. In another instance, agitators could not show a film because electricity for the room went out. One woman tried five times to give her lecture, but air raid sirens and an artillery bombardment and the lack of light ultimately forced her to cancel it. Another lecturer and audience were ready to go at one location—except the supervisor was in a long line for food and did not come to let them in.<sup>14</sup>

The second challenge was delivering these messages in a competent and convincing manner, which in turn depended on the quality of cadres and of messages and materials at their disposal. This meant fitting the message both with the needs of the regime *and* with the reality Leningraders faced. Explaining how the Germans had suddenly gone from being friends to the most hated of enemies was a problem, although available archival material suggests that this was not brought up openly. It seems the Party’s propaganda division preferred not to talk about such a policy blunder at all. Instead, agitators were supposed to tell workers what they had to pay attention to in newspapers.<sup>15</sup> This points to one propaganda strategy: diverting attention or keeping potentially distressing or damaging facts or stories out of public discourse. Censors worked not only to keep sensitive military information out of circulation. They also worked to keep out anything that did not fit with the accepted narrative or could challenge that narrative. Unfortunately, much information on censorship was lost or destroyed in the first Blockade winter, but some materials survived. One internal circular tacked onto a general decree from June 23, 1941 listed what materials and information could not be published: information on the location of airfields or changes in the officer corps, information on partisan activity and the movement of naval vessels, information on military tactics, or information on air raids (the quantity of bombs and where they fell, or how air raids disrupted everyday life).<sup>16</sup> Economic information that could not be published included Plan targets and related data, data on the defense industry, details of evacuations (except for schools), and data about the supply of food—although “it is allowable to write about facts on the bad work of individual persons of trade and supply organizations.”<sup>17</sup> Another surviving fragment on censorship showed concrete examples of mistakes in newspapers and required corrections to go along with the new Party line. The table below provides some examples:

Some corrections were political, such as the nature of the war. Stalin was courting capitalist allies, and framing the war as a struggle between socialism and capitalism would not do. In other newspapers besides those listed here, censors demanded removal of the claim that the war was for global socialism. Even in the first half of July, newspaper writers and editors continued to articulate this interpretation, and censors had to keep calling them out on the change in the new Party line.<sup>18</sup> Not only did censorship apply to dissemination of concrete types of information; even the language to be used publicly was under the censors’ watchful eyes. Internal orders decreed in autumn 1941

Censors' corrections to newspaper material, late June 1941<sup>19</sup>

Comment or problematic text	Corrections demanded by censors
<i>Elektrosila</i> 40, June 23, 1941 Misunderstanding of the nature of the war	Remove a sentence on how the war is between socialism and capitalism.
<i>Zhdanovets</i> 34, June 24, 1941 In the current international context, such convictions of England are harmful and mistaken	Take out the sentence on how England is trying to destroy Soviet power
<i>Sovietskii obektiv</i> 47, June 27, 1941 To speak of a struggle with capitalism overall is politically mistaken, the struggle is with a miscarriage of capitalism, German fascism	In the article "Fascism will break its own head," take out this line, "The war started by the will of imperialists will be the decisive battle between socialism and capitalism."
<i>Sovietskii obektiv</i> 47, June 27, 1941 Entirely incorrect slogan flowing from a misunderstanding of the nature of the war	In the article "The triple blow for blow," take out the slogan "Long live the German Soviet Republic"
<i>Avangard</i> 23, June 26, 1941 Article entirely harmful and incorrect	Take out the article "For the cultured dormitory" that describes how filth and unpleasantness of one dormitory reminds one of the tsarist regime
<i>Avangard</i> 26, June 25, 1941 Misunderstanding of the war	Remove the line stating, "This war will be a continuation of the great October socialist revolution, the final goal of which will flow out into world revolution."
<i>Avtodvigatel</i> 24, June 23, 1941 Entirely harmful feuilleton oriented to creating a panic among the population	Cut out the feuilleton "Two pounds of flour" that describes how the head of the supply department cannot find two pounds of flour anywhere for pasting the Komsomol committee room
<i>Krasnyi tramvaishchik</i> 21, June 14, 1941 No reason given	Remove material on blaming hooliganism at work, which the newspaper simply reports without assigning blame

"Hitlerites" (*gitlerovtsy*) be used instead of "Nazis" (*natsisty*), and that the "Soviet-German Front" be used instead of "Eastern Front"—the former stressing an individual over a broader movement (thus demonizing the leader but potentially reducing the culpability of the mass of Germans), and the latter signaling a stress on Soviet effort rather than joint effort with the Allies. Also, formal news could not write about women being "drafted" in the army; instead, women "volunteered" for service.<sup>20</sup> Other stories risked creating worry or worsening morale, such as the story above of the official unable to find flour (from *Avtodvigatel* on June 23).

