

M. David-Fox

Tragic Agency and a Final Rubicon

This is a book about extremes; it's about what happens to a city, a society, the Soviet system when subjected to the extreme shocks of hunger, starvation, and siege. In a purely analytical sense, the extreme shocks of starvation and suffering from almost a kind of natural experiment, rare in history and social science. Hass doesn't use that term but discusses how the Soviet system was "tested" in making the case that the Blockade is a "better case" than Stalingrad or the defense of Moscow "for making sense of war, duress, and survival" (p. 4). I am sympathetic to this basic premise and thrust of the book, because I am personally looking at the war, studying regime change and Nazi occupation (in Smolensk), with a similar mission of uncovering what these shocks reveal about the dynamics of this age of extremes.

I'll start by discussing the book's treatment of one disturbing, even gruesome phenomenon as a prism into the book's approach and findings. Brace yourself: I will be discussing cannibalism. I choose to do this because in a work where food and lack of food is at the very center of analysis, cannibalism is perhaps the most extreme transgression of the status quo ante, what Hass calls "a final Rubicon".

Before I read this book I did not think about cannibalism seriously, although I've encountered it in researching Nazi starvation camps for POWs and, as I suspect many in Soviet history have, in the context of the rural famines of the early 1920s and early 1930s. In those contexts, the fact of cannibalism is often mentioned to confirm the extent and depth of starvation, the extent of the catastrophe, the revulsion of witnesses and survivors.

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The discussion in this book is of urban cannibalism. With Leningrad, Hass has at his disposal all the diaristic and other sources that entails. More important, he makes the breaking of this severe taboo part of a broader discussion of transgressing norms — what Hass calls “tragic agency” — in the realm of “local, personal relations”. Hass treats cannibalism as one extreme part of what he terms in the introduction the “fields of intimacy and community” and the “moral economy of dignity”. Civilians in the blockade were torn, in Hass’ words, between “survival and sympathy, egoism and altruism, cooperation and opportunism” in the midst of what one diarist vividly called the “dictatorship of the stomach” and “food psychosis” (p. 92, 108, 109).

In this book, then, consuming human flesh is not merely invoked as a shocking fact. It is situated as the extreme on a continuum of norm-breaking in terms of what was considered food: glue, dirt, stray and domestic animals. People who ate cats were called *koshkoedy* and those who ate dogs, *sobakoedy*, after the term for cannibalism, *liudoedstvo*. There was no criminal law against cannibalism, so those convicted were charged with banditry, and if deemed sane they were shot. But in practice prosecutors treated *trupoeedstvo*, the consumption of corpses, less harshly than *liudoedstvo*, killing for human flesh. Hass remarks that data show “fewer cases than one might expect”: at the height of mass starvation in winter 1942, 366 were arrested; in the first half of February 1942, 494 were arrested.

The authorities, however, are not at the center of this discussion. Cannibalism was the “clearest manifestation” of what Hass calls tragic agency — decision-making by people outside the state who take decisions and make choices at a moment of unprecedented danger to survival. This heightened agency is tragic because it is forced and compelled in the face of death. In this case the action they takes threatens the norms of culture and civilization, what is taken to be human.

Key to this discussion is not only the prevalence and punishment of cannibalism, therefore, but the symbolic dimensions of the transgression. We hear the voice of one 17-year-old male who, fired from his job and walking by a graveyard, admitted to stealing corpses. He excused himself by invoking rumors suggesting he was not alone, by blaming wartime violence, by [quote] “framing cannibalism as a fleeting deviation from a normal cultured self”. He begged for mercy to study music. The Tribunal ordered him shot.

As this suggests the widespread rumors about meat pies at the *rynok* as well as publicly visible manifestations of cannibalism, that is mutilated corpses, forced a much broader reckoning by those who resisted or refused to cross the Rubicon. The rumors suggest that many resisted with scare stories about the dark side of humanity. As Hass remarks, “cannibalism sheds special light on order and dignity under assault, especially what was *not* done”. Resisting cannibalism meant refusing to be dehumanized; Hass concludes that the “grip of ‘civilization’ was profound” (p. 128). In only one case do we see a cannibal deliberately, even gleefully, transgressing taboos: 17 years old, a Leningrad version of Hannibal Lecter, accused of cutting of the head of a corpse, when asked why by the judge, replied: “You cannot imagine how ideally tasty fried human brain is. Do you understand? It has the ideal taste”.

What we observe here is that Hass uses evidence from courts and authorities, but his treatment yields its results through consideration of the “fields of intimacy and community”. Field, of course, comes from Bourdieu. It may seem a bit incongruous to transition from a discussion of cannibalism to a discussion of Bourdieu, but not in the context of this book. Hass is what you might call a fan, follower, or acolyte of Bourdieu — habitus and capital and fields underpin his framework. The Introduction delineates three fields he will treat — power, labor and economy, and intimacy. At one point, on p.224, discussing the usual suspects of Hellbeck and Halfin and quote-unquote Soviet subjectivity, he even declares in an aside: “I trade Foucault for Bourdieu”.

The topic of this roundtable has to do with the author meeting his critics. From that I take it that my role should include that of critic. Let me sort out what I think is a contribution from framework shaped by Bourdieu and what I would question and critique.

