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Seeing like a Starving State: The Soviet Political Economy of Death in the Blockade of Leningrad

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Seeing Like a (Stalinist) State: How a State Sees Death

How state elites and officials classify, measure, and analyze "death" is part of the practices of modern governance. Causes and rates of death shape how states plan for economic performance and war: more healthy citizens means better economies and armies, while higher death rates speak to problematic governance and can hinder state authority and capacity (e. g. for fighting wars). How elites and officials inside the state, then, "see" death — analytic visions for seeking and discursive frames for presenting those pictures — are part of overall practices of governing *and* of legitimating governance and governmentality. The Bolshevik regime and Soviet state were little different: control requiring counting, whether tons of steal of number of available workers and soldiers (and "counter-revolutionary" degenerates roaming around the country). Stalin's politics of intrigue arguably made real counting difficult and even created contradictions, as managers and lower-level cadres reported what they thought higher-ups wanted to see; but the data they passed on were not entirely fictitious. Seeing like a Soviet state in the 1930s was a balancing act of playing on the margins of measurable "reality" while representing some facts of that socioeconomic "reality" — including life and death of Soviet citizens.

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The Blockade of Leningrad challenged how the local Soviet state apparatus saw death (and by extension, life): What various officials within the state saw, how they saw it, what they expected or wanted to see, and how they articulated perceptions and responses. Unusually high death counts were not unusual to a regime that had caused and weathered other incidents of above-average death tolls: the Civil War, collectivization, and the Great Terror showed that concern for the sanctity of human life was not a core Bolshevik norm. Concerns about abortions and family stability — in particular, placing heavy restrictions on divorces and abortions — showed that the Stalinist regime was concerned for death and demographic trends as they affected the capacity of the state to govern, carry out important policies (e. g. rapid and sustained present and future industrialization), and fight wars. The death toll in the Blockade was concerning to the Bolshevik elite in Smolny, for reasons of governance and producing for the war effort, as well as for optics of appearing competent during the life-and-death struggle with Germany.

The Soviet state, like many states embedded in frames and ideologies of "high modernism", attempted to code and organize society to make it more comprehensible and manageable[1]. Soviet socialism was not only an ideology that aspired to rationalize society for progressive goals; it was also an ideology of a particular form of class struggle and control. Socialism in power embraced and imposed a "scientific" logic of relations and practices (e. g. the Five-Year Plan, centralized political economy without the uncertainty of the market) and a logic of a new status of order (e. g. the Communist Party as the font of legitimate knowledge for the benefit of a new hegemonic class). Such high modernism was grounded in a political and technocratic elitism: the Party knew best, and its ideology and frames of vision, and corresponding strategies for organizing Soviet economy and society, were supreme.

This said, Stalin's own politics of intrigue and control via terror worked at cross purposes with this high modernist approach to governance and governmentality. In contrast to a Party and state in theory oriented to reshaping economy and society in socialism's image, Stalin's politics resulted in, and almost required, uncertainty and some instability. To maintain his legitimacy as the oracle of Leninist wisdom, Stalin himself could not be pinned down to any concrete policy position: he had to be ready to alter policies, positions, and people so that no opposition could emerge and so that there would be mistakes that he and those who wanted his favor could then criticize for political gain (i. e. via repression). Part of this practice of power involved the NKVD consistently on the lookout for "counter-revolutionary" politics and behavior — but this remained a slippery concept so that it could be employed at will. If some bodies of the state and Party bureaucracy (e. g. Vesenkha, Gosplan, etc.) were looking on the economy and society as a mass to be shaped into specific operative form, others (NKVD) were looking for anything that Stalin, Yezhov, Beria, and others driven by arrests and repression could possibly interpret as a threat.

The Stalinist state, then, suffered from (at least) double vision vis-à-vis society: potential for progressive (if costly) construction; and ubiquitous and always shape-shifting threat[2]. The appearance of real threats could evoke different responses corresponding to these visions, with risks attached. The first vision was more utopian, focused, and grounded in clearer categories (worker, *kolkhoznik*, and so on). It

involved a focus on preconceived, assumed causation and use of preconceived, prepared responses. In the context of extreme threats, this vision could be effective if its categories and logics helped to accurately ascertain the nature of threat; if it did not, however, time and effort would be required to "recalibrate" this vision—which could result in a lag addressing that threat. And this points to one problem of this vision under duress: it is difficult to "see" a society in a forward-looking, utopian manner when the defining characteristic of duress is uncertainty and even the possibility of extermination — there might be no tomorrow to plan for, making the utopian lens problematic. The second (Stalinist) vision was more dystopian and grounded in a fixation on and search for vague "saboteurs" and other malevolent actors (with traits of such threatening actors more amorphous than defined), justifying quick application of repression (exile, prison, firing squad). This vision was broad enough that it might locate sources of threat, but this then would require focus instead of a general vision of general "threat". However, this dystopian vision also had its downside for wartime. While seeing a society as perpetually containing ever-present enemies might make the authorities more attuned to real saboteurs and similar malevolent actors, it also might lead authorities to see threats where they did not exist — in the process, drawing attention away from possible opportunities and necessities for adaptation and survival. Someone with a German surname might be viewed as an automatic threat, rather than as a potentially loyal (or at least ambivalent) citizens with abilities that could be harnessed for the war effort.