Agitators and propagandists always had the periodical *Propaganda i agitatsiia* as one resource. So important was propaganda that special journals—*Bolshevik*, *Partstroitelstvo*, *Propagandist*, *Sputnik agitator*, *Komintern*, and others—were shipped in from Moscow, across Lake Ladoga—journals taking up space that could have been

used for food.<sup>21</sup> The content reflects what we might expect from Stalin's era. Leading articles for the February 1942 issue of *Propaganda i agitatsiia* included "Lenin and Stalin—supreme leaders [*vozhdi*] and organizers of the Red Army," "Where there is Stalin, there is victory" (a history of Stalin's achievements in the Civil War), "Defense of the Motherland is the highest law of our life," and heroic stories of snipers, pilots, and partisans (including one article entitled "For the Motherland! For Stalin!").<sup>22</sup> The March 1942 issue was critical of agitprop work—agitators did not always feel they had support of Party cells, and various agitation points in homes had been closed for some odd reason. That issue also offered heroic stories and tips for keeping homes clean, which agitators were supposed to share with civilians.<sup>23</sup> Poems by Pushkin and Lermontov were sometimes included,<sup>24</sup> as were data on production in the USSR and the United States.<sup>25</sup> One article from summer 1942, entitled "To nurture hatred for the enemy,"<sup>26</sup> stressed the role of propaganda for maintaining morale and noted that agitators and propagandists were not driving home Stalin's warning that difficult times still lie ahead. Maintaining morale and a will to victory required inculcating hatred for the "enemy" (even though this clearly meant the Germans), and the primary goal of propaganda was "nurturing hatred for the enemy, such hatred that will lead a person to seek out the enemy, to find all means and possibilities to annihilate the enemy, to give everything of himself without letting up on defeating the enemy. That hatred for the enemy is the central thread in the life of every Soviet person, eclipsing everything else, must be achieved."<sup>27</sup> Using examples of German atrocities was one tool to inculcate such hatred, for example stories of starvation in occupied territories.<sup>28</sup>

New slogans in summer 1942 expressed the Germans' concrete atrocities, provided sharp criticism of Hitler, and reveled in the heroic exploits of the Red Army. Of course, there was still work to do among the civilian population, in particular improving discipline and rooting out deserters who had tried to blend into the urban landscape.<sup>29</sup> Local agitprop departments did take the new Party lines and advice from above seriously, as minutes from a July 1942 meeting of the agitprop department of the Oktiabr'skii district Party *raikom* for the reveal. While 1942 would be the year to beat the Germans, agitprop cadres still had to be careful about framing the path to victory and related world events. If the message was that the anti-Hitler coalition is strong, then workers might become complacent. On the other hand, to say that the Germans were progressing through Soviet territory (e.g. as on the way to Stalingrad) might be an incentive for workers to improve their discipline.<sup>30</sup> To help with this war effort, agitprop efforts would also be directed at encouraging those not necessary to military production to evacuate out of Leningrad, and that doing so did not compromise their patriotism.<sup>31</sup> And of course, whipping up hatred for Germans was a must. Telling of German atrocities was a normal component of this message and effort, but it was not enough. Just to say "I hate the Germans" was not enough, because one could claim to hate Germans but still show up late for work or work badly. Leningraders' discipline and effort had to be driven by hatred. Thus, the new policy was to question civilian hatred: if someone said "I hate the Germans," the appropriate response was to say "I don't believe you" and to demand concrete actions for the war effort as proof of real hatred. "Our hatred must be measured by material deeds," was the claim—hatred had to be instantiated as practice, not just empty words.<sup>32</sup>

