

A. Sloin

Inequality of Blockade Suffering and the Nature of (Soviet) Class

Jeffrey Hass' *Wartime Suffering and Survival* is a well-written, impressively-researched account of the siege of Leningrad, grounded in an extraordinary source base — diaries and written autobiographies from party records of the Blockade culled from the Central State Archives, Central Archives of Arts and Literature (TsGALI) and the Central State Archive of Historical-Political Documents (TsGAIPD), among many other archives and libraries. While a work of sociology, the book also an important study of the social history of emotions and group psychologies, theoretically informed, in the horrific suffering and desperation of the Blockade. The survivors' accounts are gripping and harrowing, revealing, as Hass shows us — habits, or modes of thought, and fields of meaning through which people made sense of and navigated the impossible choices of death and survival that gripped Leningrad in a vice.

Drawing on the insights of Primo Levi's writings on the Holocaust, Hass' book explores how Leningraders responded to conditions in which "dehumanization and duress breed extreme instrumental rationality and rend the social asunder" (p. 3). While recognizing the fundamental heroism of the population as a whole, he is more interested in the story of everyday survival. As a non-Blockade specialist, I learned a tremendous amount about the siege itself, the everyday conditions of suffering, death, and starvation, the negotiations and tactics of survival through speculation, trade, barter, theft — and the moralizing language that swirled around all of them. Through the diaries, Jeff shows how the social positionality of witnesses structured not only their survival strategies

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and odds, but also how they made sense of their intellectual, moral, and ethical choices produced by the extreme conditions.

Which brings us back again to the habits of thought, and through this, to the underlying key to this considerably unique intervention in Soviet history: Pierre Bourdieu. Following Bourdieu, Hass seeks to draw out commonalities of thought and responses among different social strata, or fields of Leningrad society under siege. He — like Bourdieu — is interested in unpacking collective responses in a way that is also deeply attentive to the individual agency and narratives people tell about themselves¹. Through Bourdieu, Jeff seeks to analyze the core reality of the siege: that all Leningraders suffered during the Blockade, but not equally or uniformly. Nor did they make uniform sense of who was to be blamed or condemned for the suffering. Rather, witnesses encountered the siege through mental frameworks of meaning-making that structured by distinctions inflected not only by ideological schooling, but also by hierarchies of gender and class — in a distinctly Bourdieuan sense.

In reconsidering the category of class throughout the Bourdieuan lens, Hass forces readers to consider anew this most basic category at the heart of Soviet history. For Hass — as for Bourdieu — class mattered in Soviet society, and emphatically during the siege, but not in the way most Soviet historians understand class; which is to say, most frequently in the terms of vulgar Marxism offered up by the Soviet regime itself. Following Bourdieu's critique of Marx, Jeff challenges the notion that class was reducible to relations of property ownership, central to the regime's claim. Moreover, as Hass suggests, the revolution itself and the conditions of Soviet society rendered these vulgar notions of class incoherent, as "the absence of private property stymies Marxian and Weberian schemes" (p. 181).

In place of schematic approaches that reduce class to relations property ownership, Hass posits Bourdieu's concept of class as distinctions of thought, values, cultural codes, and moral systems learned and acquired through socializing milieus (*habitus*)². In the Bourdieuan sense, class is a way of thinking and being in the world, of acquired discourses, habits of thought, and moral systems based on distinctions that are undoubtedly real and social. The siege intensified and threw into stark relief existing Soviet social stratifications of class formed through capital, again, in Bourdieu's sense, as resources, material or cultural, that one acquires to gain status and entry into socio-cultural milieus. Class in this Bourdieuan sense inflected attitudes towards mundane issues, like how one viewed the basic if distasteful necessity of trading on the *ryнок*. *Intelligentsy*, bound to milieus of state and ideology, tended to view the market "speculators" with disdain from a distance while allowing intermediaries to sully themselves with transactions; workers, by contrast, saw the traders as price gougers also working to survive — and, however distasteful, less detestable than privileged, overfed factory managers (pp. 199, 210). In the context of the Siege, what mattered most to the constitution of class was not relations to property ownership, but proximity to power, privilege, position, networks of the state, and above all, food. Access to food required access to state institutions, and through it (through ration cards, work cafeterias, the Academic House cafeteria, and most of all, pilfered or purchased state goods). In one brilliantly effective example of the class-food nexus, Hass recounts the rather remarkable self-centeredness of one