In sum, this double vision did not leave the USSR ready to face threats — it put the country at even greater risk of errors in understanding and addressing causes of threat, and possibly of contradictions between the two visions in doing so. Our story here, and in the broader project from which this is drawn, is that the experience of extreme duress compelled a new logic of seeing society, with relevant practices of governance, to emerge and to start to take root in institutional configurations and procedures: a more *pragmatic* logic of governance and authority that we call "Blockade Bolshevism"[3]. In this essay we explore how that pragmatic vision and logic of governance emerged in the context of confronting mass death in the Blockade (as one of several such cases of duress and adaptation). We argue that in confronting Blockade death — and by extension, confronting Blockade life — both pre-war political ways of seeing did not suffice. Ultimately, Smolny (what we dub the local regime) was compelled to become more pragmatic in how it "saw" Leningrad and what it was trying to see. This new pragmatic vision did not emerge *de novo* but instead did have pre-war roots; and it did emerging immediately or full-blown. But the experience of war did have the potential to remake Soviet political culture, and we suggest this brief narrative of "seeing like a starving state" reveals some facets of this process[4].

Death in the Blockade: Seeing and Responding Like a Starving State

The Blockade was about to become such a threat and a test of this double Soviet vision. Subjected to extreme deficits in food, Leningrad was a starving state. In one attempt to figure out a range of figures about Blockade death, Nadezhda Cherepenina showed how different sources revealed different numbers: police and

ZAGs reports suggested a number closer to one million, whereas a count comparing the number of ration cards in circulation produced a different account. Counts based on hospital and morgue records could provide a third[5]. The amount of death one saw depended on where and how one looked. This is our launching point. For Cherepenina, the story is one of problematic data sources and a need to use them logically to produce as precise a number as possible. For us, it points to the question of how the state "sees" — no small issue for a state trying to defend a city from enemy attack (a threat without) and from starvation and resulting innovative acts of desperation by suffering victims (a threat within). For James C. Scott, how a state sees can have dire consequences. For his study, states that look upon society through the lenses of "high modernism" are likely to trample on important local knowledge and impose abstractions that do more harm than good — and that in the Soviet case, certainly provided the tools and flexibility to apply coercion to make sure society understood what was good for it. But states see in many ways — closer to a bee than to a human.

When the war broke out, the Soviet state in Leningrad was looking at different facets of its civilian population. The fully effective accounting and control of all available human resources was one of the key pillars of the Soviet economy. As such, procedures for planning, control, and provision "saw" Leningrad society in different ways, from different institutional vantage points. We focus on three that were interconnected: labor, the dead, and living civilians. Our argument is that the double vision crystalized around a more pragmatic approach to seeing Leningrad, compelled by the need to survive. Ideological purity was not a mile wide and an inch deep, and those roots were deep enough that they could emerge after the war ended. However, they did not run *that* deep, and cadres and officials of the Soviet state, from Smolny on down, were capable to clearing away the ideological blinders — potentially clearing the path for evolution in the direction of ore pragmatic authoritarianism.

Seeing the Dead. We begin with a brief discussion of how state elites and officials "saw" rising mass death and the dead, especially in the first Blockade winter. The early Bolshevik Party and state had looked out at death through lenses of a new socialist rationality, trying to impose new Soviet rituals of disposal and commemoration upon a mostly Orthodox population; some newer traditions stuck, while others (e. g. cremation) took less hold[6]. In good bureaucratic fashion of the new Soviet rationalism, the Soviet state looked upon death as a statistic important for reckoning with the state of Soviet society. From the outset of war on June 22, 1941, up to December 1941, the city administration[7] was able to keep fairly accurate records of the mortality rate. For instance, reports by Burial Trust (*Pokhoronnoe Delo*) show that just before the war, the average daily death toll in Leningrad was about 105 people; in the first half of 1941 Burial Trust buried 18,909 people[8]. (During the war, special attention was paid to mortality amongst the group of those 15 years old and older; growth of mortality by 8.9 percent was alarming)[9]. As Cherepenina noted, what the state counted (the number of dead) depended on how the state looked for the dead. However, the system for registering deaths itself was fragmented — which presumes the dead were found in the first place. The most accurate information was collected by the regional NKVD, which coordinated surveillance and security in the city. Regional NKVD reported on mortality both to Moscow and Smolny. However, the NKVD

had many tasks but limited labor. Burial Trust and cemeteries were not interested in an undercount of the dead, because they were remunerated based on services provided — more dead meant more money, although this created an incentive for occasionally cooking the books to register truly "dead souls"[10]. ZAGS (Otdel zapisei aktov grazhdanskogo sostoianiia), the state body responsible registering births, marriages, and deaths, also faced challenges in registering and thus determining the number of deaths.