*Propaganda i agitatsiia* could provide ideas and materials, but these risked being too broad and general to have sufficient emotional or personal impact on suffering Leningraders. Shaping or aligning civilian perceptions, identities, and interests required somehow affecting their senses of attachment and empathy—if possible, playing on significant anchors and other symbols and objects of meaning that were or had been part of civilians' myriad fields. Given how many civilians' (usually male) family and friends were serving in the Red Army at the Leningrad front, framing civilian-military relations in personal terms, and from there inculcating collective patriotism, was too tempting and important a strategy to pass up.<sup>33</sup> Civilians and soldiers listened regularly to the radio, and so this became an important medium for delivering this civilian-military discourse. One regular radio program was "Letters to and from the front," in which radio announcers would read letters wither from soldiers to family and friends behind the lines, or from family, friends, and co-workers to their comrades at the front lines. How many of these letters were real is impossible to determine from available data—only the typed transcripts of what was read on the radio are available in the relevant archive (TsGALI SPb).

A complementary strategy was to arrange for civilians to visit soldiers or to send them such gifts as socks, scarves, pencils, and other useful items. Party-organized worker committees would collect and send presents to the front, and sometimes groups of workers would travel to the front lines to give them personally, as well as to relay news. (Sometimes Leningrad women would travel to the front to sing or put on shows for soldiers, much as many did in hospitals for the wounded.) As early as November 1941, Party leaders were organizing groups of worker representatives to visit the front lines. These groups were not only supposed to reinforce relations between the front and the rear; they were also reconnaissance missions of sorts, to learn the mood of the troops, who might speak more openly to civilians than to superiors. Upon returning from the front, Party cadres often debriefed these workers' groups—only to discover that not only were soldiers not always happy, but also that they were complaining to civilians. One group was supposed to visit the 55<sup>th</sup> army on November 4, although it turned out the delegation made it to the front on November 5 and was sent to a different division than originally intended. They claimed the soldiers were in a brave mood, and the worker representatives spent time meeting with the commissar (*politruk*) to discuss agitation and propaganda. Soldiers asked questions about international politics, how the Allies were helping on other fronts, and whether Leningrad was being bombed. Some also complained about slow deliveries of mail from friends and family. Others griped that they had to leave behind personal belongings but had not received receipts for them, and they were wondering whether their valuables were properly stored. They told worker representatives that they could use warm clothes and shoes. Another group, sent to division of the 8<sup>th</sup> army, discussed the situation in Leningrad with curious and concerned troops. Soldiers complained of having too little ammunition, shoes, and quality political education. There were not always enough shovels to dig trenches, and they were low on medicine.<sup>34</sup> Another group, sent to the 20<sup>th</sup> division of the 5<sup>th</sup> army at Dubrovka, related that soldiers felt they were not receiving adequate news and quality discussions about politics of the war. Newspapers from November 7, which contained Stalin's speech on the anniversary of the October Revolution, arrived late—finding a driver to transport

them was difficult—and those responsible for agitprop were not using their heads or were being “formal” about work (i.e. going through the motions).<sup>35</sup>

### **Maintaining Control of Discourse: Quality of Cadres and Behavior of Civilians**

Officials heading agitprop were concerned about the quality of their messages, but not only to mobilize civilian emotions and actions in a way conducive to state power and the war effort. Archival documents suggest that agitprop cadres were at least as interested in their performance and image vis-à-vis Party and state leadership. In fact, the majority of agitprop documents in the former Leningrad Party archive in St. Petersburg are not the content of lectures or posters. Instead, they were reports about progress and quality of agitation and propaganda—in the spirit of *samokritika*, criticisms of and reflections upon the state of the propaganda machine and its content in the besieged city. While Leningraders were trying to survive, and in the process creating their own meaning to life and society, propagandists were trying to create *their own* normality—not just of regime, state, and society, but of themselves in the war effort and their position and status inside fields of power, in a situation where they might be less significant than soldiers, state and Party elite, producers and distributors of food, and the security services. In short, agitprop cadres and departments might have felt a threat to their *raison d'être*, and archival materials about the internal politics of agitation and propaganda reveal an institutional inferiority complex. For example, in March 1942, leaders of the October district Party cell for the Trade Administration criticized comrades for irregularities in the appearance of well newspapers (*stengazety*). The editor responded that other communists were not pulling their weight. The Party bureau chair ordered member Mariia Martynovskaia to help with various tasks.<sup>36</sup> In May wall newspapers remained a central issue for bureau discussions afterwards, although the editor complained that she was working alone and that other Party members were not helping post *stengazety* throughout the district.<sup>37</sup> The lack of manpower was again the central problem, except that here, as elsewhere, policies were not adjusted to fit a physical reality of real people exhausted by hunger.