particular *intelligent* who complains of “starvation” because he is forced to eat bland staples procured through access to the “Academics House”, in a city where people are dying of starvation, eating pets, and getting sick from rancid flesh, street animal or human, being sold in markets (p. 189).

The subtlety of Hass’ Bourdieuan analysis — to which I have not done justice here — points to one of the most innovative aspects of this book. In a field, Soviet history, that often exhibits indifference, if not outright hostility to theory, often falsely juxtaposed against “empirical” research, this work shows how theory can actually allow deeper access into archival documents and enrich analysis. Theory helps Hass organize vast pools of archived memories into ordered form. Through Bourdieu, he focuses attention on how groups made sense of participation in practices of survival that ranged from the merely disliked or despised (going to the *rynok*) to the absolutely unthinkable decisions made in a desperately starving city. Hass’ approach offers an innovative avenue for reconceptualizing class as an agentive category that is neither rigidly over-determined, as in the old Marxian framework, nor simply “ascribed” or spoken into existence by inculcating workers into the ideological practices of “speaking Bolshevik”. An odd form of class consciousness emerges, as workers articulate anger between “us and them” — directed at the managerial and bureaucratic elites, a revived discourse from the period of the Terror (and Civil War).

Yet, to push back on the question of class, I want to return to the point about the absence of private property “stymying” a Marxian analysis of class in Soviet society. Certainly, in the vulgar sense Hass critiques, this is true. By their own logics and claims, the Bolsheviks abolished class with the revolution because they abolished private property. Yet, I would suggest that — aside from the relevant lines in the *Communist Manifesto*, which becomes the catechism of Marxian theocracy, as Jeff characterizes — Marx is quite critical of the idea that class can be reduced to relations of private property. He hammers this point in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*: it is the alienation of human labor through the process of buying and selling labor that *produces* private property³. Similarly, *Capital* begins not with the private ownership of production, but with the commodity and the buying and selling of labor power embodied or “congealed” within it. For Marx, class is produced not through ownership, but through the process of production itself⁴.

In this respect, while I find myself quite convinced of the usefulness of Bourdieu for thinking about how the class came to be reconstituted in the siege and in Soviet society generally, I am skeptical of the claim that class in the old-fashioned Marxian sense ceased to matter absent private property. The absence of class in the old-fashioned sense manifests in a curious elision: we learn much about how workers engage in the desperate struggle for consumption, but less about their actual labor and how they worked. We get rumbings about wages, frequent laments that they are too low, or complaints, like those of one diarist responding to worker complaints: “What does money mean now? One can only buy food. At the *rynok* everything is traded” (p. 68). We learn much about the licit and morally fraught ways in which people gained objects of consumption, but little of the licit means or how most people worked and were remunerated. This last point is tied directly to the question of money and monetary stability that runs throughout the book. The

evidence Hass presents is remarkably and revealingly contradictory. On one hand, people insist repeatedly (as noted above) that money has no value in the *rynok* and that only barter prevails (p. 67, 78). In a similar lament, as the price of bread in the market skyrockets to 30 rubles on the market, against the ration price of 1 ruble, 25 kopeks, an academic laments: “what is our money worth? No one wants to work for money. They only want to work for food” (p. 67, see also p. 187: “I only work for food”). Yet, clearly, in the above example, goods are being sold for money — a lot of it. In other moments, goods are bought in exchange for bartered materials, plus rubles. The degree to which money, even devalued, continued to matter can further be discerned from the story of one worker who haughtily avoided the *rynok* out of a sense of moral propriety until she lost her ration card, along with her mothers, midway through February 1942. Unable to replace them, she was forced to spend 1,365 rubles over two weeks to buy food — “an enormous sum”.