Formal procedures were supposed to provide accurate counts of the number of dead, who exactly had died, and what they died from. One mobile group of Burial Trust, with health-care services of local department of the MPVO, collected corpses in places of bombardments and artillery fire. All corpses were subject to identification within 48 hours. Those not identified by relatives were to be photographed. The dead were buried in tranches, while all related documents (photos and death certificates) were kept in order. Victims' valuables were passed directly to the financial office of the appropriate city district. Regarding the number of burials, the Trust provided the same number about deaths as other official documents: 3688 people in July, 5090 in August, 7820 in September, 9355 in October, and 11401 in November. According to Burial Trust, the mortality rate grew 2.5 times in December, reaching about 1400 people per day (42,000 per month). Yet accuracy of such data could be questioned, for several reasons. One is that starvation as the increasingly important cause of civilian deaths required devising new categories for coding mass death[11]. As odd as this might seem, medical authorities did not code such death as "starvation", but instead used categories for causes that might stem from starvation[12]. What was the authority able to "see" in these new circumstances? Also, the increasing amount of death began to overwhelm the state, clouding its vision. By the end of November 1941, ZAGS failed to issue death certificates in hospitals on the day that a person died, and relatives had to wait several days for the certificate. On December 10, 1941, city authorities allocated extra labor to ZAGS branches across Leningrad (two additional people per branch); the ten largest hospitals received the right to issue death certificates themselves. Civilian deaths at home were registered by the local militia and housing management bureau (*zhilkontora*). On December 25, 1941, Lengorispolkom allowed as a "temporary measure" the burial of the dead on lists provided by appropriate hospitals and other medical institutions following registrations of those deaths at ZAGS. To collect those who died at home or on the streets, morgues were created in each district of the city. On request of relatives, morgues had to issue special papers for receiving corpses[13].

Challenges to seeing death went beyond making sense of exactly what they were seeing. Another challenge to pre-war sight was that there were some Soviet citizens the state simply did not see, because it did not know where or how to look. The police might find corpses, but the most important record-keeper was families and friends of the dead, who might alert the police to those deaths. In particular, this was the case with refugees. Dozens of thousands of civilians who were unregistered with the city authorities and lived in the city before the war, or had become refugees there, perished during the Blockade with no record at all. About a hundred thousand civilian refugees from the Baltics, Pskov, and Novgorod had fled from the Nazis to

Leningrad and were caught in the siege. Some were evacuated in September and October 1941 across Lake Ladoga, and those who remained were left to their own desperate devices. Together with city residents living alone after their families were evacuated or who had no families at all in Leningrad, this group was almost missed from bureaucratic records, especially when most factories were closed temporarily for lack of electricity. In fact, there was often nobody to report the death of these people, whether they died at home or on the streets. The police were busy with other business and not always interested in discovering the names of those who died on the street. Hence, the registration of such cases was very complicated.

Another significant factor hindering an accurate count of the dead was that many practices regarding the dead were in institutional shadows and thus not directly in the state's line of vision: seeing the dead, in other words, was complicated by the fact that the state had to investigate the murkiness of institutional shadows. One shadow strategy was civilians hiding their dead for purposes of survival. By not alerting the authorities to a death, the survivors retained the dead person's ration cards and could augment their own food supply. Hiding corpses was also beneficial for opportunistic cadres in housing management (the infamous *upravdom*) and in the city's bureau on accounting for ration cards. These cadres could enrich themselves in the first Blockade winter in a similar way, by not reporting the dead but retaining their ration cards and obtaining extra food (which they could consume or sell in shadow markets). In a way, for a short period of time, the interests of poor people whose rations were miserable coincided with those of opportunistic officials, and they both played this game of survival or profit against the state. On the other hand, Ivan Andreenko told Daniil Granin in the 1980s that in late autumn 1941, about 90,000 rations cards were not exchanged by Leningraders at bread shops to get their bread rations — meaning that those people likely died or were close to death and had no one to take their ration cards to bakeries, so that nobody could use those cards[14]. Also, directors of factories and institutions reported inflated data on the number of workers at their organizations, thus playing yet another role in this game. A discussion of assistance to heavily exhausted people at a Leningrad Party bureau meeting on January 9, 1942, shed light on this issue. Aleksei Kuznetsov noted that it was surprising that the number of ration cards issued in January 1942 was 15,000 less than the number issued in December 1941, while at a minimum 50,000 people had been evacuated and about the same number had died. Kuznetsov said, "We have a reduction at a minimum of 100,000, but according to the number of ration cards, the population declined just by 15,000. Is this abuse, or is it not? For sure, it is abuse. Who does this? It is directors of factories and institutions who submit inflated figures, and those figures are not checked properly. And the number of workers in January grew by 12,000. I am not sure that the working class grew in January... Why did all this happen? Because they began cheating Party and Soviet institutions..."[15]