If agitators and propagandists believed in their work and messages they were delivering, it could add to the effectiveness of propaganda: as enough teachers (hopefully) know, one tool for effective teaching is to be passionate about the subject and to know the content. We do not have many diaries from propagandists, and some come across as highly formulaic, as if the writer was mimicking what he or she was also delivering to audiences. Yet some appear more sincere. For example, in 1984 Ivan Balin recorded his reminiscences about propaganda work in the Leningrad Party to address those “living in the remarkable conditions of developed socialism, some of whom have skepticism” and hopefully to reduce some of the “anger and egoism” that worried him in the 1980s. Born to poor peasants and joining the Komsomol and “Lenin’s Party,” he eventually came to Leningrad to help speed up collectivization outside the city. During the war he carried out ideological work in an army unit while his wife and son remained hungry and ill in Leningrad. So important was propaganda and agitation work to his personal history that his basic comment on the Blockade—and by extension, about his family’s



sufferings—was that one day his son cried as he ate bread, and that he himself “could not comfort them in any way.”<sup>38</sup>

Maintaining a consistent message—propagating a few basic signals to shape civilians’ trajectories of thought and behavior—was no easy task, as one report about propaganda and agitation work in the Kirov *raion* for the first half of 1942 revealed. There was nearly no work from January to March 1942, although with the spring this agitprop division returned to life. Despite hardships, however, agitprop cadres persisted in their work—and those hardships were not insignificant, as if war and Blockade were conspiring against the structuring of signals and discourse. Narrating the Blockade and war was a major challenge, as sequences of military news and events were anything but constant and did not fit a stylized picture of Soviet superiority vis-à-vis the decadent bourgeois West. Finding a plausible and useful message, and making sure all agitprop cadres articulated the same narrative and could field civilians’ questions, was a constant problem that Party officials blamed on “training” or “competence.” Not all agitators were up to the task to propagate the Party line as needed—either they were insufficiently educated or motivated.<sup>39</sup> Training agitprop cadres, like training new communists, meant more than reading a newspaper, Stalin’s *Short Course*, or some other text. It required extended discussions to make sure that new entrants into the lower levels of field of power understood the logic and line of the state and Party and were able to defend and propagate it in the face of adverse events or civilians’ questions and confusion.<sup>40</sup> These challenges bred yet another: the growing lack of such qualified personnel. This part of the field of power was being depopulated; without appropriate agents, constructing signals of normal symbols, meanings, and public practices became that much more difficult. Death and illness stemming mostly from winter hunger were the main reason for the dwindling number of available agitators and propagandists in the Kirov *raion*, and even the rise in the bread ration at the end of December 1941 could not stem the effects of starvation.

Despite such challenges, Kirov agitators and propagandists told a story of continuing dedication in face of hardships. In those first three difficult months of 1942, agitation and propaganda activities went on for celebrating Lenin’s death, the creation of the Red Army, and International Women’s Day, as well as for collecting clothing for the army and mobilizing civilians to clean their rooms and courtyards. Agitators tried to hold regular discussions with civilians at their places of residence, with overviews of the progress of the war, the state of the alliance with the United States and Great Britain, and news about the southern eliciting the most interest.<sup>41</sup> “Nurturing hatred” of the enemy by giving lectures on the “essence of fascism” was a regular staple, and this included discussions of German atrocities against Soviet people in occupied territories.<sup>42</sup> Agitprop cadres at one food factory reported their efforts maintaining morale and discipline. Not enough local residents were covering their windows (which normally would elicit a fine) or doing enough to help clean snow and filth from city streets. Cadres also had to uncover and counter rumors, such as claims that the real reason for the December 25, 1941 increase in the bread ration was because of mass death and fewer mouths consuming the same quantity of food. Discussion themes in general include news from the front, speeches by Molotov and other leaders, fascism, and hygiene.<sup>43</sup> The main themes of discussion and mobilization at one “agitation point” in a local dormitory were evacuations (reasons

to evacuate and providing help), hygiene (accompanied by inspections of dorm rooms), helping the ill and weak, and cleaning the dormitory and surrounding area.<sup>44</sup> Other lectures touched on complicated issues (e.g. the loss of Sevastopol' in 1942 and what this might mean for Leningrad's fate)<sup>45</sup> or addressed the importance of vitamin C and what kinds of plants Leningraders could eat, heroic stories of partisans' exploits behind enemy lines, and a possible "new order" in Europe following the demise of fascism (which one lecturer apparently hoped would take place in 1942).<sup>46</sup>

