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The Leningrad Blockade through the Lens of Historical Sociology and Social History

Jeffrey Hass' study of the blockade is in many ways path-breaking. An exacting interdisciplinary investigation of the 872-day blockade, it harnesses insights supplied by fields such as history, sociology, economics and behavioral psychology to understand how individual Leningraders survived inhuman conditions and why society in the northern capital did not collapse under the pressure of the German siege. Particularly interesting to me are Hass' findings about how the uniquely grim conditions of the blockade both challenged notions of gender and class identity and at the same time reified them, reinforcing traditional patterns and behaviors¹.

In focusing on the Leningrad siege, Hass concentrates on probably the most severe sustained experience of urban hardship, suffering and starvation in World War II. Especially the conditions experienced during the winter of 1941–1942 were so bad as to defy comparison — something that means that the book's findings may not necessarily apply to the wartime experience elsewhere in the USSR, or anywhere else in the world, for that matter. Hass is aware of this and explains that some of the goals of this study are bigger in focus than just World War II, and examine instead broader questions concerning systemic collapse. Specifically, what is it that generally determines when communities or institutions or civilizations break down? What are the sources of resilience and the capacity to adapt that allow society to survive extreme hardship?²

The uniqueness of Hass' topical and thematic focus leads me to focus my comments today on the disciplinary perspective that the book is written from — historical sociology —

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and the degree to which that may affect how various audiences will view the book's findings. Social history and historical sociology have a lot in common, of course, both being rooted in the empirical examination of society in the past. That said, they tend to approach this area of common interest in very different ways.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when the fields were most distinct, many contended that social history involved the study of particular facts while historical sociology involved the formulation of general hypotheses³. Since then, historians have come to frame their empirical work in less exceptionalist and more subjective, comparative terms, while historical sociologists have come to show more interest in particularized investigations and less interest in generalized change over time.

Nonetheless, fundamental differences between historical sociology and social history remain regarding research strategies and methodologies. Social history emphasizes the sociocultural context of separate and distinct events and actors; social historians tend to select research topics that are culturally and temporally delimited and that emerge from the contingent logic of events of a given place and period. By contrast, historical sociology stresses more generalizable theory and its verification. Given their orientation toward theory, historical sociologists tend to approach research topics in ways governed by their relevance to broader conceptual areas of scholarship⁴.

Although both social historians and historical sociologists engage in comparative historical analysis, historians do this in order to probe the distinctiveness of historical experience and phenomena, while historical sociologists engage in such work in order to identify generalizations connecting historical moments across space and time. Traditionally, this has meant that social historians focus on concrete lived experiences while their colleagues in historical sociology concentrate on broader structural continuities and transformations. Social history, as a result, tends to privilege the specificity and particularism of concrete events, as well as the contingent nature of cause and effect. Historical sociology, by contrast, concentrates on refining established theories or developing new ones capable of supplying the most convincing and comprehensive explanations for historical patterns, structures and behaviors⁵.

Put another way, social historians work inductively, attempting to make broader sense of disparate historical data. Historical sociologists, by contract, work deductively, identifying evidence capable of supporting or refuting theoretical propositions, using the comparison of case studies to either identify factors capable of explaining why we get similar historical outcomes in different contexts or, conversely, why we may observe differing outcomes in similar historical contexts⁶.

The tense relationship between social history and historical sociology has been discussed by many well-known critics such as such as Eric Hobsbawm, whose best-known essay on the subject dates to 1970⁷. Famous for its snobbery and conceit, this piece sought to coopt some well-known historical sociologists like Charles Tilly and Neil Smelser while writing off others such as Walt Whitman Rostow⁸. Hobsbawm's chief critique was that historical sociology's focus on the search for generalizable patterns and behaviors rendered it rather mechanistic. "At best", he wrote, historical sociology's "best such structural-functional patterns may be both elegant and

heuristically useful [...] At a more modest level, they may provide us with useful metaphors, concepts or terms [...], or convenient aids in ordering our material". Most of the time, implies Hobsbawm, historical sociology is just an incorrect way of doing history⁹.