When the Blockade was lifted and Extraordinary Commission on Investigation of Crimes committed by the Germans began to work, additional information became available. First, those who hid corpses of the dead in frozen apartments sand rooms during the first Blockade winter to collect their ration cards eventually had to report those deaths. Second, some Leningraders evacuated from the city made inquiries

about the fate of those who stayed in besieged Leningrad and with whom communication was lost. Appropriate checks by police and housing managers resulted in different findings: some people were reported as missing, some as evacuated, and others as dead. Third, the Blockade death toll increased substantially after independent scholars began to count as victims of the siege those who have died either during evacuation or shortly after it from hunger or related deceases.

In sum, a combination of fragmented bureaucratic structures and procedures, strategies for survival and opportunism, and the massive number of dead clouded the state's vision of how many civilians perished at any given time. This would contribute to later politics of the real number of the dead, and by extension the real quality and competence of the Soviet state under wartime duress[16]. The desperate need to figure out the number of the dead, and the next question of what to do with them and how to reduce the death toll, drove pragmatism in how the Soviet state in Leningrad looked out onto its society. But by not having an accurate figure of how many died, the state also did not have entirely accurate information on the number of the living, which could affect provision for the civilian population: more deaths meant fewer mouths to feed and thus higher rations, and vice versa. The practices and structures clouding the state's vision of the dead also clouded its vision of the living.

Seeing the Living I: Labor. Life and death are two sides to the same (human) coin, and so seeing and seeking death had repercussions on how the Soviet regime saw and sought life — especially because mass death threatened the regime's capacity to prosecute the war and defend the city and Motherland, and because mass death could threaten the regime's very legitimacy (and this in the city where wartime deprivation sparked the February Revolution). We can also add that *labor* was clearly in the state's field of vision, and so threats to the labor force would also be in its vision — as would the nature of labor that dealt with collecting and disposing of the dead. Even with 3.2 million people in 1941, Leningrad still needed hundreds of thousands of new hands for ambitious projects. In addition to further development of military factories, the city was going to begin labor-intensive construction of the city's metro. More manpower was also required for social services, such as medical care, education, public catering, and utilities. In the late 1940, the Leningrad planning committee conducted a special study into labor resources in the city to seek reserves for growing industrial and construction needs. The findings came to a series of key conclusions: there were about 50,000 men aged 16–59 not employed in any sector of Leningrad's economy, and about 340,000 women of the same age group could cover the labor demand of 175,000 people. The use of women was conditional on availability of day-care facilities and nursery schools. Significant "hidden" labor reserves were found in industry (30,000 people), transportation (10,000 people), construction (8,000 people), retail (4,000 people). There were about 10,000 office workers who could be transferred to other sectors of economy, including manufacturing[17]. Regarding general data on demography in pre-war Leningrad, the city administration[18] collected and analyzed detailed data on birth rates, mortality[19], number of marriages and divorces, and leading causes of death. It is no exaggeration to say that Smolny kept a very close eye on all strata in Leningrad.