Even if agitprop bosses and cadres could improve the quality of the presentations and their contexts, this did not guarantee that the performance of guiding discourse would follow the script ideally. Controlling the topics of coverage in newspapers and agitation discussions, and bringing civilians and soldiers together, could go some way to imposing a particular narrative of the nature and conduct of the war, of the legitimacy of the regime's policies, leadership, and qualities, and of normal civilian behavior. However, Soviet propaganda was not merely a one-way street of the regime's agents talking and civilians listening. Rather, the Communist Party and Soviet state demanded that civilians participate in the enactment of those agitprop meanings coming. Before the war, this meant preparing for and participating in various celebrations, such as hanging up banners and marching in parades.<sup>47</sup> For agitation lectures and similar meetings, while Party cadres would give speeches or lead discussions, the presumption was that the audience would go along by asking "proper" questions—a practice akin to what Stephen Kotkin called "speaking Bolshevik."<sup>48</sup> This gave audiences the opportunity to ask and write down questions for lecturers. While we should not be under any illusions that free speech as we know it was encouraged, workers and other civilians could use the regime's own language to interrogate its cadres further—perhaps taking the ideology and the nation more seriously than cadres themselves. And in a situation such as the Blockade, when important information was vague and distant and transmitted by radio and newspaper, sometimes these agitprop lectures were opportunities to flesh out specifics or get some kinds of answers to important questions.

Archives do not contain details for all questions asked at all lectures—record-keeping was far from systemic—but some examples survived to give us a clue about the atmosphere of these moments when regime met subjects. Civilians' questions to lecturers reveal an interest in geopolitics beyond scripts of Party and propaganda. Propaganda officials and activists conducted lectures as part of their usual routine; many were held in enterprises, others in general social settings like lecture halls or libraries. Following lectures (usually parroting the Party line of the time), lecturers invited questions from the audience. Some lecturers' notes of those questions that survived reveal average workers whose curiosity of global politics—and their place in it—was fairly sophisticated, not only in terms of general knowledge but also about just how Soviet policies would mesh with those of allies. At one meeting between workers and agitprop cadres in late November 1941, the majority of workers present publicly accepted that ration reductions were inevitable, and that if a daily bread ration of 150 grams was what was needed to defeat the Germans, then so be it. This was an example of speaking Bolshevik—following the script for "proper" discourse in an agitprop meeting. Maybe some even believed this. Yet they also asked questions that strayed beyond a quiescent script. One individual,

possibly an NKVD informant, included some questions in a *svodka* passed on to the Party hierarchy:

How long with this difficult food situation last?  
 What is Moscow's situation, compared to that of Leningrad?  
 Will there be further reductions in rations for food and bread?  
 For how long will food reserves in the city last? Will supply improve once the blockade is broken?  
 Will strict control be established in stores and cafeterias, so that they did not mismeasure and reduce rations owed to the people?  
 Why did they let the Germans get so close to Leningrad and give them the chance to fortify their positions?<sup>49</sup>

The presence of such probing voiced publicly suggests that some workers were willing to hold some members of the state and Party to account. The practice of incorporating civilians into agitprop practices, and providing a template for discourse, provided civilians with some tools to hold these lowly members of the regime to account and to exercise a modicum of autonomy (such as it could be in Stalinist wartime)—ironically, a logic antithetical to that of agitprop.

### **Agitprop at War: Lessons from the Blockade?**

This essay provides only a quick glimpse into the routines of Blockade agitprop, and so extrapolating to bigger lessons about Soviet power and discourse at war comes with risks. Clearly and unsurprisingly, the suddenness and ferocity of the war and Blockade, as well as the uncertainty and deprivation, presented challenges not only to maintaining a clear and consistent message, but also to propagating any message at all. Even if agitprop cadres could hold lectures and discussions or put up banners and newspapers, the reality of hunger and German bombs could not be covered up or explained away by Marxist-Leninist dialectics. Even Stalin himself had to admit that victory would not come easily or without great cost. Agitprop did not seem particularly effective at inhibiting black markets in the speculative resale of stolen food (and led some Leningraders to ask about this publicly, as one question noted above clearly reveals). To the extent Leningraders felt hatred towards the Germans, this was due less to agitprop efforts than to Leningraders' own experiences of hunger, air raids, and watching many others die. The Germans did a far better job mobilizing patriotism than any banner or speech could.