Hobsbawm's objections to what he called the structural-functionalism of historical sociology related to what he saw as the discipline's tendency to stress continuity, commonality and stability, thereby depreciating contingency, diversity and change over time:

Broadly speaking, the structural-functional patterns illuminate what societies have in common in spite of their differences, whereas our problem [as historians] is with what they have not [got in common]. It is not what light Levi-Strauss's Amazonian tribes can throw on modern (indeed on any) society, but on how humanity got from the cavemen to modern industrialism or post-industrialism, and what changes to society were associated with this progress or were necessary for its to take place, or consequential upon it. Or to use another illustration, it is not to observe the permanent necessity of all human society to supply themselves with food by growing or otherwise acquiring it, but what happens when this function, having been overwhelmingly fulfilled (since the neolithic revolution) by classes of peasants forming the majority or their societies, comes to be fulfilled by small groups of other kinds of agricultural producers and may come to be fulfilled in non-agricultural ways. How does this happen and why?¹⁰

(In this case, Hobsbawm would have been likely intrigued by Hass' case study of starving Leningrad, insofar as Hass outlines in incredibly detailed, analytical terms how the entire society reverted to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle when industrial modernity's food supply system collapsed.)

Hobsbawm also expressed concern over historical sociology's ability to shed light on revolutionary periods of social conflict and upheaval — something he prioritized on account of the fact that some "important problems cannot be studied at all except in and through such moments of eruption", which cast light on "so much that is normally latent..."¹¹. In particular, historical sociology's focus on generalizable patterns, according to Hobsbawm, risked highlighting simplistic patterns or anachronistic factors taken outside of their proper historical context:

The danger of this type of study lies in the temptation to isolate the phenomenon of overt crisis from the wider context of a society undergoing transformation. This danger may be particularly great when we launch into comparative studies, especially when moved by the desire to solve problems [...], which is not a very fruitful approach in sociology or social history. What, say, riots have in common with one another (for example, "violence") may be trivial. It may even be illusory, insofar as we may be imposing an anachronistic criterion, legal, political or otherwise, on the phenomena [...]¹².

Advocating a more contextual historical accounting of concrete revolutionary upheavals, Hobsbawm argued that it is only the study of particularistic drivers and contingent cause-and effect that can, "over a period of a few decades or generations", properly inform the social history of crisis and rupture¹³.

Writing in 1970, Hobsbawm could not anticipate the progress that historical sociology and social history have made — often in tandem — in the past 50 years. In particular, he did not anticipate the effect that post-structuralist scholars like Michel

Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes would have on both fields. Foucault's decentering of power relations and the cultural turn's stress on viewing texts as subjective rather than objective historical evidence are particularly relevant here.

Hass' book reflects a lot of the progress that historical sociology has made, insofar as his study of the blockade is both subtle and multifaceted, being attentive to individual agency, the multivalence of power and change over time. That said, *Wartime Suffering and Survival* still demonstrates some elements of historical sociology that Hobsbawm criticized in 1970. In its effort to identify the generalizable, the book elides some of the particularism of the blockade context. Were prewar Soviet gender norms really traditional enough to catalyze such stark breadwinner/breadseeker categories? Were other demographic characteristics of Leningrad's population in 1941 somehow less relevant in the community's fight for survival? What about the fact that it was an unusually young, newly urban population? That it was unusually homogeneous? Unusually literate? Unusually regimented? Unusually egalitarian in socio-economic terms? Unusually used to war scares and population losses? Unusually accustomed to belt tightening and delayed gratification?

In Hass' tight chronological focus on the blockade years, how many of the practices that he draws our attention to denote *real* change over time and how many should be viewed as more temporary exigencies of war? Cannibalism, for one, would seem to be a wartime exigency. But to what extent did the reification of gender roles — not only among men, but among women — outlast the war? Was Leningrad really a bastion of conservative, traditionalist social and gender roles after the war? Did postwar Leningrad norms and practices differ from those in other areas of the USSR that had not endured such a siege?

Outside the family, within the context of state policy and public life, to what extent did the limited experiment with a wartime NEP really affect postwar norms? Did the semi-legal, barter-based markets survive the blockade? If the war had such a transformative effect on Leningrad's societal resilience and identity, why wasn't there more social protest when Stalin moved first to close the city's blockade museum and then to decapitate the leadership of its party organization? And why was this 1949 purge of the local party organization — the Leningrad Affair — so limited in scope, if power in the city had become so multivalent during the war?