One area that would grow in significance in the grander scheme of Leningrad labor was that of disposal of the dead. The main agent for such labor and services was Burial Trust. On the day war broke out (June 22, 1941), Burial Trust received additional resources for transportation (twelve buses and 34 horses); workshops to produce coffins, monuments, fences, and the like for the dead; and 109 gravediggers, 64 janitors, and 77 watchmen. Eleven cemeteries were at disposal of the Trust for burials. By August 1941, light morgues were built in six of the main cemeteries. All of this seemed to suffice at that moment. Tragically, this was an underestimation of the needs for disposal labor. The enormous mortality rate in Leningrad caused enormous problems with burial of corpses. The Trust failed to deliver due to the lack of all necessary resources to carry out their tasks. Of 109 gravediggers, 49 died from hunger; there were not enough trucks to handle the increasing number of the dead; and the cemeteries filled quickly. (In the first months of war, most burials were in individual graves.) Civilians sought private services for coffins, transportation, and cemetery plots for their deceased kith and kin. On December 18, 1941, two employees of Burial Trust wrote a letter to the Leningrad City chairman Petr Popkov, arguing for burying civilian dead in mass graves (*bratskie mogily*) before mass burials "became a serious political problem"[20]. The "political problem" was twofold, which the state's vision initially missed: the aesthetics of disposal, and growing markets for disposal. There already had been some inkling in Smolny that extraordinary measures would need to be taken: already in November, expecting a substantial rise in the wartime death toll, the Trust excavated 280 tranches (dimensions 20 × 2.5 × 1.7 m). This was far from enough. In December 1941 there were around 7,000 unburied corpses near hospitals, morgues, and evacuation stations. On December 25, 1941, the Chief Manager of Burial Trust was fired and put on trial for allowing this to happen. In response to the new and growing crises of disposing of the dead, the City Council authorized digging mass graves near existing cemeteries as well on Decembrists' Island, Vesely Poselok, and Piskarevka[21]. Four excavators, 200 gravediggers, and extra rations (including vodka or wine) were supposed to improve productivity of cleaning the city of corpses. In January 1942, each city district assigned 400 workers to help with collecting and burring corpses. During winter up to 4000 people worked daily in cemeteries of Leningrad. Usually in the winter 1941–1942, truck drivers transporting corpses to cemeteries had to produce papers from morgues that indicated the number of corpses in their trucks. According to one former official at Piskarёvka, there were cases when truck drivers did not bring any papers to the cemetery. As a result, many real corpses delivered were not registered and did not end up in data bases (such as they were at the time)[22].

At the end of 1941 and into 1942, the state began looking more closely at labor, and not only at Burial Trust's needs to get the job done. City Police Chief Grushko, NKVD officials, and various investigators — whose jobs were to be on the lookout for disorder — turned to disposal work with a critical eye. They found three things to criticize: the pace of work, aesthetics of said work, and emerging shadow markets in disposing of civilian dead[23]. First, disposal work was going far too slowly, although this was in part to insufficient labor and supplies (from special clothing and soap for workers, to lime for mass graves, to gasoline for tractors)[24]. Second, disposal work

was not following norms of discipline and tidiness (to the extent this was possible); corpses were scattered around cemetery sites and stacked almost chaotically in sheds and other places. For Grushko in particular, this created an image of disrespect for civilian dead. Whether Grushko personally felt outrage at this disrespect, he certainly believed that this could spark some civilian backlash and discontent[25]. Third, some gravediggers were taking payment in rubles, vodka, and bread to dispose of the civilian dead in some meaningful manner, from digging an individual grave to placing the dead in a particular part of a mass grave so that relatives would have some idea of where their late relative were resting eternally. Civilians wrote about such practices[26], and soon the state found out. In part to reduce shadow trade in death services, gravediggers and cemetery officials were forbidden from taking the dead out of coffins, so that disposal personnel could not then resell these coffins on the side to grieving civilians[27]. A later investigation into Burial Trust work revealed some degree of the extent of such market practices, and how some officials and gravediggers demanded payment to do their jobs with respect formally demanded of them anyway[28]. For all Grushko's demands for discipline and punishment, however, there was little the state could do except look — seeing like a disempowered, not just starving, state.

Seeing the Living II: Mothers. In the living the Soviet state saw not only real (and threatened) labor; in the dead they see lost labor, soldiers, and loyalty. When states look for the dead, they leave open the possibility of figuring out why they died so that they can control death more readily — thus defending the living. Those living can contribute military labor (e. g. soldiers), or they can comprise a combination of material support (e. g. producing for the war effort and the general economy) and symbolic support (loyalty and morale to defend the regime's back as it fights external enemies). Thus, Soviet state and Communist Party looked out not only for the working and the dead, but others who were living — not necessarily out of any liberal inclinations to care for the personal well-being of the civilian population, but certainly to defend the wellspring of legitimacy and material production. Yet seeing the living was then joined by deciding what to do about them, and for this issue during the war and Blockade, the state had to make difficult and sometimes harsh choices. In his (in)famous *Leningrad v blokade*, Dmitrii Pavlov, the representative of the State Defense Committee in Leningrad charged with food policy, cited Lenin's claim in 1921 that food distribution cannot be viewed through the prism of fairness. Food distribution , instead, a tool for increasing production, and food distribution should privilege those needed for higher productivity[29].