Not that any of this had a significant impact on broader agitprop logics and practices. The reality of war forced a shift in content of messages, but the juxtaposition of agitprop and reality raised the risk that the regime would lose credibility among civilians—which did happen on occasion, if rumors reported in *svodki* and diaries are reflect social reality.<sup>50</sup> Regimes at war do not shy away from propaganda, but adjustments to practices can be significant, for example in the United Kingdom in World War I and the United States in World War II. The war and Blockade posed challenges to agitprop, but basic routines and practices did not change except marginally. Apparently, agitprop was core to Bolshevik political culture and institutional practice.

I conclude with a curious facet of the politics of propaganda that the Blockade's stresses and challenges accentuated. Those challenges meant that agitprop did not

always work smoothly or have a desired result. The source of blame for such shortcomings might reveal something deeper about Bolshevik logics of perception and practice, and perhaps not only for agitprop. And archival materials of internal accounts and discussions about the quality of agitprop hint that there is something worth further investigation going on under the surface. When criticizing their subordinates' efforts, higher-ups in the agitprop machine framed criticism and blame for shortcomings with the same logic by which Leningrad elites in the Military Council or elsewhere in the state and Party assigned blame for shortcomings in distribution of food, preparation of defensive fortifications, or production: *the individual himself or herself was to blame*. This was a theoretical irony for self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninists to locate shortcomings in individual psyches and effort, rather than in broader social structures. While this likely came in part from an attempt to save one's skin by not directly blaming Bolshevism and its leaders (especially Stalin), the fact that this logic appears everywhere suggests that this was a logic more than a tactic of personal and political survival. Criticizing Stalin and Bolshevism were beyond the pale—but criticizing *local* structures, procedures, and collective habits could have worked, especially if one avoided criticizing Smolny and did criticize in the spirit of *samokritika*. Yet the persistence of blaming *individual* motivations and psychology suggests a real move away from the core logic of Marxism and even Leninism—namely, the centrality of structures and structural contradictions. In this sense, the political culture of Leningrad in the Blockade and the USSR at war might have been closer to the (somewhat real but also somewhat mythical) individualism of Anglo-American political culture—closer than either side would want to admit. The story of Blockade agitprop, possibly, might provide a glimpse into the soul of one of two partners in a fascinating and troubling relationship that was developing before and during the war and about to dominate international relations, and the fate of humanity, for the next fifty years.

<sup>1</sup> Lukes S. *Power: A Radical View*, second edition (New York, 2005). Note that I do not discuss unofficial, informal structures and forms of discourse and communication, especially rumors. On this subject, see: Piankevich V. L. *Liudi zhili slukhami. Neformal'noe kommunikativnoe prostranstvo blokadnogo Leningrada* (St. Petersburg, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Kenez P. *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (New York, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> Brandenberger D. *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Dzeniskevich A. R. *Nakanune i v dni ispitaniï. Leningradskie rabochie v 1938–1945 gg.* (Leningrad, 1990). P. 53–55.

<sup>5</sup> Dzeniskevich A. R. *Nakanune i v dni ispitaniï*, pp. 56–57. See also: TsGAIPD SPb. f. 5, op. 2, d. 227, l. 128–129, and f. 25, op. 10, d. 173, l. 8.

<sup>6</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 2, op. 2, d. 349, l. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Dzeniskevich A. R. *Nakanune i v dni ispitaniï*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>8</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 895, op. 1, d. 2, l. 2–3, 5.

<sup>9</sup> See: Sobolev G. L. *Leningrad v borbe za vyzhivanie v blokade*. Book 1–3 (St. Petersburg, 2013–2017).

<sup>10</sup> See: Boldovskiy K. A. 'Gorkom VKP(b) i sistema upravleniya Leningradom v nachale Velikoj Otechestvennoj vojny', *Vestnik SPbGU*, Ser. 2: Istoriya, Iss. 2, 2016, pp. 61–73.