Finally, in Hass' determination to use besieged Leningrad as a case study of systemic collapse, it is possible that he may end up valorizing the blockade at the expense of the rest of the USSR's wartime experience. Was Leningrad's experience typical enough to be considered representative of broader Soviet wartime social institutions? Or was it an exceptional outlier? No other cities experienced such lengthy sieges, but Sevastopol did hold out for 247 days before falling, while Stalingrad endured 163 days of close urban combat before being relieved. Other frontline cities like Tula and Kharkov also found themselves embroiled in conflict for months at a time. Did these places also demonstrate a striking reification of gender and class identities, or was that dynamic only localized within Leningrad?

All in all, *Wartime Suffering and Survival* identifies an array of fascinating dynamics during the blockade that have escaped decades of scholarly attention

since the mid-1940s. And thanks to Hass' study, we now have a whole new agenda of issues to consider regarding the study of the war, Soviet social history and the historical sociology of systemic collapse.

¹ Although Hass focuses in his gender analysis on women and their role as “breadseekers” and caregivers, a different study of the military front lines just outside Leningrad would likely have identified similarly tested and reinforced forms of masculinity in the realm of combat, comradeship, unit solidarity and discipline.

² “Wartime Suffering and Survival: The Blockade of Leningrad”, University of Manitoba, January 27, 2022. Available at: youtube.com/watch?v=4-teCmx0JVk (accessed: 01.10.2023).

³ Franzosi R., Mohr J. W. ‘New Directions in Formalization and Historical Analysis’, *Theory and Society*, no. 26, 1997, pp. 133–139; Lipset S. M. ‘History and Sociology: Some Methodological Considerations’ in *Sociology and History: Methods*, eds S. M. Lipset, R. Hofstadter (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp. 22–23.

⁴ Smelser N. J. *Essays in Sociological Explanation* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 35; Bonnell V. E. ‘The Uses of Theory, Concepts, and Comparison in Historical Sociology’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, no. 22, 1980, p. 159.

⁵ Bonnell V. E. *Op. cit.*, pp. 159–161; Skocpol T. ‘Social History and Historical Sociology: Contrasts and Complementarities’, *Social Science History*, no. 11, 1987, p. 28.

⁶ Bonnell V. E. *Op. cit.*, pp. 162–167; Skocpol T. ‘Emerging Agendas and Recurrent Strategies in Historical Sociology’ in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, ed. by T. Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 378–379.

⁷ Hobsbawm E. ‘From Social History to the History of Society (1972)’ in Hobsbawm E. *On History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998), pp. 71–92.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 76–77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90. Hobsbawm continued: “There are things about the Russian Revolution, or about human history, which can be discovered only by concentrating on the period from March to November 1917 or the subsequent Civil War, but there are other matters which cannot emerge from such a concentrated study of brief periods or crisis, however dramatic and significant”.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

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Abstract: Jeffrey Hass' study of the 872-day blockade of Leningrad is groundbreaking interdisciplinary research, weaving together history, sociology, economics and behavioral psychology to explore how individual Leningraders survived the siege's inhumane conditions and why society in the northern capital didn't collapse. He examines how the blockade challenged notions of gender and class identity and at the same time reified them, reinforcing traditional patterns and behaviors. Hass focuses on the siege of Leningrad, which was probably the most sustained experience of urban hardship, suffering and starvation in World War II. He is aware that his findings may not necessarily apply to other contexts in World War II or beyond, and instead investigates larger questions about systemic collapse, such as what determines when communities, institutions or civilizations break down and the sources of resilience that allow society to survive extreme hardship. The disciplinary perspective of the book is historical sociology, which is an empirical study of society in the past. There has been tension between social history and historical sociology, with the former emphasizing the sociocultural context of separate and

distinct events and actors, and the latter stressing more generalizable theory. Social historians focus on the distinctiveness of historical experience and phenomena, while historical sociologists investigate these topics in ways governed by their relevance to broader conceptual areas of scholarship. Historical sociology offers a deductive approach, identifying evidence capable of supporting or refuting theoretical propositions, while social history suggests an inductive methodology, attempting to make broader sense of disparate historical data. These differences have been discussed by well-known critics such as Eric Hobsbawm, who argued that historical sociology's focus on generalizable patterns and behaviors rendered it mechanistic. Hass's book, as a premier example of modern historical sociology, is careful enough to deflect many of these traditional criticisms of the field.

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

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