But the state's vision was not uniform across the civilian field. Rather, that vision was shaped by different measures of utility. Living bodies that could contribute to the war effort received the relatively kindest gaze and best rations. (This did not always sit well with other civilians, who sometimes wrote scathing letters to Smolny protesting this injustice and claiming that they, too, made important contributions to the war effort)[30]. One way to "look" for and at the living was through occasional registration of ration cards. In this way, the regime could know who was alive and the worth of their labor, so that rations could be adjusted as per the regime's judgment of worth. While abuses of ration cards could skew the perception of how many living

Table 1

Nutrition norms for pregnant women, 1942

Food	Daily ration in grams	Calories
Bread	500	947
Meat	100	108
Sugar	100	387
Cereal	133	364
Butter	60	472
Milk	500	350
Dry fruits	50	152
Total		2,780

Source: TsGAIPD SPb, f. 4000, op. 20, d. 23, l. 121.

civilians were in the city — and there were various strategies for opportunistic, beyond those noted earlier — overall the regime kept a decent measure of the living, perhaps better than that of the dead. In some cases, looking for the living involved measures not only of current worth to the war effort, but also future worth (labor) as well as current worth (legitimacy). One such lens of vision was expecting and new mothers. Children were an important anchor of valence in the city[31], such that the regime could not entirely ignore them or their mothers. On January 3, 1942, Smolny decided to increase food rations for those women who expected babies in four months or less[32]. By spring 1942, it evaluated the situation of maternity clinics and birth rates. This vision seemed pretty clear: data on rations, overall conditions in clinics, infant mortality was very detailed and complete[33]. The clear problem was that pregnant women needed extra nutrition, for obvious reasons, but they were not getting in clinics. Table 1 provides data on their rations.

In fact, pregnant women received only a half of rations that they were supposed to receive, according to usual clinical literature and norms. As a result, there were too many premature babies weighing under 2,000 grams — significant for newborn children. A sharp decline in the quality of work by staff in maternity clinics, bad health conditions for newborn babies, low temperatures in the clinics, and a lack of breast milk (due to mothers' near-starvation diets) led not only to rising numbers of premature births, but also to "unacceptably high infant mortality" (table 2).

The mortality rate among women giving birth sharply increased as well. In January 1941, only 0.15 percent of such women died. By January 1942, the rate was already 3.7 percent, rising to 9.1 percent in February. To reduce infant mortality, Smolny ordered to increase medical control over pregnant women, to raise their food and vitamins supplies, and to provide maternity clinics with electricity and firewood[34].

Such vantage points came from the state's own volition, its own attempt to look at various parts of Leningrad society from various angles. Sometimes civilians

Table 2

Mortality of newborn children in Leningrad, January-February 1942

Month	# of births	Births			Born dead	# that died after birth		
		Total	Normal	Premature		Total	Normal	Premature
January	2202	2110	1304	906	86	539	143	396
February	1590	1594	636	958	136	473	80	397

Source: TsGAIPD SPb, f. 4000, op. 20, d. 23, l. 124.

themselves could leap into the state's line of vision. One important way was through letters to the regime. Almost every day Party and City Council officials received hundreds of letters from starving Leningraders, whose voices were no less informative or convincing than dry statistical data. Many letters were addressed to Andrei Zhdanov and Ivan Andreenko (who made public announcements about food). After January 1942, many of these letters were re-routed to the newly organized Food Commission, whose job was to pass judgment on contingent or extraordinary requests of situations concerning doling out extra food. While the majority of letters were pleas for marginal extra portions of food (which is about what they got), some letters suggested policy innovations for civilian well-being. Some suggestions recommended — in so many words — seeing the civilian population less as a source of labor or soldiers, and more as junior partners in governance and defense of the city. For example, on January 11, 1942, one schoolteacher (surname Michurina) wrote a detailed letter to Zhdanov. She offered him a series of measures which aimed at better management in food distribution, including public control over heads of canteens, improvement of medical services, bringing to Leningrad vitamins, drugs and medical doctors, and arranging fast death registration and burial of corpses. She also made a strong point on the need to explain people through the radio how to consume daily rations, and how to behave in case sickness. Finally, she asked Zhdanov to make a speech on the radio to raise public morale[35]. This letter was forwarded to Popkov. Zhdanov also asked him to make a speech on the radio.

From Theocratic to Pragmatic Sight?

Bolshevism was consistently afflicted with double vision before the war: the need for real data on the state of the economy, demographics, and political loyalty; but also a fixation on "counter-revolution" grounded (especially since the Civil War) in a mentality of constant class war and a routinized paranoia born of roots in its pre-Revolutionary underground existence. In a sense, this was s double *theocratic* vision born of ideological dreams of a new alternative modernity, and born of fear of competing visions and ideologies that could undercut the regime's very *raison d'etre*. While we do not disagree with this appraisal of Bolshevik political culture, we also suggest it is limited and static. Much received scholarly wisdom of the ages is that Bolshevik political culture was grounded in Marxism-Leninism and in ideology

generally, and that Bolshevism was incapable of pragmatic adaptations and evolution. By a "pragmatic" logic we do not mean pragmatic twists and turns in policy in the name of defending the purity of the ideology and its carrier, the Communist Party[36]. We mean that the core logic of Bolshevism could have evolved away from ideological purity and a theocratic core (e. g. of Marxism-Leninism), towards a more pragmatic form of rule *in general*, with the core norm the maintenance of the Community Party's monopoly of power[37]. This is one core argument of the project from which this paper is drawn.