Tellingly, wages only really become a central point briefly in the text with mention to the Stalin monetary reform of 1947, when workers were informed they “would receive their next wage in new notes” (p. 222). This point underscores what is elided throughout the text: however meager, or devalued they became, and however coercive the state mechanisms for forcing people to work, the basic motive of production and remuneration remained waged labor. The fact that factories also became the primary point of access to food through cafeterias suggests not the abolition of waged labor, but rather the fact that in the context of hyperinflation, siege, scarcity, and threatening social breakdown, food also began to function as money, constituting part of the wage (and the most desperately needed part), along with being a means of acquiring goods. While this points to the degree of social and economic breakdown, it is also critical to note that the entire Blockade crisis massively amplified the intensive exploitative dynamic of the wage relationship, but did not end, overcome, or abolish it.

Read through this perspective, Jeff’s workers seem far less like a group bounded together not only by habitus and customs of thought, but also by a social system of hyper-statist domination grounded from the outset of the revolution on the wage labor form. In the context of the siege, as wages lost value (radically) and prices soared, workers complained, vilified their managerial elite bosses and distant bureaucrats, expressed outrage at the well-fed bureaucrats who attended party soirees and gorged guiltily on state-accessed celebrations while workers and those on the fringes starved and died by the hundreds of thousands. As Hass shows, the work of Bourdieu can help us understand how everyday workers made sense of the landscape of death and domination around them, and how articulations of classed anger took the form of animosity towards managerial elites and distant bureaucrats. Yet, by reconceptualizing Marx’s understanding of class as a phenomenon created through the process of proletarianization and the alienation of human labor — and not simply as one of property ownership — we can also recognize plainly how class as a socially constituted actuality of production continued to kick beneath Bourdieu’s habitus, even in the phantasmagoric horrors of Leningrad under siege.

¹ On the socially-structured nature of thought, see: Bourdieu P. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Bourdieu P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2013).

² Bourdieu P. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, pp. 72–87.

³ For Marx's clearest articulation of the relationship between wage-labor, alienation, and the creation of private property, see the relevant sections of the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Marx K. *Early Writings*, transl. by R. Livingstone (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 322–332.

⁴ Marx returns to the relationship between wage labor and alienation in the section on the “fetish” character of the commodity in: Marx K. *Capital*. Vol. 1 (New York: Penguin, 1976), pp. 163–177.

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Abstract: Jeffrey Hass' *Wartime Suffering and Survival* is an important study of the social history of emotions and group psychologies during the siege of Leningrad. Hass explores how Leningraders responded to the inhuman conditions of suffering, death, and starvation. Following Pierre Bourdieu, Hass examines the collective responses of different social strata to the siege, and how class was reconceptualized in terms of mental frameworks of meaning-making, rather than relations to private property ownership. His analysis reveals how entrenched class distinctions were in Soviet society, and how they impacted the strategies of survival employed by the population. By combining theory with archival documents, Hass provides an innovative approach to understanding the class-food nexus in Soviet society, and how the extreme conditions of the siege amplified the exploitative wage labor relationship. Jeffrey Hass' work shows how theory can allow deeper access into archival documents and enrich analysis, thus offering an innovative avenue for reconceptualizing class as an agentive category. To push back on the question of class, the Marxist understanding of class is critiqued, as Marx is quite critical of the idea that class can be reduced to relations of private property. Class is instead seen as a phenomenon created through the process of proletarianization and the alienation of human labor — and not simply as one of property ownership. It is thus suggested that, in the context of hyperinflation, siege, scarcity, and threatening social breakdown, food also began to function as money, constituting part of the wage and the most desperately needed part. Read through this perspective, Jeff's workers seem far less like a group bounded together not only by habitus and customs of thought, but also by a social system of hyper-statist domination grounded from the outset of the revolution on the wage labor form.

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