<sup>11</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 4000, op. 10, d. 1260, l. 16–17.

<sup>12</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 2, 11, 17.

<sup>13</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 2, 19.

- <sup>14</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 19.
- <sup>15</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 5, op. 3, d. 35, l. 19.
- <sup>16</sup> TsGALI SPb. f. 359, op. 1, d. 1, l. 1–2.
- <sup>17</sup> TsGALI SPb. f. 359, op. 1, d. 1, l. 3–4.
- <sup>18</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 286, l. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 286, l. 1–4.
- <sup>20</sup> TsGALI SPb. f. 359, op. 1, d. 1, l. 8.
- <sup>21</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 335a, l. 5–6.
- <sup>22</sup> *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, no. 3–4, February 1942.
- <sup>23</sup> *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, no. 5–6, March 1942.
- <sup>24</sup> E. g. ‘Pushkin’s “Poltava” and Lermontov’s “Beglets”’ in *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, no. 10, May 1942.
- <sup>25</sup> *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, no. 12, June 1942, pp. 10–16, 35–36.
- <sup>26</sup> *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, no. 14, July 1942, pp. 1–4.
- <sup>27</sup> *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, no. 14, July 1942, p. 2.
- <sup>28</sup> *Propaganda i agitatsiia*, no. 14, July 1942, p. 34.
- <sup>29</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 335a, l. 1–2.
- <sup>30</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 326, l. 7.
- <sup>31</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 326, l. 11–12.
- <sup>32</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 326, l. 17–18.
- <sup>33</sup> Kozlov N. *S volei k pobede. Propaganda i obydennoe soznanie v gody VOV* (St. Petersburg, 2002), p. 113.
- <sup>34</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 244, l. 1–9.
- <sup>35</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 244, l. 10.
- <sup>36</sup> Alas, good help was hard to find: one month later the Party bureau expelled Martynovskaia—more than two months after she had been accepted into the Party—for “deserting” the city. Apparently, she left Leningrad despite being denied permission to do so. TsGAIPD SPb. f. 895, op. 1, d. 7, l. 4.
- <sup>37</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 895, op. 1, d. 6, l. 2, 4, 6, 9.
- <sup>38</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 4000, op. 18, d. 489, esp. l. 1–5, 16–18, 35 (source of quote).
- <sup>39</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 123.
- <sup>40</sup> E. g. TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 12.
- <sup>41</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 8–10.
- <sup>42</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 26–27.
- <sup>43</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 42–46.
- <sup>44</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 52.
- <sup>45</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 66.
- <sup>46</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 25, op. 10, d. 330, l. 68–69, 167.
- <sup>47</sup> For example, see: Lane C. *Rites of Rulers* (New York, 1981).
- <sup>48</sup> Kotkin S. *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995). “Speaking Bolshevik” was the conscious use of the Party’s formal categories and rhetoric, e.g. of proper class behavior. Civilians did this to demonstrate loyalty and reduce the risk of falling under suspicion of the Party, police, or NKVD.
- <sup>49</sup> TsGAIPD SPb. f. 5, op. 3, d. 38, l. 27.
- <sup>50</sup> Again, see Piankevich V. L. *Liudi zhili slukhami*.

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*Abstract:* In wartime, a crucial state goal is mobilizing civilians to sacrifice for the war effort and to feel a sense of loyalty to state and nation, and by extension to relevant elites. All talk and efforts for creating a loyal subject of

a nation (or other political entity) are put to the test in war. One extreme case of the shock and suffering of war was the Blockade of Leningrad, where the 872-day siege led to mass death as well as suffering and created a new world of survival tactics and expedient policies. The research on the agitprop in Leningrad during the Blockade leads to a curious conclusion. Criticizing Stalin and Bolshevism were beyond the pale—but criticizing *local* structures, procedures, and collective habits could have worked, especially if one avoided criticizing Smolny and did criticize in the spirit of *samokritika*. Yet the persistence of blaming *individual* motivations and psychology suggests a real move away from the core logic of Marxism and even Leninism. In this sense, the political culture of Leningrad in the Blockade and the USSR at war might have been closer to the individualism of Anglo-American political culture—closer than either side would want to admit.

*Keywords:* Agitprop, Leningrad, Blockade

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