We suggest that a moral of this brief story is that the double vision we noted early could resolve around a more pragmatic, and even realistic, vision in which high modernism and institutionalized suspicion were downplayed, in favor of a more pragmatic vision and more pragmatic policies as a result. If this was the case, then this suggests that the Bolshevik logic of authority could also shift, from theocracy and its practices of ideological purity and double vision, to a more pragmatic authoritarianism in which ideology and its symbolic trappings, while not unimportant, were not longer required touchstones for politics and political economy. We know that this did not happen: *zhdanovshchina*, the Leningrad Affair, the Doctor's Plot, and high Stalinism generally were the history that unfolded. However, that history did unfold this way does not mean that it would *inevitably* unfold this way. Had Stalin died soon in 1945 or soon after (or had some magical change of heart), this pragmatism would not have led immediately to capitalism and parliamentary democracy: Soviet elites and officials were too invested in Bolshevik socialism, whether by habit or belief (or both). However, if Bolshevik *logics* of governance (not just outward appearances) could shift in a non-trivial fashion during the war, then those shifts would leave legacies and reveal that the Soviet political economy could have shifted, perhaps towards a "NEP reboot". That it ultimately would not evolve towards pragmatic authoritarianism is the historical record; what happened to that pragmatism after the war, and in the 1960s, is a bigger thesis for a different time. Yet this possible alternative compels us to rethink the nature of Soviet institutions, authority, political economy — and even Stalinism.

[1] Scott J. C. *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven, 1998).

[2] These are Stephen Kotkin's claims about foundations of Bolshevik political culture: Kotkin S. *Stalin, vol. I: Paradoxes of Power* (New York, 2014); Kotkin S. *Stalin, vol. II: Waiting for Hitler* (New York, 2017). We are in some agreement with this, but not entirely, as we discuss in the conclusion.

[3] For one initial exploration of Blockade Bolshevism as a possible pragmatic turn in the Bolshevik logic of rule, see: Hass J. K., Lomagin N. A. "Making Peace with War: Adaptation and the Soviet Political Economy in the Blockade of Leningrad", *Modern History of Russia*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2020, pp. 53–69.

[4] Amir Weiner also explores the effect of the war on Soviet political culture—but he does so by examining the politics of framing World War II *after* the war itself. Whether the experience of World War II left any legacies in institutions and practices is elided. — Weiner A. *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, 2001).

[5] Cherepenina N. Yu. "Famine and death in a blocked city", in *Zhizn i smert v blokirovannom Leningrade,* eds John Barber and Andrei Dzeniskevich (St. Petersburg, 2001), pp. 35–80.

[6] Merridale C. *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (London, 2000).

[7] Leningrad NKVD (militia and state security), as well as healthcare institutions and the registry office, provided accurate information about deaths in Leningrad until rapid growth by mid-December 1941.

[8] Burial Trust was formed as a cooperative in the 1920s to meet civilians' funeral needs and later included in the city's Administration of Enterprises for Communal Services. — Sazanov A. *Pokhoronnoe delo v Rossii: istoriia i sovremennost'* (St. Petersburg, 2001).

[9] TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2b, d. 5115, l. 108.

[10] E. g.: TsGA SPb, f. 7384, op. 3, d. 58, l. 122.

[11] Hass J. *Wartime Suffering and Survival: The Human Condition under Siege in the Blockade of Leningrad, 1941–1944* (New York, 2021), chap. 6.

[12] TsGA SPb, f. 9156, op. 6, d. 5, l. 140–141.

[13] *Povsednevnie dokumenti leningradtsev v godi voiny i blokadi 1941–1945 gg.*, ed. by N. Yu. Cherepenina (St. Petersburg, 2020), pp. 18–19.

[14] *"Liudi khotiat znat'". Istoriia sozdaniia 'Blokadnoi Knigi' Alesia Adamovicha i Daniila Granina* (St. Petersburg, 2021), p. 39.

[15] *Blokada v resheniiakh rukovodiaschikh partiinykh organov Leningrada 1941–1944 gg. Postanovleniia biuro leningradskikh gorkoma i obkoma VKP(b), stenogrammy zasedanii. Chast' 1. Iiun' 1941 g. — mart 1942 g.,* comp. K. A. Boldovskii (St. Petersburg, 2019), p. 482–483.