I’ve already tried to suggest that the framework of the field of intimacy and community as something distinguishable from the power and authority of the party-state is an accomplishment. It yields the results I’ve tried to show in the discussion of cannibalism. It is an approach that gets us beyond the dichotomy between institutions and structures vs. individual agency, as noted in the conclusion. But it also differs from the categories and approaches most commonly deployed by historians when they have relating individual and social agency: social groups, everyday life, individual biography and world-view, Foucauldian subjectivity.

I agree with the conclusion on p.329 that local communities were “more than reenacting a Stalinist grand narrative and subjectivity, both of which sound dramatic but are less useful if we explore causation and variation”. I’ve been saying for years that “subjectivity” suffers from a problem of scale — if we talk in the singular of a singular, overarching Soviet subjectivity — as well as an acute empirical problem of variation.

That said, the whole discussion of Bourdieu versus Foucault brought me back to the theory wars of the 1990s. One reason I like History is that one can remain what the Soviet Marxists disparagingly called an eclectic. Even the subjectivity twins, Hellbeck and Halfin, whose work has actually evolved over the decades and the first of whom objects to forever being linked to the second over one article they co-authored in 1996, do not own a monopoly on Foucault. His core concept of governmentality, how states envision and attempt to shape citizens, has almost never been explored in Soviet history.

In Hass’ treatment the handling of existing scholarship or historiography is a bit foreign to me. My approach is that if I can, I try to engage and build on previous works, looking for where they can amplify or clarify my own arguments. In a series of footnotes, our author tends to carve out one thing to praise about a scholar’s work in advance of dismissing other more devastating inadequacies. I personally came to this book not having read a ton on the blockade beyond Bidlack and the major study by Alexis Peri. After reading this book, I can say that to my reading, in terms of what I learned and took away, there was more overlap and potential dialogue between Peri and Hass than this book allows.

Where I think the Bourdieu framework is not so much mistaken as unnecessary is in terms of the “fields of power”. It comes up at the beginning and in various chapters in the guise of the power center at Smolny and “state officials and professionals” acting according to bureaucratic logic. But what do we get from delineation of a field here? It does not yield new insights the way that the field of intimacy and community does. By the end of the book the discussion of power (p. 331) — the section on “power and compelled, tragic agency” — has no mention of field.

Further: is it *fields* of power in the plural as in many parts of the book, or *field* of power in the singular as on p. 25? Perhaps Bourdieu’s French is at fault here: in “*les champs de pouvoir*”, “*champs*” or field is in the plural. Bourdieu also used the terms *champs administratif* or *champs bureaucratique*, I think in his later lectures. Deploying those terms might achieve much the same thing but would not have the effect of taking power in other senses off the table, especially in the sense of power relations, not to mention power as knowledge and power as ideology. Maybe the sense this book uses “the field of power” does not preclude those other angles, but, for example, I don’t recall seeing the word “ideology” in this book and it does not appear in the index. That seems like a missing piece in any discussion of Stalinism or the human condition in this ideological war. I am happy to be enlightened, but I don’t see Bourdieu’s contributions to the theory of the state (adding to Weber the symbolic dimensions of the monopoly on violence) as overly relevant to the Stalinist state or total war.

If I were a social scientist (which I am not) and I were writing this book (which I could not), or if I had been a reviewer of the manuscript (which I was not) I would have made *food* into the explicit Leitmotif, or, if you want to call it that, the master variable. Extreme deprivation of food and what it does — materially, symbolically, socially, politically, culturally — defines the shock to the system this book explores and remains the pervasive factor throughout. That would have been in my humble opinion the most elegant and focused design. Instead, the book reaches for the “human condition” in the title. It shows great ambition in doing so. But as a result it puts many, many balls up in the air in the introduction and conclusion. I certainly understand the temptation after immersing oneself in the Blockade of Leningrad, however, to make humanity itself the topic of conversation.

I’ll end with one of those balls in play: the issue of agency. Historians including in our field, and I’ve been saying this for years, have long invoked agency in a simplistic way. It’s become in many cases a ritualistic form of endorsing the importance of whatever usually subaltern group one is working on. We rarely think about it rigorously. In Hass’ words, “We assume ‘agency’ is positive and implies capacity to realize oneself. It might be less so when it is compelled and involves thinking the unthinkable”. Hass treats cannibalism as the most horrific and concentrated form of compelled agency. Historians of Stalinism, National Socialism, and other catastrophic and extreme moments in history would benefit from considering the workings of a kind of agency that became, as he puts it at the end, a “poisoned chalice” .

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Abstract: Author believes that this book is about exploring what happens to a city, a society, the Soviet system when subjected to extreme shock, such as hunger, starvation and siege. Jeffrey Hass looks at how the Soviet system was "tested" by these events, making the case that the Blockade is a "better case" than Stalingrad or the defense of Moscow for understanding the war, duress and survival. The book discusses cannibalism as a prism into the book's approach and findings. It looks at the breaking of the severe taboo and how people were torn between survival and sympathy, egoism and altruism, cooperation and opportunism in the midst of the "dictatorship of the stomach" and "food psychosis". It shows how consuming human flesh was seen as the extreme on a continuum of norm-breaking in terms of what was considered food. Jeffrey Hass explores the authorities' handling of cases of cannibalism, the prevalence and punishment of the phenomenon, as well as the symbolic dimensions of the transgression. It looks at the voices of people who violated the taboo, and the mercy they asked for. The book is ultimately about the heightened agency people were forced to take in the face of death, and the tragic decisions they made in order to survive.

Keywords: Blockade, Leningrad, World War II, survival, institutions, culture, power, resilience, social theory.

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