[16] At the Nuremburg trial, the Soviet government reported about 650,000 registered deaths from 1941 to January 1944, explained as resulting mostly from starvation, bombardments, stress, and exposure. Studies by Leningrad historians V. Kovalchuk and G. Sobolev in the 1960s suggested a death toll of at least 800,000, but their findings were rejected by Soviet elites mainly for reasons of high politics. The main argument was that revising the Nuremburg count could undermine trust in other evidence and might raise serious questions about bad management during the war in such areas as evacuation, food supplies, and healthcare.

[17] TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2b, d. 5115, l. 2–3, 82–86.

[18] The Department of the national accounts of Leningrad provided general information on demographical changes in the city. The sector of population and healthcare of this department recorded the leading causes of death and made month to month and year to year comparisons (TsGAIPD SPb, f. 24, op. 2b, d. 5115, l. 108–113).

[19] Data on mortality was provided about every age group for each of fifteen districts, as well as Kolpino, Kronshtadt, Peterhof, and Pushkin.

[20] TsGA SPb, f. 7384, op. 17, d. 282, l. 17; Dzeniskevich A. R. *Leningrad v osade. Sbornik dokumentov o geroicheskoi oborone Leningrada v godi Velikoi Otechestvennoi voini 1941–1944* (St. Petersburg, 1995), pp. 279–280.

[21] The mass graves at Piskarevka became the largest: 371,428 corpses were buried in that cemetery between December 1941 and June 1942. The regional NKVD reported that 274,273 people died in Leningrad in January–March 1942. — Dzeniskevich, *Leningrad v osade*, p. 298.

[22] *"Liudi khotiat znat'"*, p. 37. The total number of corpses buried at Piskarevka might be more than 700,000 in reality, in contrast to the lower official number (over 500,000).

[23] For more on the political economy of disposal and competing fields of power and labor, see: Hass J. *Wartime Suffering and Survival*, chap. 6; Hass J. K. "War, Fields, and Competing Economies of Death. Lessons from the Blockade of Leningrad", *Poetics*, vol. 48, 2015, pp. 55–68.

[24] E. g.: TsGA SPb, f. 7384, op. 17, d. 234, l. 9, 14; op. 3, d. 58, l. 7–9, 23.

[25] TsGA SPb, f. 7384, op. 4, d. 67, l. 17; op. 17, d. 234, l. 26–27.

[26] E. g.: TsGAIPD SPb, f. 4000, op. 11, d. 35, l. 43; TsGALI SPb, f. 107, op. 3, d. 321, l. 10, 12.

[27] TsGALI SPb, f. 7384, op. 17, d. 234, l. 10.

[28] Ibid., f. 7384, op. 4, d. 78, l. 110–113.

[29] Pavlov D. *Leningrad v blokade* (Moscow, 1958), p. 56–57 (Lenin V. I. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 43, p. 359).

[30] TsGAIPD SPb, f. 4000, op. 20, d. 60, l. 73–74.

[31] Cf.: Hass J. *Wartime Suffering and Survival*, chap. 3.

[32] *Blokada v resheniiakh*, p. 523.

[33] TsGAIPD SPb, f. 4000, op. 20, d. 40, l. 119–124.

[34] Ibid., d. 23, l. 122–124.

[35] Ibid. d. 40, l. 12–15.

[36] This is the argument put forward by Julie Hessler: Hessler J. *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917–1953* (Princeton, 2004).

[37] In other words, post-war Bolshevism could have drawn on this pragmatic logic and become something akin to China today: a communist party with a monopoly on political authority and maintaining some claims to “socialism,” but ultimately pursuing power for its own sake (privilege)—perhaps with the nation as a new symbolic core.

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Abstract: State elites and officials “see” their polities and societies through ideological and symbolic lenses that shape what they seek and perceive as they devise policies. But what happens to that sight and vision during moments of challenge and duress, and with what effect on policies? This article uses the example of the Blockade of Leningrad to begin an exploration of this subject. The pre-war Soviet state and Communist Party had a “double vision”, seeing Soviet society as an object for utopian plans and projects (a “high modernist” vision), and as an amorphous source of constant potential risk (e. g. counter-revolution). Extreme duress and challenges to survival from the Blockade challenged both facets of this double vision. What began to emerge was a more pragmatic vision centered on maintaining state authority and political order. We use state perception of and policies towards death and, as an extension, defending (civilian) life. Brief explorations of how state elites and officials perceived death, disposal labor (coping with corpses), and life (mothers) reveals a more realistic pragmatism, less deferent to ideology, beginning to emerge. We conclude that this points to a possible “Blockade Bolshevism” as a shifting formula of rule and possibilities of a “NEP reboot” lost to high Stalinism after the war.

Keywords: blockade, Leningrad, World War II, stalinism, food, rationing.

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